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# The Cycle of Violence<sup>1</sup>

Cathy Spatz Widom

Considerable uncertainty and debate remains about the extent of early childhood victimisation. It is estimated that 1.6 million children in the United States experienced some form of abuse or neglect in 1986 (Westat Inc. 1988) and that over 1 000 children die each year under circumstances suggestive of parental maltreatment (American Humane Association 1984). However, even less is known about the impact of this victimisation on children and adolescents. The immediate consequences may involve physical injuries or psychological trauma. The emotional and developmental scars that these children receive may persist into adolescence and beyond. Because many other events in the child's life may mediate the effects of child abuse or neglect, the long-term consequences of early childhood victimisation have been difficult to determine. How likely is it that today's abused and neglected children will become tomorrow's murderers and perpetrators of other crimes of violence, if they survive?

In the past, research on child abuse and neglect has suffered from a number of methodological problems that have hindered the assessment of long-term consequences, particularly outcomes into adulthood (Widom 1989b). Recently, as a result of a project to examine the relationship between early child

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abuse and neglect and violent criminal behaviour, base rate information is available on one important set of consequences of early abuse and neglect—delinquency, adult criminality, and violence.

This research demonstrated clearly and convincingly that childhood victimisation increases the likelihood of delinquency, adult criminality, and violent criminal behaviour. It also indicates that the relationship is not inevitable, suggesting an opportunity for long-range violence prevention through appropriate early intervention.

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## **The Study**

In 1986, I began research to address the relationship between early child abuse and neglect and later delinquent and violent criminal behaviour using a design that overcame many of the methodological limitations of previous research.

This paper will describe findings from a study of 1 575 children from a metropolitan area in the midwest, including a matched control group, who were followed through official records of delinquency and adult criminality for a twenty-year period after the abuse or neglect incident. This study was designed to have a clear definition of abuse and neglect, to have large sample sizes allowing examination of the consequences of physical and sexual abuse and neglect separately, and to document consequences over a twenty-year period extending into young adulthood. While these findings support previous research, this prospective study allows issues of causality to be examined and disentangles the effects of childhood victimisation from other potential confounding factors.

The abused and neglected group consisted of 908 substantiated cases of child abuse and/or neglect processed through the courts during the years 1967 through 1971. Excluded from the sample were cases of adoption, involuntary neglect, placement only, and failure to pay child support. These are cases of early child abuse and neglect, and the sample is restricted to children who were 11 years of age or less at the time of the abuse or neglect incident. The control group represents 667 children, who were matched on age, sex, race,

and approximate family social class during the time period of the study (1967 through 1971).

Most of the subjects were in their twenties at the time of this study (the mean age was 25 years), although they ranged in age from 16 to 33. Clearly, most subjects were old enough to have official records for delinquency and adult criminality. Arrest records were used to measure delinquency and adult criminality (with searches at local, state, and federal levels of law enforcement).

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## Major Findings

### **1. *Abused and neglected children have a higher likelihood of arrests for delinquency, adult criminality, and violent criminal behaviour than matched controls (see Table 1).***

Being abused or neglected as a child increases a person's risk for an arrest as a juvenile by 53 per cent, as an adult by 38 per cent, and for a violent crime by 38 per cent. [Violent crimes include arrests for robbery, assault, assault and battery, battery with injury, aggravated assault, manslaughter, involuntary manslaughter, or reckless homicide, murder or attempted murder, rape, sodomy, and robbery and burglary with injury.]

*Table 1*

### **Extent of Involvement in Delinquency, Adult Criminality, and Violent Criminal Behaviour**

<i>Any Arrest</i>	<i>Abused and Neglected</i>	<i>Controls</i>
	<i>(n = 908)</i> <i>(%)</i>	<i>(n = 667)</i> <i>(%)</i>
Juvenile	26.0	16.8
Adult	28.6	21.1
Violent Crime	11.2	7.9

Note: All differences are significant.

**2. *Abused and neglected children are involved in delinquency and criminality earlier, commit more offences, and more often become chronic or repeat offenders than control children (see Table 2).***

*Table 2*

**Other Characteristics of Offending**

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>Abused and Neglected (n = 908)</i>	<i>Controls (n = 667)</i>
Age at first arrest (in years)	16.5	17.3
Average number of arrests	2.4	1.4
Per cent chronic offenders (more than 5 arrests)	17.0	9.0

**3. *Experiencing early child abuse or neglect has a substantial impact even on individuals with little likelihood of engaging in officially recorded adult criminal behaviour.***

Although males generally have higher rates of criminal behaviour than females, being abused or neglected in childhood also increases the risk of adult arrest for females—by 77 per cent over non-abused and non-neglected control group females.

As adults, abused and neglected females are at increased risk for property, drug, and public order offences, but not for violent offences. Females in general are less likely to be violent on the streets (and to be arrested for street violence), whereas they appear more often in statistics on violence in the home.

**4. Black and white abused and neglected children have higher risks of offending than control children. However, the difference between white abused and neglected and control subjects was not as great as that between black abused and neglected subjects and controls (see Table 3).**

In fact, for arrests for violent crimes, white abused and neglected children do not show increased risk over controls. This contrasts strikingly with the findings for black abused and neglected children in this sample who show dramatic increased rates of violent arrests compared to control children. This surprising apparent race-specific finding requires further examination. Because these findings are based on official records and because official records over-represent minority groups, one obvious reason for the higher rates of violent arrests among blacks is that there is bias and discrimination within the criminal justice system. However, this does not seem adequate to explain the differences within the blacks and the lack of differences within the whites.

Another possible explanation for these race-specific findings is that there is more parental violence among black families than whites. To the extent that this research can address this issue, these data indicate that this is not the case for this sample. Approximately 20 per cent of the white children were physically abused, compared to less than 9 per cent of the black children. Relative to whites in the sample, blacks suffered more neglect.

A third possibility reflecting a more subtle type of differential treatment may be at work here and may have influenced these differential long-term consequences. Recall that these are cases of abuse and neglect from the late 1960s and early 1970s. It is possible that the system responded differentially to black and white abused and neglected children at the time. For example, abused and neglected black children could have been subjected to more extreme victimisation than white children, or to victimisation which persisted for a longer period of time, before coming to the attention of officials. This would presume a justice system that expects and tolerates higher levels of violence among black families. Following this scenario, only the most extreme cases of physical abuse in black

families would be reported to the authorities, and thus these cases would not be comparable to the cases of physical abuse from white families. This would also mean that abused and neglected black children would suffer their victimisation experiences longer than white children, before any interventions might take place. It is important to examine these race-specific effects for violent arrests and to consider these possible explanations.

Table 3

### Involvement in Criminality by Race

<i>Any Arrest</i>	<i>Abused and Neglected (n=908) (%)</i>	<i>Controls (n=667) (%)</i>	<i>Significance</i>
<i>Juvenile</i>			
Black	37.9	19.3	<.001
White	21.1	15.4	<.050
<i>Adult</i>			
Black	39.0	26.2	<.010
White	24.4	18.4	<.050
<i>Violent</i>			
Black	22.0	12.9	<.010
White	6.5	5.3	NS

**5. In a direct test of the cycle of violence notion, violent criminal behaviour was examined as a function of the type of abuse or neglect experienced as a child (see Table 4).**

Defining a childhood history of violence as physical abuse only, the cycle of violence hypothesis would predict that compared to other types of abuse or neglect, individuals experiencing physical abuse as a child should show higher levels of violence. The findings indicated that being physically abused increases one's likelihood of committing criminal violence, but being neglected also increases the risk of engaging in criminally

violent behaviour (*see* Table 4). Even using more complicated multivariate statistics which control for age, sex, and race, the physical abuse and neglect groups have a significantly higher likelihood of having an arrest for a violent offence than the controls (Widom 1989a).

Table 4

**Any Arrest for a Violent Offence as a  
Function of Type of Abuse**

<i>Abuse Group</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>Percent with an Arrest for Violence</i>
Physical abuse only	76	15.8
Neglect only	609	12.5
Sexual abuse and other abuse or neglect	28	7.1
Sexual abuse only	125	5.6
Controls	667	7.9

**6. Connection between Child Abuse and Neglect and  
Runaways**

A recent national survey of *Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children in America* estimated that 446 700 children ran away from households in 1988. Pagelow (1984, p. 49) called attention to the growing number of professionals who work with status offenders or delinquents who increasingly recognised that "many runaway children are not running toward something, but rather are running away from something—a home life in which they were subject to abuse, particularly sexual abuse".

To what extent do current research findings indicate that being abused or neglected in childhood places one at high risk for running away as an adolescent? Only a handful of studies have attempted to describe the extent to which adolescents who run away report having been abused or report having run away because of abuse. The results of these studies suggest that

there may be a link between childhood victimisation and running away. Nevertheless, since these study designs do not include control groups, we do not know the proportion of children who run away even without abusive or neglectful experiences in their homes.

There was direct support for a relationship between early childhood victimisation and adolescent running away (Widom & Ames 1994). As adolescents (before age 18), male and female abused and neglected children were significantly more likely to have an arrest as a runaway than controls (5.8 per cent versus 2.4 per cent). Furthermore, in an ongoing follow-up which involves 2-hour in-person interviews, 699 of the original 1 575 subjects were asked whether they had ever run away from home and whether they had ever run away from home overnight (before the age of 15). More than half the abused and neglected group (53 per cent) reported ever having run away (versus 30 per cent of the controls), and 28 per cent of the abused and neglected group reported running away from home overnight before the age of 15 (in comparison to 14 per cent of the controls). Both sets of findings were significant. Indeed, controlling for age, sex, race, level of education, and criminal history, being abused and neglected was still a significant predictor for a person's reporting that they had run away from home.

In sum, victims of early childhood victimisation appear at increased risk of running away from home and being picked up by the police. Running away puts these vulnerable children at further risk since many of them report personal victimisations—being robbed or sexually or physically abused—after they have run away.

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### **Self-destructive Behaviour, Depression, and Suicide Attempts**

Given the pervasive acceptance of the notion that violence begets violence, it is not surprising that much of the work in this area has focused on aggression and violence. At the same time, the effects of early abusive experiences may be manifest in ways not related to delinquency or running away, but may



lie in more subtle manifestations of emotional damage such as low self-esteem, depression, withdrawal, or, in the extreme, suicide.

In the current follow-up study, it was found that the abused and neglected group are significantly more likely to have had thoughts about death and to have made suicide attempts than the controls (*see* Table 5). These differences remain significant despite controls for age, sex, race, level of education, and criminal history. Thus, not only are abused and neglected children destructive and abusive toward others, but they also appear to be damaging to themselves.

*Table 5*

**Extent of Suicide Attempts: Preliminary Findings from Follow-Up Study in Progress**

<i>Attempted Suicide</i>	<i>Abused and Neglected</i> ( <i>n</i> = 416) (%)	<i>Controls</i> ( <i>n</i> = 283) (%)
Overall	19.2	7.8
Males	12.8	9.5
Females	27.0	5.2

Note: Differences between groups and for females are significant.

**Potential Protective Factors**

One of the emerging findings from this body of research is that a substantial portion of abused and/or neglected children do not appear to manifest negative outcomes. Although abused and neglected children are at increased risk, not all of them grow up to become delinquents or violent criminals. While it would be premature to conclude that the majority of abused and/or neglected children do not show some problem behaviours in adolescence or adulthood on the basis of the existing literature,

given some of the findings, it certainly seems appropriate to speculate on what might make a difference for some of these children. Some ways of handling or responding to potentially traumatic experiences of child abuse or neglect might lead to better outcomes. The literature suggests a number of potential protective factors (characteristics of the child or life experiences) which may act as buffers against long-term negative consequences.

Individual characteristics, such as high intelligence and certain kinds of temperament, and cognitive appraisal and experiences, such as developing a relationship with a significant person or some out-of-home placement experiences, may serve as buffers for some childhood victims growing up. For most of these characteristics and experiences, one can only speculate about ways in which they might protect abused and neglected children. For some, there is conflicting or indirect evidence. A major gap exists in our knowledge about what makes a difference in the lives of abused and neglected children. It is evident that there is much to be learned about the effects of protective factors and individual characteristics such as these, and even more to be discovered about how they operate to increase or decrease vulnerability for dysfunctional and problem behaviours.

Although controversial, one potential factor that may act to protect abused and neglected children from more serious long-term consequences is *placement outside the home*. Proponents of out-of-home placements such as foster care point to the potential for serious future harm in leaving these children in the home. They acknowledge that although some children are injured by foster parents, the rate of reported abuse by foster parents is lower than that of the general population, and far lower than the rate of re-abuse by abusive parents (Bolton, Lanier & Gia 1981). Furthermore, they point to the potential benefits of foster care as compared to the relatively poor results of parent treatment programs (cf. Cohn & Collignon 1979; Herrenkohl et al. 1980; Magura 1981). Studies of adults who grew up in foster homes found no evidence of more problem behaviours, delinquency, criminality, mental illness, or marital failure than in the general population (*see* Widom 1991 for a review of this literature). Kent (1976), for example, examined

case records of a large group of court supervised abused and neglected children in Los Angeles and found that children who had been in foster care at least a year were rated by their social workers as being better off (physically and socially) than at the time they entered foster care. After a six-month period in foster care, Fanshel and Shinn (1978) found that the well-being of the majority of the children had improved in terms of physical development, IQ, and school performance. They did not find that the longer a child spent in foster care, the more likely the child was to show signs of deterioration, and most of the children maintained the improvement over the five-year period of the study.

On the other hand, it has frequently been asserted that social intervention strategies in cases of child abuse and neglect are, at best, ineffective and destructive and, at worst, harmful to the child. Critics of foster placement outside the home stress the need to maintain biological family ties and to minimise government interference in family life, the concern over the financial cost of placement, and the concern that foster care may actually be worse for children than leaving them in the home, even taking into account the potential risk for continued abuse (Hubbell 1981; Wald 1976). Some examinations of foster care experiences have described the inadequacy, failures and high costs of the system (Gruber 1978; Schor 1982), whereas others have reported a high rate of behaviour problems (Bohman & Sigvardsson 1980; Bryce & Ehlert 1977; Frank 1980; Littner 1974) and school problems (Canning 1974) among foster children. However, none of these studies compared rates of such behaviours in non-foster care children or presented information about these children prior to their placement.

While out-of-home placements may act to exacerbate already heightened levels of stress in children from abusive and neglectful households, recent evidence suggests that out-of-home placements for some abused and neglected children may not be detrimental, at least, in terms of criminal consequences. Using a matched historical cohort design with children who had been maltreated, Runyan and Gould (1985) studied the impact of foster care on the subsequent development of delinquency, comparing 114 foster children (aged 11 to 18-years-old) who

had been in foster care for three or more years with a (demographically matched) comparison group of 106 victims of child maltreatment who had remained in their family home. These authors concluded:

Overall, there appears to be no support for the idea that foster care is responsible for a significant portion of later problems encountered by victims of maltreatment (Widom 1991, p. 562).

I described placement experiences for my sample of juvenile court cases of child abuse and neglect from approximately 20 years ago and examined the role of these placement experiences in relation to delinquency and violence. These abused and/or neglected children in foster care and other out-of-home placement experiences, who typically came from multi-problem families, are a particularly vulnerable group in that they have experienced both a disturbed family situation and separation from their natural parents. In this research, under certain circumstances, out-of-home placements did not necessarily lead to higher risk of arrest for delinquency and violence.

One of the factors examined was *amount of time in first placement*. The assumption was that the longer the time spent in first placement, the better off the child would be. This is based on the notion that, in the context of a stable cratering relationship, the child would have the opportunity to develop attachments and thus a stronger sense of self and self-esteem. Children who spent more than ten years in their first placement had the lowest overall rates of arrests as an adolescent for delinquency and for violence. *Age at first placement* was also examined. The percentage of children later arrested for delinquency and for violent crimes increased with age at first placement. Few of the children placed before the age of one year had arrest records (15 per cent) and none had arrests for violent crimes, whereas children placed initially at ages 4-6 years old, for example, had higher rates of delinquency (30 per cent) and arrests for violence (10 per cent). Some children may actually benefit from out-of-home placements.

The challenge for social workers and therapists is to recognise and to act upon the different needs of these children and their families. Caution should be used in extrapolating

from these findings to present-day foster care situations. Present-day foster care children may differ from the sample of children studied here in being older at age of entry, in care for shorter periods of time, and coming from families who may be more dysfunctional because of substance abuse, domestic violence, and homelessness (Widom 1991).

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## Implications

Not all children who grow up in abusive or neglectful households necessarily become problematic adolescents and adults. Certainly there are a wide variety of environmental stresses, potential triggering mechanisms, and other factors in the developmental process. Life experiences subsequent to the early childhood victimisation experiences certainly have an important impact on ultimate development. Nevertheless, these findings relating early child abuse and neglect to later delinquency, adult criminality, and violent criminal behaviour have important implications for policy.

One implication from the findings is that interventions with childhood victims of abuse and neglect need to occur early so that they can have an impact on early stages of development. Given the demonstrated increased risk associated with early childhood victimisation, police, teachers, and health workers need to recognise signs of abuse and neglect and take action to intervene early. Later interventions should not be ignored, but the later the intervention in the child's life, the more labour intensive and more difficult the change process becomes. Particular attention needs to be paid to abused and neglected children with behaviour problems noted early in their lives. These are likely to be the children who are at risk for becoming chronic runaways and at highest risk of becoming offenders and violent offenders. These children need a specialised approach.

Second, increased attention needs to be paid to neglected children. Nationwide, the incidence of neglect is almost three times that of physical abuse and neglect cases represent the majority of cases taxing the child protection system. Since neglected children are at significantly increased risk for becoming violent offenders, prevention efforts need to be expanded. Parent training and nurse-home visitation

programs, such as the one suggested by Olds (1988), need to be implemented and evaluated. In contrast to the explosive and episodic nature of physical abuse, neglect is a chronic condition which in some ways may be more amenable to intervention strategies.

Increasingly, efforts are being made to look at and distinguish different forms of child maltreatment. There is mounting evidence that many of the observed problems in abused children may be attributed to neglect. Some researchers have suggested that neglect may be potentially more damaging to the development of the child than abuse (that is, if abuse is not associated with neurological impairment), particularly in the areas of language development (Allen & Oliver 1982), psychosocial development (Egeland et al. 1983; Bousha & Twentyman 1984), and empathic responsiveness (Frodi & Smetana 1984). In one study of the influence of early malnutrition on subsequent behavioural development (Galler et al. 1983), previously malnourished children had attention deficits, reduced social skills, and poorer emotional stability when compared to comparison children and these deficits were independent of IQ.

These findings are of particular concern since according to a recent report (Westat Inc. 1988), the majority of official reports of child abuse and neglect are cases of neglect (rates were 15.9 per 1 000 children in 1986, as compared to 5.7 per 1 000 for physical abuse and 2.5 per 1 000 for sexual abuse). Very little is known about the long-term consequences of childhood neglect. My findings demonstrate a clear and direct link between neglect (as distinct from physical or sexual abuse) and later violent criminal behaviour.

Finally, there needs to be increased recognition that children are not doomed if their childhood includes abuse and/or neglect. Unfortunately, too little is known about the factors which protect children from the development of antisocial, delinquent, and adult criminal behaviour. There are clues in the literature about potential protective factors which have implications for the development of intervention strategies. Finally, we need to know more about the specific ways or mechanisms by which childhood victimisation leads to increased risk for problem behaviours and violence.

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## Appendix 1

### ***Details of Study***

The abused and neglected group consisted of 908 substantiated cases of child abuse and/or neglect processed through the courts during the years 1967 through 1971. Excluded from the sample were cases of adoption, involuntary neglect, placement only, and failure to pay child support.

These are cases of early child abuse and neglect, and the sample is restricted to children who were 11 years of age or less at the time of the abuse or neglect incident. The control group represents 667 children, who were matched on age, sex, race, and approximate family social class during the time period of the study (1967 through 1971). Children who were under school age at the time of the abuse and/or neglect were matched with children of the same sex, race, date of birth (+ 1 week), and hospital of birth through the use of county birth record information. For children of school age, records of more than 100 elementary schools for the same time period were used to find matches with children of the same sex, race, date of birth (+ 6 months), same class in same elementary school during the years 1967 through 1971 and home address, preferably within a five-block radius of the abused or neglected children. Because of the matching of subjects, children in both groups are alike in important characteristics such as age, sex, race, and approximate social class. The children differed only in the officially reported abuse or neglect experienced in childhood.

The percentage of males and females was about equal (about half and half), and whites outnumbered blacks (approximately 2:1). About a third of the sample was under school age at the time of the abuse or neglect incident and the remainder (65 per cent) was in school.

### ***Definitions***

*Physical abuse* cases included injuries such as bruises, welts, burns, abrasions, lacerations, wounds, cuts, bone and skull fractures, and other evidence of physical injury.

*Sexual abuse* charges varied from relatively non-specific charges of assault and batter with intent to gratify sexual desires to more specific ones of fondling or touching in an obscene manner, sodomy, incest, and so forth.

*Neglect* cases reflected a judgment that the parents' deficiencies in child care were beyond those found acceptable by community and professional standards at the time.

These cases represented extreme failure to provide adequate food, clothing, shelter, and medical attention to children. Although the literature on childhood victimisation deals with several phenomena (including physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, severe physical punishment, and psychological maltreatment), this research focuses on the first four and only indirectly deals with psychological maltreatment.

Detailed information about the abuse and/or neglect incident and family composition and characteristics was obtained from the files of the juvenile court and probation department, the authorities responsible for cases of abused, neglected, or dependent and delinquent children. Juvenile court and probation department records were also examined for the control subjects. In addition to searches of law enforcement records, searches were made of the Bureau of Motor Vehicles and (for all females) marriage licence records to find social security numbers to assist in tracing subjects through criminal records.