Children Fathered by Previous Partners: A Risk Factor for Violence Against Women

Author(s): Martin Daly, Lisa S. Singh and Margo Wilson


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REFERENCES

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Children Fathered by Previous Partners: A Risk Factor for Violence Against Women

Martin Daly, PhD, Lisa S. Singh, BA, Margo Wilson, PhD, MSL

Recognition of violence against women as a public health problem is still relatively new, and epidemiological investigation is in its infancy. There are several reasons to hypothesize that the presence of children fathered by former partners might be a significant risk factor for such violence. Sexual possessiveness and jealousy are prominent attributes of wife-abusers and wife-killers,1-5 who may resent their predecessors’ children as living violations of their monopoly over their wives. Stepchildren are themselves vastly over-represented as assault and homicide victims, in Canada6,7 and elsewhere.8 Moreover, certain samples of spousal homicides include remarkably high proportions of stepfamilies.9 Even in the absence of violence, stepchildren are apparently sources of marital conflict: stepfamilies are characterized by higher rates of divorce than two-genetic-parent families9,10 and by lower marital satisfaction.10,11

Despite these considerations, a possible association between stepfatherhood and violence against wives has apparently never been assessed. A 1986 review12 identified 97 proposed “risk markers” for violence against wives; parenthood of children was not among them. This neglect persists in subsequent research.13-15

METHODS

Women who sought refuge from abusive male partners at a shelter for abused women and their children in Hamilton, Ontario in 1986-1987 constitute the sample of victims. For each woman admitted, shelter staff recorded information on standard intake forms, including the ages of the woman and her partner; the type and duration of their relationship; the sex and age of each of her children and whether the present partner was their genetic father; and the nature and frequency of assaults and threats by the partner against the woman, her children and others.

Intake data were available for 223 women, of whom 170 reported having one or more children less than 18 years of age and a male partner co-residing at the time of shelter admission. These 170 mothers were classified into three groups, according to paternity of their children: present-partner’s-only (N=122), previous-partner’s-only (N=27), and both (N=21).

The area served by the shelter is the regional municipality of Hamilton-Wentworth. Living arrangements of children in Hamilton-Wentworth were surveyed between August and November 1983.5 We contacted a random sample of 1,328 households, of which 97% provided details of household compositions and the residents’ relationships to one another. The resultant sample provided a close fit to census information in all verifiable details (age and sex distributions; relative numbers of single-parent and two-parent households; distribution of family sizes), as well as providing information on steprelationships, which the census does not collect.6

RESULTS

Table I shows that women with children fathered by previous partners were greatly over-represented among shelter clients. This was true both for women whose children were previous-partners’-only (Odds Ratio relative to present-partner’s-only = 5.2) and women with children fathered by both (Odds Ratio relative to present-partner’s-only = 4.7).

Table II shows that men were significantly more likely to have assaulted the children as well as their female partners if one or more of those children were fathered by predecessors.

DISCUSSION

The results support our hypothesis that stepfatherhood is a risk factor for violence against women. Comparing shelter data for 1986-1987 with survey data from 1983 may have exaggerated this association, but there is no evidence of substantial changes in household compositions over that time. Unfortunately, the census does not collect information on genetic versus stepparentship, necessitating reliance upon surveys.

Steprelationship could be an incidental correlate of other risk factors. We have shown, however, that it is not such a correlate of either socioeconomic status or the woman’s age.6,16 Young wives are over-represented among shelter clients (Table I), as they are among homicide victims,7 but the over-representation of steprelationships is independent of this fact. Steprelationship, poverty and the woman’s age are distinct, additive risk factors for child abuse,6,16 and they appear to be distinct, additive risk factors for woman abuse too.

Table I does not demonstrate conclusively that women who have children from previous unions are especially often assaulted. The data might instead reflect differential use of shelter services, espe-
STEPCHILDREN AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WIVES

REFERENCEs


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TABLE I

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paternity of co-residing children</th>
<th>All Ages</th>
<th>Age &lt; 30 Years</th>
<th>Age ≥ 30 Years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Present-partner’s-only</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One or more stepchildren</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previously-partners-only (Both)</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% with stepchildren</td>
<td>28.2</td>
<td>25.6</td>
<td>31.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chi-Square (1 df) = 43.5
p < .0001
Odds Ratio = 17.5
95% Confidence Interval = 3.0 - 8.3

TABLE II

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paternity of co-residing children</th>
<th>Children Assaulted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present-partner’s-only</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One or more stepchildren</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previously-partners-only (Both)</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chi-Square (1 df) = 5.99
p = .028
Odds Ratio = 1.7
95% Confidence Interval = 1.2 - 5.8

Chi-Square (1 df) = 5.0
p = .025
Odds Ratio = 3.6
95% Confidence Interval = 1.5 - 8.5

% with stepchildren 28.2 vs One or more stepchildren:

Chi-Square (1 df) = 43.5
p < .0001
Odds Ratio = 17.5
95% Confidence Interval = 3.0 - 8.3

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