

# Family Violence: Research and Public Policy Issues for the '90s

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Family violence, that is, assaultive behavior against spouses, children, and other family members, is a serious—and apparently growing—national problem. Each year hundreds of thousands of wives are abused by their husbands, and over a million children suffer various forms of physical, sexual, and emotional maltreatment.

Despite the seriousness of family violence, little is known about this tragedy. Only now are we gaining an appreciation of its magnitude and its causes. Moreover, our ability to prevent or treat such behavior is rudimentary, at best. Thus research on the incidence and etiology of family violence and on effective means of intervention is indispensable to efforts to protect its victims better.

Unfortunately, the quality of current research on family violence leaves much to be desired. Too often appropriate public policy making has been stymied by the absence of crucial data. A few points should be emphasized:

1. *Research on the extent and sequelae of family violence must be evaluated within the context of the study's definitions and methodology.* Widely varying estimates of the incidence of child abuse or spouse abuse are a direct result of differences in definition and methodology. Similarly, one cannot expect to determine the sequelae (or effects) of a behavior if one cannot define it reliably and consistently. Standardization of terms should be a first priority.

2. *Research will not find the cause of family violence.* Dozens of well-funded research projects have tried and failed to discover the specific cause or causes of family violence. As for all forms of human behavior, there is no one cause. Research should seek to identify and understand better the different mixes of social and individual factors that lead some individuals, but not others, to violence. No research is likely to be any more definitive.

3. *Research will not discover a "cure" for family violence.* Just as there is no single cause of family violence, no single therapeutic technique or service can cure it. Instead, many effective treatment approaches can break patterns of abuse; success depends on the family, its situation, the quality of the therapist, and a host of other variables. Research should pursue this kind of multifaceted approach to assessing treatment efforts.

4. *Research on the operational functioning of programs is not glamorous, but it is essential.* Many spouses and children

suffer serious injury *after* public agencies have learned of their situations. In cases of child abuse, for example, agency malfunctions usually come to light only when a child's death is widely reported by the media. Research on program evaluation can reveal points of delay, staff inadequacies, decision-making problems, and administrative weaknesses so that they can be corrected before a child's unnecessary death. In this area a small amount of research money can produce a great deal of program improvement.

5. *Special demonstration programs may do more harm than good.* What better way to combat family violence than to create a new program to provide treatment services? Unfortunately, such demonstration programs are a costly and often counterproductive duplication of pre-existing services. Almost invariably, they last only as long as special funding is available. They spend an inordinate amount of time in getting started, finding clients, and winding down. And because they are so short-lived, they have difficulty in recruiting well-qualified therapists.

Often these new programs do more harm than good. They seem to promise a quick cure for parents—when long-term, intensive services are needed. And they siphon off funds that would ordinarily go to such services. Too many of these projects "coordinate" the services of established agencies [and] thus create interagency antagonisms and discourage other community-based agencies from becoming involved with abusive families. Instead, funding should enhance the capacity of existing mental health, social, and family service agencies to serve families in trouble.

Before closing, a few words are in order about the relevance of research to policy. We are people particularly enamored of numbers; no other constitution requires a census that counts not just people but also things. Research can be crucial to policy making because it gives us numbers. Research on the incidence of family violence, showing that child abuse and spouse abuse are widespread, has galvanized public and political support for tougher laws and expanded programs.

Sometimes research merely sanctions or justifies an existing policy preference. Larry Sherman's research, for example, on the effect of arrests in domestic violence cases facilitated a policy change that was already occurring. At the time his findings were published, advocates

around the country were arguing for more arrests, and, suddenly, there appeared this research that conveniently sanctioned their position. Advocates, politicians, and police departments needed a reason to change their policy, and Sherman's study provided it. Thus research can provide powerful leverage for change.

Research findings can also block change. In effect they can be used to sanction inaction or the refusal to change direction. For every constituency that wants to make a reform, a corresponding group usually prefers the status quo. Research can provide a reason—or an excuse—for saying no to a change in policy. The policy maker can say, "I would like to help you, but there is research that shows that it would not be wise to do so." Research does not have to be definitive; it can even be flawed, just not embarrassing. The point is that research can provide political cover.

Research is often irrelevant to policy, of course. When it comes to research on child abuse, for example, no program evaluation shows any treatment program making more than a small difference in the behavior of the parents involved. People believe that treatment makes a difference, but no systematic, properly controlled study has shown an impact. If one had, the program would

have been replicated across the nation. This absence, however, has not prevented the expansion of treatment programs because we believe in helping parents care better for their children.

Does research matter? Yes. But not as much as many researchers would like—partly because of political and other factors and partly because of shortcomings in the research itself. If we want policy makers to pay more attention to research, we will have to improve our product.

This essay is the Foreword from *Family Violence: Research and Public Policy Issues*, to be published by the American Enterprise Institute later in the Spring.

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## Violence and Women Offenders

A survey of women in prison and jail in the State of Maryland found that a significant number of inmates acknowledge that they have been victims of abuse: 43 percent indicate physical abuse and 33 percent indicate sexual abuse. Corrections and mental health professionals speculate that these self-reported figures are probably underestimated. (From the *Report of the Governor's Committee to Study Sentencing and Correctional Alternatives for Women Convicted of Crime, State of Maryland, June 1988*.)

A High Security Unit (HSU), built by the Federal Bureau of Prisons (FBP) at Lexington Federal Prison, Kentucky, came into operation in September 1986. Initially three women convicted of politically motivated offences were held there; later they were joined by four other female prisoners.... On 15 July 1988 Federal District Judge Barrington Parker ruled that the FBP had violated the prisoners' First Amendment right to freedom of speech, association and expression because they had been held in the HSU on account of their political beliefs, and ordered them to be transferred into the general prison population. He did not find the general conditions in the HSU to be in breach of the Constitution, but said that the prisoners' treatment "skirted elemental standards of human decency" and warned the FBP to be careful that conditions at the new Florida unit "do not lead to wanton and unnecessary infliction of psychological pain."

Amnesty International considers that the conditions of confinement and the transfer of prisoners to the HSU on the basis of their political beliefs constitute "cruel, inhuman and degrading" treatment in contravention of Article 5 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The prolonged isolation of the prisoners, the humiliating strip-searches and the additional restrictions imposed on them had a detrimental effect on their physical and mental health. (From *USA: The High Security Unit, Lexington Federal Prison, Kentucky* [AI Index: AMR 51/34/88], 1988.)

*Response* is preparing a special issue on Violence and Women Offenders and invites submission of articles and items for departments. Submissions should be sent to the editor by November 1, 1990.

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