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THE CHILD ABUSE CRISIS: THE DISINTEGRATION OF MARRIAGE, FAMILY, AND THE AMERICAN COMMUNITY

INTRODUCTION

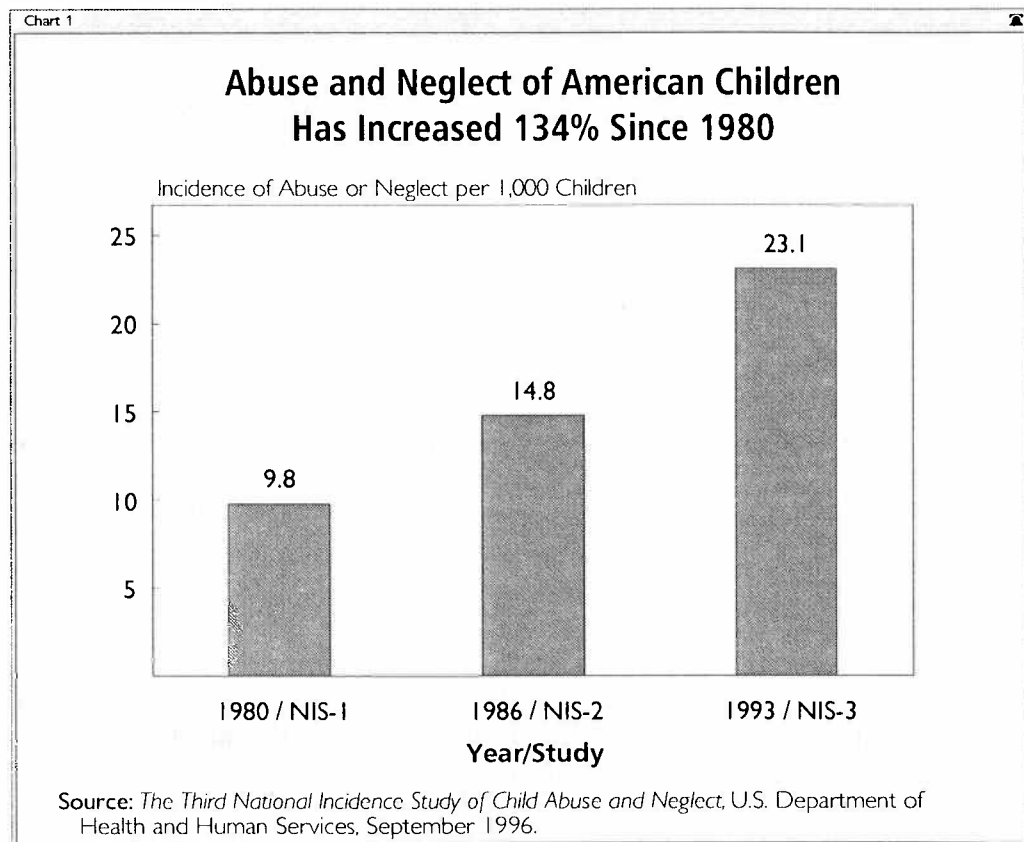
Far too many children are badly abused in the United States today. This disturbing fact—driven home by shocking stories on nightly television broadcasts—appears also in professional literature as analysts try to understand the causes of this problem and find a remedy for it. The growing empirical evidence on child abuse¹ reveals new, alarming, and distinct patterns of familial relationships that contribute greatly to this tragedy. The studies show that, along with a continual rise in the incidence of child abuse in the United States, there has been an increase in the number of children born out of wedlock and abandoned by their fathers, as well as an increase in the number of children affected by divorce. Now, in addition to poverty and community environment, the rising incidence of child abuse in the United States can be linked to one more factor: whether an abused child's parents are married.

The underlying dynamic of child abuse—the breakdown of marriage and the commitment to love—is spreading like a cancer from poor communities to working-class communities. As social scientists, community leaders, and legislators consider ways to stop the spread of this cancer, they must focus their attention on the most upsetting byproduct of the disintegration of family and community: the abuse, maiming, and even death of America's infants and young children, about 2,000 of whom—6 per day—die each year.²

- 1 The data in this paper are drawn from the following studies: Andrea J. Sedlak, Ph.D., and Diane D. Broadhurst, M.L.A., *The Third National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-3): Final Report*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect, Washington, D.C., September 1996, and Robert Whelan, *Broken Homes & Battered Children: A study of the relationship between child abuse and family type*. Family Education Trust, London, 1993.
- 2 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, *A Nation's Shame: Fatal Child Abuse and Neglect in the United States*, Fifth Report, United States Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect, 1995.

The Alarming Rise in Child Abuse

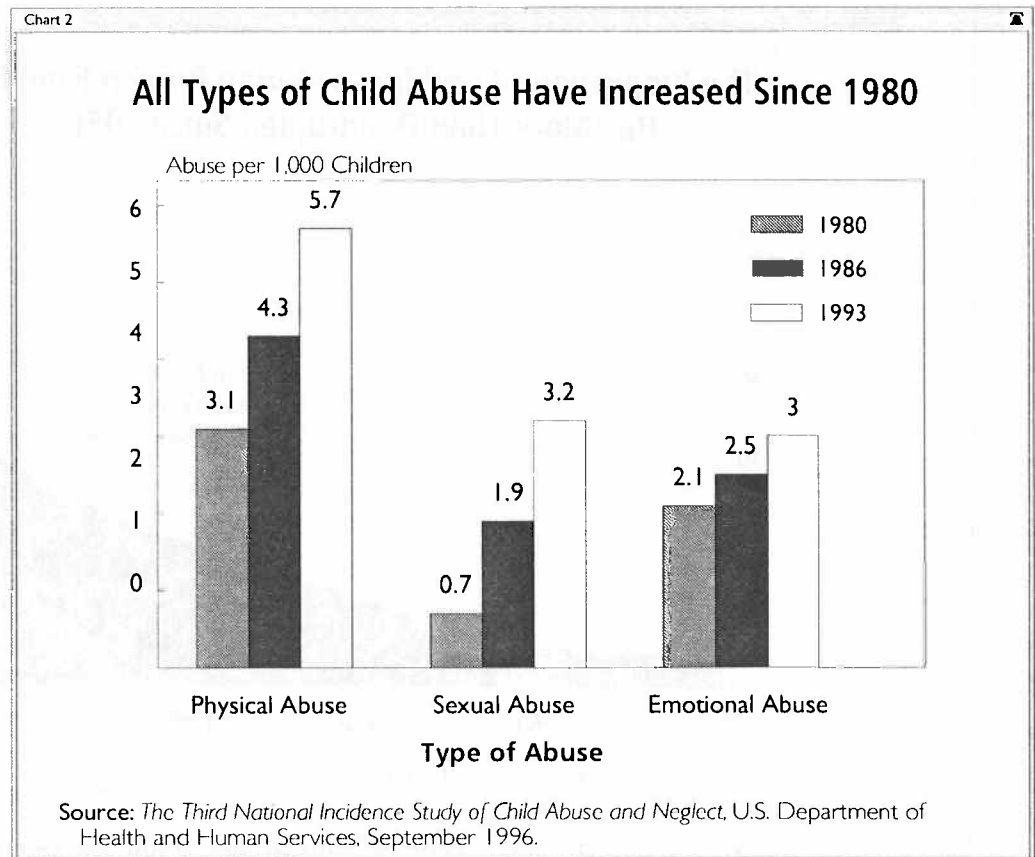
The best available estimates of child abuse in the United States are found in studies conducted by the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). These National Incidence Studies of Child Abuse and Neglect, conducted in 1980 (NIS-1), 1986 (NIS-2), and 1993 (NIS-3),³ focused on reported and recognized cases of abuse (although they did not measure the actual incidence of abuse). According to NIS-3, child abuse and neglect increased by 67 percent between 1986 and 1993 (an average of almost 10 percent per year) and 149 percent between 1980 and 1993. Some of the biggest increases in recent times were reported in physical abuse (102 percent, or almost 15 percent per year) and sexual abuse (83 percent, or almost 12 percent per year).



Obtaining trustworthy estimates of the degree of abuse and neglect in the United States—situations that perpetrators try to keep hidden for as long as possible—is difficult. Scholars utilize various methods to generate estimates of abuse, and their estimates are not always similar. Consequently, serious disagreements about the true level of abuse exist.⁴ Chart 2 is derived from data obtained from the 1996 NIS-3 survey report and illustrates the continuing rise in physical, sexual, and emotional abuse in the United States.

3 The results of the 1993 National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-3) were released in September 1996.

4 For an excellent review of the data available, see Richard Gelles's chapter, "Family Violence," in Michael Tonry, ed., *Criminal Justice Handbook* (National Academy Press, forthcoming).



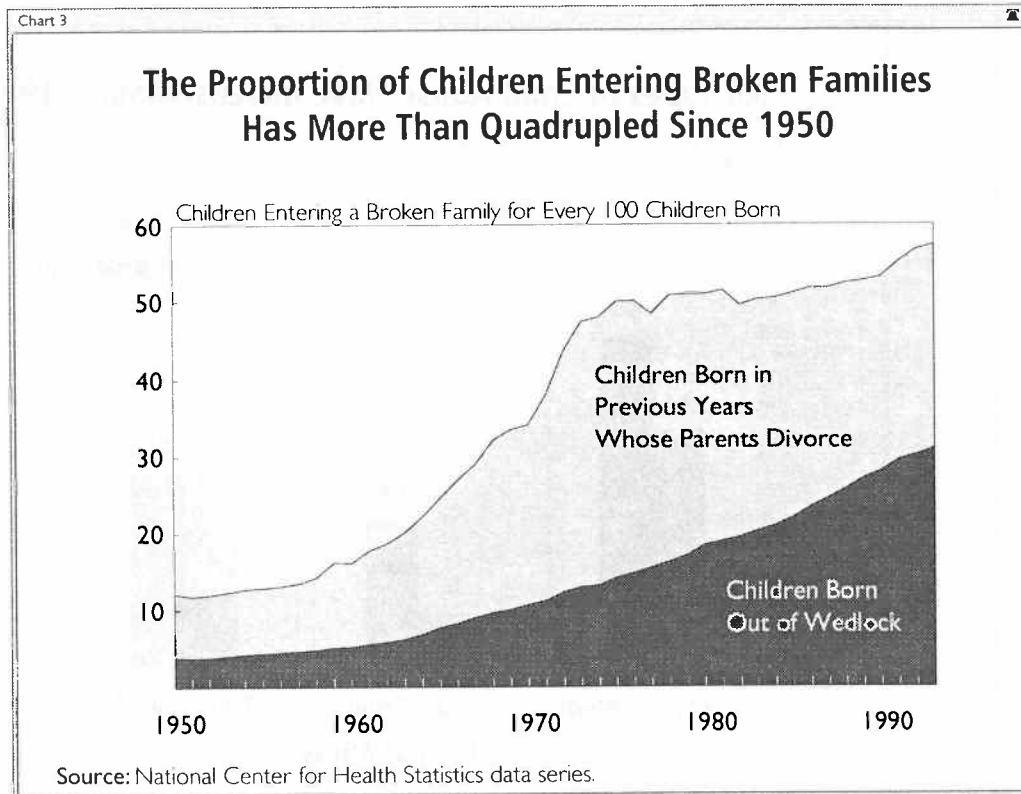
A seminal British study⁵ confirms that a child is safest when his biological parents are married and least safe when his mother is cohabiting with a man other than her husband. Specifically, the Family Court Reporter Survey for England and Wales presents concrete evidence that children are 20 to 33 times safer living with their biological married parents than in other family configurations. This study offers important insights into the profound impact that marriage can have in preventing child abuse; it also is the only one in the literature on child abuse that analyzes abuse by family structure and the marital background of parents. The research on crime and delinquency in both the United States and Great Britain frequently illustrates similar social trends and relationships between family breakdown and social problems. Comparing the results of the British study with the data on child abuse in the United States has been difficult because studies of abuse in the United States are few; but if the relationships in the British study hold true for child abuse in the United States, the implications for social policy are significant.

Society views child abuse as one of the most abhorrent of behaviors. Unfortunately, however, it often remains hidden until it is too late for society to save the child's life or repair the damage. Child abuse also is difficult to define. As measured by the National Incidence Studies,⁶ the four major categories of child maltreatment are physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect.

The effects of abuse are more readily observable: broken bones and bruises, scars from cigarette burns, swollen faces, and drastic changes in behavior. School teachers and

5 Whelan, *Broken Homes & Battered Children*.

6 Sedlak and Broadhurst, *Third National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect*.



doctors are often in a position to see these signs of abuse; but few see the signs of neglect in the passive child who is rarely talked to at home, or who may be locked up and left unfed, unclothed, and unwashed for long periods, or who must fend for himself. Changes in the neglected child's body and behavior are slower and more easily mistaken for ill health or shy personality.

Research on the effects of neglect indicates that it has even deeper and longer lasting consequences than physical abuse. Richard Emery, Professor of Psychology at the University of Virginia, has noted that neglected children often are more seriously disturbed than abused children.⁷ The neglected child is treated more as if he were not there, or as if his parents wished he were not there, and this insidious and fundamental rejection can inflict deep psychological wounds. By contrast, physically abused children frequently are cared for in other ways by their abusers. They are given food, clothing, playthings, and even enjoy good times with others in the family.

The Demographics of Child Abuse

A survey of the professional literature shows that the three main types of abuse most commonly researched are physical abuse and, to a lesser extent, neglect and the trauma of children who have witnessed violence against their parents.⁸ According to the professional literature, child abuse in the United States exhibits definite demographic patterns:

- 7 Richard Emery, "Abused and Neglected Children," *The American Psychologist*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (1989), pp. 321-328.
- 8 Physical abuse in the NIS-3 study includes such activities as punching, kicking, throwing, burning, stabbing, and choking. Sexual abuse includes such things as penile penetration of the oral, anal, or genital organs. Neglect includes physical neglect (failing to keep the child clean, fed, and warm); educational neglect; medical neglect; and emotional neglect, which frequently is coupled with witnessing violence between parents.

- **The safest family environment for a child is a home in which the biological parents are married.** Contrary to current theory about the effects of marriage on children, recent research demonstrates that marriage provides a safe environment for all family members, one in which child abuse and fatality are lowered dramatically.
- **Cohabitation, an increasingly common phenomenon, is a major factor in child abuse.** Cohabitation implies a lack of commitment. The evidence suggests that a lack of commitment between biological parents is dangerous for children, and that a lack of commitment between mother and boyfriend is exceedingly so. The risk of child abuse is 20 times higher than in traditional married families if parents are cohabiting (as in “common-law” marriages) and 33 times higher if the single mother is cohabiting with a boyfriend.⁹
- **The incidence of child abuse decreases significantly as family income increases.** The impression that there is a high incidence of abuse among the very poor is reinforced by the results of research into child abuse. In 1993, the overall rate of maltreatment (abuse and neglect combined) in the United States was lowest in families with incomes above \$30,000 per year; 10 times higher in families with incomes between \$15,000 and \$30,000 per year; and 22 times higher for families with incomes below \$15,000 per year.¹⁰
- **Child abuse frequently is intergenerational.** Another generation of child abusers is being weaned by today’s abusing parents, and many of these children will never know that children can be treated differently.
- **Child abuse is prevalent in “communities of abuse” characterized by family breakdown.** These also are communities of crime, characterized by the absence of marriage, the prevalence of drug and alcohol abuse, and a primary dependence on welfare.¹¹ Children who grow up in these “communities” show signs of permanent damage; moreover, as statistics follow them over time, many prove to have been damaged for life. From these communities of abuse come society’s “superpredators” (the psychopathic criminals of tomorrow), violent gang members, and other hostile, depressed, and frequently even suicidal young people.
- **Child abuse is directly associated with serious violent crime.** An increase in the incidence of child abuse precedes an increase in violent crime.

Although a home with biological parents who are married cannot guarantee that a child will be safe and happy, the evidence suggests that it represents the safest of all environments for children; at the same time—and in sharp contrast—the evidence also suggests that a home with adults who decide not to marry and to live together out of wedlock represents the most dangerous environment of all for children.

9 Whelan, *Broken Homes & Battered Children*.

10 Sedlak and Broadhurst, *Third National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect*, p. 53.

11 Patrick F. Fagan: “Rising Illegitimacy: America’s Social Catastrophe,” Heritage Foundation *F.Y.I.* No. 19, June 1994, and “The Real Root Causes of Violent Crime: The Breakdown of Marriage, Family, and Community,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 1026, March 17, 1995.

Child Abuse: A Precursor to Crime

The increase in severe child abuse has another serious ramification. The evidence suggests that the United States will face increased levels of serious violent crime (murders, rapes, and assaults) at the hands of abused children when they reach their mid- to late-teenage years. According to Cathy Spatz Widom, Professor of Criminal Justice and Psychology at the State University of New York (SUNY) in Albany,

Early childhood victimization has demonstrable long-term consequences for delinquency, adult criminality, and violent behavior... The experience of child abuse and neglect has a substantial impact even on individuals with otherwise little likelihood of engaging in officially recorded criminal behavior.¹²

According to studies of the official records of abused children and arrested offenders, the association between child abuse and crime is significant: between 14 percent and 26 percent.¹³ But this association is roughly three times greater—from 50 percent to 70 percent—when researchers go beyond the official reports of child abuse cases and study the reports of abuse given by the delinquents themselves.¹⁴ In one study, 26 percent of incarcerated delinquents who had committed murder had experienced physical abuse; they also were more likely than those who had not suffered abuse to have directed their violence toward members of their immediate families.¹⁵ In another report, of 14 juveniles condemned to death in the United States in 1986, 12 had been brutally abused as children, and 5 had been sodomized by relatives.¹⁶

Moreover, the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime offers substantive insight into the background of a killer.¹⁷ The three most frequent factors in the history of a killer are physical or sexual abuse, a failure in emotional attachment to the mother, and a failure to use parents as role models. The connection between child abuse and violent crime should capture the attention of people across the political and social science spectrum. It cannot be ignored. Child abuse is costly to American society. Considering the increase in severe child abuse reported in NIS-3, the United States must be prepared to brace itself for the consequent rise in violent crime in the future.

12 Cathy Spatz Widom, "The Cycle of Violence," *Science*, Vol. 244 (1989), pp. 160-166.

13 D. O. Lewis, S. S. Shanok, J. H. Pincus, and G. H. Glaser, "Violent Juvenile Delinquents: Psychiatric, Neurological, Psychological and Abuse Factors," *Journal of the American Academy of Child Psychiatry* (1977), pp. 307-319; Peter C. Kratoski, "Child Abuse and Violence Against the Family," *Child Welfare*, Vol. 61, Issue 7 (1982), pp. 435-444; F. G. Bolton, J. W. Reich, and S. E. Guitierrez, "Delinquency Patterns in Maltreated Children and Siblings," *Victimology*, Vol. 2 (1977), pp. 349-357.

14 C. M. Mouzakis. "An Inquiry into Child Abuse and Juvenile Delinquency," in R. J. Hunner and Y. E. Walker, eds., *Exploring the Relationship Between Child Abuse and Delinquency* (Montclair, N.J.: Osmun & Allanheld, 1981). See also P. W. Rhoades and S. L. Parker, "The Connections Between Youth Problems and Violence in the Home," Oregon Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence, Portland, Ore., 1981.

15 Peter C. Kratoski, "Families Who Kill," *Marriage & Family Review*, Vol. 12, No. 1-2 (1987), pp. 47-70.

16 D. O. Lewis, J. H. Pincus, B. Bard, E. Richardson, L. S. Prichep, M. Feldman, and C. Yager, "Neuropsychiatric, Psychoeducational and Family Characteristics of 14 Juveniles Condemned to Death in the United States," *American Journal of Psychiatry*, Vol. 145 (1988), pp. 585-589.

17 Federal Bureau of Investigation, National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime, *Criminal Investigative Analysis: Sexual Homicide*, 1990.

What Can Be Done?

The underlying community dynamic of child abuse—the breakdown of the family—is spreading like a cancer from poor communities to working-class communities. The underlying demographics of abuse indicate a widening and worsening social infrastructure that is more and more incompatible with social order and for which an increasingly heavy price will have to be paid: serious crime and crime-control costs; addictions and addiction rehabilitation (and related crime costs); robbery, theft, and expanded prisons to contain the robbers and thieves; and a growing demand for drugs and all of the attendant problems associated with the drug culture and industry.

The leading indicator of an increase in these problems tomorrow is their byproduct today: the abuse of young infants and young children. Today's abused children will be among tomorrow's most dangerous criminals. The United States therefore has a serious and escalating social problem, the consequences of which will be borne not only by the children who suffer terribly from abuse, but also by all of society, which will have to deal with their vicious anger, debilitating depression, and various addictions. The country can take little solace from the hope that this is just a passing demographic blip that must be endured until it fades.

State and federal policy makers cannot solve deep moral or cultural problems; but they can illuminate the problems that must be addressed, and they most certainly can improve policies that rescue children from dangerous environments and place them in safe families. Specifically, Congress should:

1. **Sharpen** the debate by improving the quality of federal research. The U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) should be directed to review the records of children who died of abuse within the past three years and delineate the family structure involved.
2. **Commission** the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to gather marriage and family background data in the next National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-4).
3. **Ensure** that federal statistical agencies gather the marital background data for respondents in all social and economic surveys. These data would provide the best resource for future studies of child abuse and crime.
4. **Enact** legislation promoting the protection and safety of children in positive family environments. One bill that seeks to do so is the Adoption Promotion Act of 1997 (H.R. 867).¹⁸

In addition, state officials should:

1. **Focus** the resources of state social service agencies on ways to separate seriously abused children permanently from continually abusive parents.
2. **Encourage** the formation of separate social service units dedicated solely to the work of terminating the parental rights of abusing parents. At present, this work is expected of social workers who also are tasked with uniting the family unit.

¹⁸ Patrick F. Fagan, "It Takes a Family: The Adoption Promotion Act of 1997," Heritage Foundation *Executive Memorandum* No. 477, April 23, 1997.

