

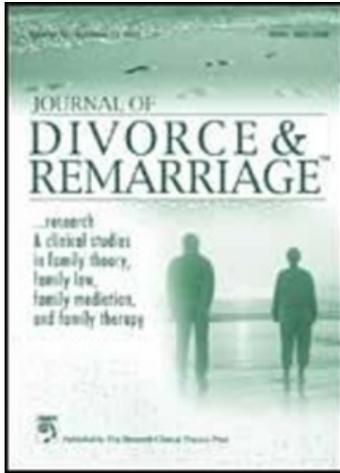
This article was downloaded by: [Auburn University]

On: 24 June 2010

Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 917357398]

Publisher Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Journal of Divorce & Remarriage

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t792306891>

What Do We Know About the Physical Abuse of Stepchildren?

Francesca Adler-Baeder^a

^a Human Development and Family Studies, Auburn University, USA

To cite this Article Adler-Baeder, Francesca(2006) 'What Do We Know About the Physical Abuse of Stepchildren?', Journal of Divorce & Remarriage, 44: 3, 67 – 81

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1300/J087v44n03_05

URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1300/J087v44n03_05

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf>

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

What Do We Know About the Physical Abuse of Stepchildren? A Review of the Literature

Francesca Adler-Baeder

ABSTRACT. Assumptions of the increased risk for stepchildren of physical abuse by a stepparent are based on a very limited and increasingly outdated literature. Although the majority of the 11 studies reviewed suggest that stepchildren are overrepresented as physical abuse victims, most of these studies are limited by their small sample sizes, consideration of households rather than victim-offender relationship, and the use of a low comparison population estimate of children living in stepfamilies, leaving questions remaining about the comparative risk of physical abuse by a stepparent. The following provides summaries of the studies' research questions, theoretical foundations, methods, and findings. Additionally, recommendations for future research are offered that center on the need for process studies of family interactions. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2006 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

KEYWORDS. Stepchildren, physical abuse, stepparent, stepfamily, review

Francesca Adler-Baeder, PhD, is Assistant Professor of Human Development and Family Studies at Auburn University.

Address correspondence to: Dr. Francesca Adler-Baeder, 286 Spidle Hall, Department of Human Development and Family Studies, Auburn University, AL 36849 (E-mail: adlerfr@auburn.edu).

Journal of Divorce & Remarriage, Vol. 44(3/4) 2006
Available online at <http://www.haworthpress.com/web/JDR>
© 2006 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.
doi:10.1300/J087v44n03_05

INTRODUCTION

Negative views of stepparents persist in our culture (Ganong & Coleman, 2004), with stepparents often portrayed as punitive and abusive (Claxton-Oldfield, 2000). What is the basis for these stereotypes? Although physical child abuse has been documented and extensively studied since it was first recognized as a social problem over 40 years ago, knowledge in the area of stepparent-stepchild physical abuse is extremely limited and has been given very little recent attention. Research on stepfamilies in general is comparatively new in the social science literature. The majority of what is known about stepfamilies comes from the last two and a half decades of research (Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Pasley, Ihinger-Tallman, & Lofquist, 1994). It is therefore not surprising that a search of the extant literature on physical abuse specifically in stepfamilies reveals only a handful of studies that have examined the physical abuse of stepchildren. No detailed review of these studies has been previously published in an academic journal. The following provides summaries of the studies' research questions, theoretical foundations, method, and findings. Additionally, conclusions and recommendations for future research are offered.

THE STUDIES

An extensive search of the Social Services Abstracts, Sociological Abstracts, and PsychInfo databases using every possible combination of the words "abuse," "maltreatment," "stepchild," "stepchildren," "stepparent," "stepfather," and "stepfamily" (including their hyphenated versions) resulted in 11 peer-reviewed articles published after 1980 that have examined the issue of children physically abused by stepparents (see Table 1). All but two of the research studies (Gelles & Harrop, 1991; Malkin & Lamb, 1994) were published in the 1980s. Five of the 11 are the work of Daly and Wilson and colleagues (Daly & Wilson, 1987; Daly & Wilson, 1985; Daly & Wilson, 1981; Daly, Singh, & Wilson, 1993; Wilson, Daly, & Weghorst, 1981), Canadian researchers who have examined the issue of stepchild abuse both in Canada and the U.S. Another study was conducted with Finnish adolescents (Sariola & Uutela, 1992). The remaining 5 studies were conducted using U.S. samples (Gelles & Harrop, 1991; NIS, 1981 reported in Giles-Sims & Finkelhor, 1984; Hermann & Martin, 1988; Lightcap, Kurland, & Burgess, 1982).

TABLE 1. Summary of Studies Examining the Risk of Physical Abuse of Stepchildren

Reference	Theory and Research Question	Subjects and Methods	Findings and Conclusions	Points to Consider
Daly, M., & Wilson, M. (1987). Risk of maltreatment of children living with stepparents. In R.J. Gelles & J.B. Lancaster (Eds.), <i>Child abuse and neglect: Biosocial dimensions</i> (pp. 215-232). Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter.	Socio-evolutionary theory Q: Are stepchildren overrepresented as homicide victims?	Official reports - child homicide rates in Canada 1974-1983	Yes to overrepresentation question. Children are more likely to be killed in stepfamilies	No report of victim-offender relationship
Daly, M., & Wilson, M. (1985). Child abuse and other risks of not living with both parents. <i>Ethology and Sociobiology</i> , 6, 197-210.	Socio-evolutionary theory Q: Are stepchildren overrepresented in reported incidences of physical abuse?	Canadian population stats taken from random sample telephone interview; n = 841 households with children. 5.7% of girls lived with non-bio parent; 5.8% of boys. Reported incidents in 12-month period to 2 children's aide societies. n = 99 cases	Yes to overrepresentation question. In the 99 cases; 15.8% of 0-4-year-olds were in SF (n = 19 total; n = 2 in SF); 33% of 5-10-year-olds were in SF (n = 33 total; n = 8 in SF); 29.8% of 11-17-year-olds were in SF (n = 47 total; n = 11 in SF)	Small sample size, No report of victim-offender relationship
Daly, M., Singh, L., & Wilson, M. (May, 1993). Children fathered by previous partners: A risk factor for violence against women. <i>Canadian Journal of Public Health</i> , 84, 209-210.	Social evolutionary theory Q: Are women with children from another man more at risk for violence? Are these children more likely to be abused also?	Women in shelters: 1986-87 n = 170	Yes to greater risk question. Women with children from a previous partner were more likely to be abused by current partner (5 to 1 ratio). These men were more likely to have abused these children as well (31% vs. 14%)	Small sample size

TABLE 1 (continued)

Reference	Theory and Research Question	Subjects and Methods	Findings and Conclusions	Points to Consider
Daly, M., & Wilson, M. (1981). Child maltreatment from a sociobiological perspective. <i>New Directions for Child Development</i> , 11, 93-112.	Socio-evolutionary theory Q: Are stepchildren overrepresented in reported incidences of physical abuse?	Official reports in Canada of abuse of juveniles n = 177 households	Yes to overrepresentation question. 40% were in stepparent homes	Households only; no report of victim-offender relationship
Gelles, R. & Harrop, J. (1991). The risk of abusive violence among children with nongenetic caretakers. <i>Family Relations</i> , 40, 78-83.	Socio-evolutionary theory; labeling theory discussed. Q: Are children with nongenetic parents disproportionately the victims of violence and abuse?	Parent report-random sample phone interviews: 2nd National Family Violence Survey; 1985 data. Asked about violence (on a continuum) used in family relationships Representative sample of 6002	No for overrepresentation question. 117 were stepparent household-3.9%	Difference in conceptualization and measurement of construct-continuum of violence; e.g., a slap = mild violence. Self-report of violence may under-represent incidents.
Giles-Sims, J. & Finkelhor, D. (1984). Child abuse in stepfamilies. <i>Family Relations</i> , 33, 407-413. Report on the National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (1981).	Social evolutionary stress, normative, and resource theories discussed. Q: Are stepchildren overrepresented in reported incidences of abuse?	26 representative counties in U.S.-reported incidences for 1 year	Question is not settled. 18% were stepparents (all forms of abuse; 15% for physical abuse); compares to estimates that 20-30% of low-income homes are stepfamilies	Considers the sociodemographic characteristics as possible confounds
Hermann, C., & Martin, M. (1988). Factors associated with hospitalization in confirmed cases of physical child abuse. <i>Early childhood development and care</i> , 31, 35-41.	Sociobiological theory Q: Are children who are hospitalized for abuse disproportionately stepchildren?	Official reports n = 137 reported cases of child abuse	No to overrepresentation question. 105 were not hospitalized; 27 were hospitalized Relationship of perpetrator to child did not differ significantly as a function of whether the child was hospitalized; i.e., most severe not from SFs	Small sample size

Lightcap, J., Kurland, J., & Burgess, R. (1982). Child abuse: A test of some predictions from evolutionary theory. <i>Ethology and Sociobiology</i> , 3, 61-67.	Social evolutionary theory Q: Are stepchildren overrepresented in reported incidences of abuse?	24 2-parent households reported for abuse – had 1 or more children in family. 184 parent-offspring dyads	Yes for overrepresentation question. Of the 184 dyads, 27 were stepparent-stepchild dyads (15%); but were 40% of the abuse cases	Small sample size
Malikin, C., & Lamb, M. (1994). Child maltreatment: A test of sociobiological theory. <i>Journal of Comparative Family Studies</i> , 25, 121-133.	Sociobiological model Q: Are stepchildren overrepresented in reported official incidences of physical abuse?	10 states - incident reports to American Humane Association in 1984 n = 52,367 victims:	No to overrepresentation question. 17.7% in non-bio families; however, 9% were abused by the stepparent Bio parents were more likely to commit the most severe abuse; more abuse in low SES families	Used relationship of perpetrator-victim. If using households, it would have appeared that stepchildren are overrepresented
Sariola, H. & Uutela, A. (1992). The prevalence and context of family violence against children in Finland. <i>Child Abuse and Neglect</i> , 16, 823-832.	Q: Do stepchildren report proportionally greater incidences of abusive interactions?	Adolescent report: used Conflicts Tactics Scale; continuum of violence (not official reports of abuse) n = 7476	Mixed. Yes for severe; No for mild on comparative risk question. Higher incidence of severe in steppather families; 8.2% vs. 5.4%; highest in stepmother families for mild violence; 81% vs. 72%; less mild violence in steppather families; 49.6% vs. 57.1%	Different research question – does not address comparative over-representation question. Compares proportions of violence between family types within the sample
Wilson, M., Daly, M., & Weghorst, S. (1981). Household composition and the risk of child abuse and neglect. <i>Journal of Biosocial Science</i> , 12, 333-340.	Socio-evolutionary theory Qs: Are stepchildren overrepresented in reported incidences of physical abuse?	1976 incident reports to American Humane Association n = 87,789 from 28 states	Yes to overrepresentation question. Abuse occurred more in stepfamilies than in 2 bio parent households. Reported on 5 age categories 2.1% in 0-2 to 14.7% 14-17	Includes sexual abuse? This is not clearly defined. Adoptive considered under "natural" parent category Households only; no report of victim-offender relationship

Research Questions

Although all 11 studies examined essentially the same question—*are stepchildren overrepresented in reported incidences of physical abuse?*—there were some variations in the specific questions asked and the methodology used. Two studies used self-report data from parents and adolescents (Gelles & Harrop, 1991; Sariola & Uutela, 1992) rather than official reported incidents of physical abuse. Gelles and Harrop (1991) analyzed data from the 2nd National Family Violence Survey (representative sample of 6002 families) and asked whether nongenetic parents are more violent toward stepchildren as compared to biological parents and children. They measured a continuum from “mild” slaps to abusive hitting with objects. Similarly, Sariola and Uutela (1992) asked whether stepchildren report proportionally greater incidents of violent interactions and they considered different levels of violence (i.e., mild, moderate, and severe). Hermann and Martin (1988) asked whether children who are hospitalized for abuse are different from those abused, but not hospitalized. This is a question of severity. They expected that stepparents would be more likely to be the most violent abusers of children. The study by Daly, Singh, and Wilson (1993) proposed a somewhat different hypothesis than their other studies. They expected that women with children from a previous relationship represent a greater proportion of the women coming to a battered women’s shelter. Additionally, they posited that these women would be more likely to have children who were abused by their stepfathers.

Theory

Ten of the studies discuss assumptions from socio-evolutionary theory (sociobiological theory is a term used interchangeably). Two also offer alternative theoretical explanations for the increased risk for stepchildren of physical abuse (Gelles & Harrop, 1991; Giles-Sims & Finkelhor, 1984). One study (Sariola & Uutela, 1992) does not provide an explicit theoretical orientation. The evolutionary framework suggests that natural selection is involved in parenting strategies (Daly & Wilson, 1980). Natural selection is a process of differential reproduction. It is posited that organisms have strategies for maximizing reproduction success, i.e., promoting the survival of their offspring. Through subconscious intent, the time, energy, and resources needed for a variety of family activities, such as feeding, courtship, and parental care, must include solutions for budgeting the parents’ efforts. It is argued that

parents are discriminative in their approach to the nurturing of children—that the biological connection enhances the motivation to invest energies and efforts into maximizing reproduction. Examples are offered from the animal kingdom to demonstrate the lack of investment and often aggressive behaviors toward nonbiological offspring (Daly & Wilson, 1980). This theory centers on the assumption of less parental investment and a greater tendency toward use of aggression on the part of nonbiological parents.

The focus of the study by Giles-Sims and Finkelhor (1984) is on theoretical frameworks for the study of physical abuse by a stepparent. They discuss socio-evolutionary theory, but also include discussion of alternative theories that would also explain an overrepresentation of stepchildren as physical abuse victims: resource theory, selection theory, and stress theory. Resource theory suggests that the more resources a person can command (i.e., the more power they have), the more that person is able to regulate the social system s/he is in. The person is then less likely to resort to physical force to get his/her way (Goode, 1971). The implication for stepparents is that there is a question of legitimacy of the power position in the family. The stepparent may, therefore, be more likely to assert his power.

Selection theory asserts that the relationship between “stepfamilies and cases of child abuse is spurious; there are common antecedent conditions to both” (Giles-Sims & Finkelhor, 1984, p. 411). It may be that the individual characteristics of low self-esteem, aggression, and tendency toward violence may be overrepresented among stepparents. These individuals may be more likely to be in conflictual relationships and may be more likely to be divorced. These characteristics may be disproportionately carried into remarriages, putting stepchildren at greater risk.

Stress theory is also discussed as a possible framework for studying physical abuse in stepfamilies. Giles-Sims and Finkelhor (1984) make the connection between the documentation of unique stressors and possible higher levels of stress for stepfamilies (than for intact families) and the findings in the child abuse literature that indicate that high stress levels in the family system put children at risk for physical abuse (e.g., Straus, 1991). They note that “although the relationship between stress level and child abuse within stepfamilies has not been specifically tested, it is well documented that stepfamilies experience stress, and that stress is related to child abuse” (p. 408). Kalmauss and Seltzer (1989) propose a theoretical framework centering on the stress experienced by individuals and families specifically during the divorce process and remarriage process. They posit that these periods of multiple

transitions and the accompanying multiple stressors place children at risk for physical abuse.

Gelles and Harrop (1991) offer another explanation for proportionally larger percentages of stepchildren being physically abused through the assumptions of labeling theory. They propose that the expectations of social workers that children are more at risk in stepfamilies may influence the social workers' decision in substantiating a reported case of alleged physical abuse.

Subjects and Procedures

Seven of the eleven studies examined a sample of official reports of incidents of physical abuse in Canada and the U.S. and compared the proportions to estimated population proportions of children living in stepfamilies (Daly & Wilson, 1987; Daly & Wilson, 1981; NIS, 1981 reported in Giles-Sims & Finkelhor, 1984; Hermann & Martin, 1988; Lightcap et al., 1982; Malkin & Lamb, 1994; Wilson et al., 1981). Glick's (1981) "1 in 10" proportion is cited in 6 of these reports. Daly and Wilson (1985) used a different population estimate, as they examined incidents of abuse in Canada. They conducted a random sample telephone survey of 2000 homes that included 841 respondents and found that approximately 5.7% of children live with a nonbiological parent. Presumably, these included adoptive parents as well as stepparents. Gelles and Harrop (1991) conducted a similar comparison of self-reported violence toward stepchildren to population estimates of stepchildren in households. However, they compared their sample proportions to Glick's (1989) estimate of 9.4% of children under 18 living with a nonbiological parent.

In Sariola and Uutela's (1992) study of Finnish adolescents and their parents ($n = 7576$), the Conflicts Tactics Scale (Straus, 1979) was used. A comparison of levels of violence between family types was conducted using ANOVAs, rather than a comparison of the percentage of stepchildren involved in violent interactions to population estimates of stepfamily households.

Results

Of the 10 studies that explored the overrepresentation question, 6 concluded that they had evidence that stepchildren are disproportionately represented as physical abuse victims (Daly & Wilson, 1987; Daly & Wilson, 1985; Daly & Wilson, 1981; Daly et al., 1993; Lightcap et al.,

1982; Wilson et al., 1981) (see Table 1). Stepchildren were found to be overrepresented as homicide victims in Canada (Daly & Wilson, 1987), overrepresented as child abuse victims and adolescent victims of abuse in Canada (Daly & Wilson, 1985; Daly & Wilson, 1981), overrepresented as child abuse victims in the U.S. (Lightcap et al., 1982; Wilson et al., 1981), and as victims when their mothers were also abused (Daly et al., 1993).

Three of the studies did not find evidence of overrepresentation of stepchildren as abuse victims (Gelles & Harrop, 1991; Hermann & Martin, 1988; Malkin & Lamb, 1994), and one study concluded that the “question was not settled” (Giles-Sims & Finkelhor, 1984, p. 409). Giles-Sims and Finkelhor (1984) report that stepchildren were overrepresented as child abuse victims (18%) in the National Incidence Study on Child Abuse and Neglect (1981) in comparison to Glick’s (1981) estimate of 1 in 10 children living in a stepfamily. However, they point out that taking social class into consideration, the conclusions may be different. They stress that the majority of child abuse reports come from lower socio-economic groups (see NRC, 1993). Divorce rates are higher at lower socio-economic statuses (Larson, 1992), and persons with lower education are most likely to remarry following a divorce (Wilson & Clarke, 1992). Giles-Sims and Finkelhor (1984) suggest that, taken together, these “findings suggest that the proportion of stepchildren in lower socioeconomic levels is significantly higher than the 10% estimated for the total population” (p. 408). Without considering sociodemographics, Giles-Sims and Finkelhor (1984) conclude, the question of whether stepfamilies are high-risk environments for children has not been settled.

The study by Sariola and Uutela (1992) ($n = 7476$) offers slightly different findings and mixed results since they compared percentages between groups within their sample rather than comparing sample proportions to population proportions. Like Gelles and Harrop (1991), their study is based on self-report (in this case, adolescent report) of parent-child interactions within a sample of households. Therefore, their findings reflect low to severe forms of violence in parent-child interactions. In their sample, they found that severe violence was reported more in stepfather families than in biological father families (8.2% vs. 5.4%). Mild violence was reported more in stepmother families than in biological mother families (81% vs. 72%). However, mild violence was found more often in biological father families than in stepfather families (57.1% vs. 49.6%) and severe violence was found more often in biological mother families compared to stepmother families (3.9% vs. 2.5%).

Hermann and Martin (1988) specifically examined the severity of the abuse (i.e., whether a child had to be hospitalized) and found that abuse by a stepparent did not better predict hospitalization (i.e., the most severe abuse was not necessarily the result of abuse by stepparent). Malkin and Lamb (1994) also support this finding by reporting that *biological* parents in their study were more likely to commit the most severe abuse.

DISCUSSION

Using a "vote-counting" method for conclusions drawn from this review, it would appear that there is more support for the finding of the overrepresentation of stepchildren as physical abuse victims by their stepparent. However, the three studies that do not draw this conclusion offer more convincing evidence that stepchildren may not be disproportionately victims of physical abuse by stepparents for several reasons. The Malkin and Lamb (1994) and the Hermann and Martin (1988) studies examined the *relationship of the perpetrator to the victim*, not simply the household composition of the victim. In the studies using household composition, it is not clear whether the victim was abused by the stepparent or the biological parent. This has been pointed out by other scholars (Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999; Sternberg, 1997). The distinction is vital. Malkin and Lamb (1994) emphasize that they had reported percentage of household composition, 17.7% of abuse victims were in a home with a nonbiological parent. Examining the relationship of the perpetrator to the victim, however, it was found that 9% were abused by a stepparent. Comparing these percentages to the 10% stepchildren population estimate (Glick, 1981) would result in different answers to the overrepresentation question.

The study by Gelles and Harrop (1991) measures all levels of violence in the sample homes ($n = 6002$), not just levels necessary to substantiate physical abuse. It could be expected that the percentage of stepparents using violence against their stepchildren would be even larger since the reports include mild forms of slapping and hitting, as well as more abusive behaviors. The total percentage found for stepparents using violence with their stepchildren, however, was 3.9%.

Another factor to consider in the studies finding support for the overrepresentation of stepchildren as physical abuse victims involves the possibility of the inclusion of sexual abuse cases in the examination of child abuse. It is not clearly defined in the Wilson and Daly studies

whether sexual abuse cases are included. Malkin and Lamb (1994), Hermann and Martin (1988), Gelles and Harrop (1991), and Sariola and Uutela (1992) state explicitly that only physical abuse cases were included. This distinction is not clear in the other studies. Evidence for the overrepresentation of stepchildren for sexual abuse by a stepparent has been found in other studies (see Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Giles-Sims, 1997). If these cases were included, the overrepresentation of stepchildren as abuse victims may be due to the rates of sexual abuse risk rather than physical abuse risk.

Another consideration is the small sample sizes used in many of the studies. Of the studies finding support for the overrepresentation of stepchildren as abuse victims, all but one used samples of less than 200. The Lightcap study (1982) examined 24 families. The Daly and Wilson (1985) study reported percentages on subsamples of 2 and 8. Generalizability of these findings to the population of stepchildren is certainly questionable. The studies that did not find evidence of overrepresentation used comparatively much larger samples.

And finally, definitive conclusions are questionable due to the population proportion used for comparison (Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Giles-Sims, 1984, 1997). For the broad population, the proportion of stepchildren remains an elusive number. Nearly all scholars in the field agree that estimates have always been and continue to be low. At the time these studies were conducted (i.e., 1980s), the "1 in 10" estimate was conceivably out of pace with the 1992 Census report that 15% of all children under 18 lived with a mother and a stepfather (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1995). In addition, as mentioned previously, Giles-Sims and Finkelhor (1984) suggested that since a higher proportion of physical abuse cases occur among lower-income families, the more appropriate demographic comparison is the proportion of stepchildren in lower-income families. They estimated at that time that as many as 20-30% of children living in lower socio-economic statuses were living with a stepparent. An additional consideration is the large number of non-legal union stepfamily households (Bumpass, Raley, & Sweet, 1995). It is not clear whether child abuse reports physical abuse by a parent's cohabiting partner as abuse by a stepparent. If this is the case, then these cases are included in the count of cases of abuse by a stepparent; yet, the comparison percentage is based on married households only. Including nonmarried stepfamily households would further increase the proportion estimates of children living in stepfamily situations.

Annual population reports of the incidence of child abuse over the last 2 decades provide information on an array of factors associated with

child abuse and provide rates by a number of demographic factors (e.g., age, gender); however, U.S. reports, even the most current (McDonald & Associates, 2002), have typically not provided clear assessments of the proportion of stepchildren being physically abused by a stepparent each year in this country. In fact, in this latest report, stepparents are subsumed under the category of parent: "By far, the largest percentage of perpetrators (81%) were parents, including birth parents, adoptive parents, and stepparents" (p. 61).

CONCLUSIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

It should be clear that there is no conclusive answer to the overrepresentation question for stepchildren among physical abuse victims. In fact, it may be surprising to some readers that so little empirical attention has been given to this issue, despite some strong debate on the topic (e.g., Daly & Wilson, 1999, 2000; Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999). Clearly, there is a need for continued research that utilizes the recommendations for better methodology in examining the question of overrepresentation of stepchildren as physical abuse victims. In addition, it is hoped that the official reporting hierarchy for child abuse incidents would standardize reporting forms to distinguish among specific contexts of abuse and the specific relationship between the offender and the victim, rather than continuing to collapse categories of offenders.

In fact, if governmental reports can provide the necessary population data on risk of physical abuse of stepchildren by a stepparent, it is suggested that the more useful focus for future social science research is on family processes that help explain the physical abuse of stepchildren. Determining conclusively that being a stepchild is a risk factor for physical abuse provides little practical information for practitioners and stepfamilies and does little to advance the theoretical understanding of physical abuse in stepfamilies. In fact, even if the answer to the overrepresentation question is "no," it does not make the problem any less important. We know that stepchildren are physically abused in stepfamilies and we know that stepchildren are physically abused by their stepparents. Vital research questions still remain: *under what conditions are stepchildren at greater risk of physical abuse by a parent? By a stepparent? Are patterns of family functioning that lead to physical abuse different in stepfamilies than in first families?* Longitudinal designs will enhance our understanding of the developmental changes

in these stepfamily processes. As in general studies of physical child abuse, information about the socio-cognitive, interactional, and transactional processes that lead to abuse is the most valuable information for prevention and intervention work. It is also important to explore different theoretical frameworks as part of process studies. Socio-evolutionary theory speculates as to the reasons for physical abuse of stepchildren by stepparents; however, its assumptions have not been tested. Similarly, the application of stress theory, resource theory, and selection theory assumptions remain to be tested.

It is also important to move beyond comparisons between first families and stepfamilies and to consider the diversity of stepfamilies (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000). Within-group analyses of stepfamilies are as important as between family structures comparisons. *How does conflict management differ in stepfamilies that are functioning well versus those functioning poorly? How do processes in complex stepfamilies (where both parents are stepparents) differ from simple stepfamilies? How do stepfather families differ from stepmother families? How do stepfamily processes differ by ethnicity and socio-economic statuses? How do stepfamily processes differ in gay and lesbian stepfamilies? Cohabiting stepfamilies?*

These findings can lead to a greater understanding of the diversity between and within family structures. This knowledge would aid primary prevention efforts by making practitioners aware of the potential risk factors for child physical abuse in stepfamilies. Programs tailored to the unique needs of specific types of stepfamilies would improve efficiency and would be more effective in reducing risk of abuse of stepchildren. Implications are equally important for intervention programs. Specific programs addressing the most salient family system factors for stepfamilies where abuse has already occurred would be more effective in the reduction of recidivism.

There has been a surprising lack of research attention given to the study of the physical abuse of stepchildren. There appears to be a dearth of convincing evidence to substantiate the negative view of stepparents as more likely to physically abuse than biological parents. In addition, there is virtually no information on the processes involved in families where stepchildren are physically abused. Research in this area is essential and will serve to move the family studies and family services fields toward a greater recognition and understanding of the diversity of family experiences and family processes that are associated with physical child abuse.

REFERENCES

- Bumpass, L. L., Raley, R. K., & Sweet, J. A. (1995). The changing character of step-families: Implications of cohabitation and nonmarital childbearing. *Demography*, *32*, 425-436.
- Claxton-Oldfield, S. (2000). Deconstructing the myth of the wicked stepparent. *Marriage & Family Review*, *30*, 51-58.
- Coleman, M., Ganong, L., & Fine, M. A. (2000). Reinvestigating remarriage: Another decade of progress. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, *62*, 1288-1307.
- Daly, M., & Wilson, M. (2000). Not quite right. *American Psychologist*, *56*, 679-680.
- Daly, M., & Wilson, M. (1999). *The truth about Cinderella*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Daly, M., & Wilson, M. (1987). Risk of maltreatment of children living with stepparents. In R. J. Gelles & J. B. Lancaster (Eds.), *Child abuse and neglect: Biosocial dimensions* (pp. 215-232). Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Daly, M., & Wilson, M. (1985). Child abuse and other risks of not living with both parents. *Ethology and Sociobiology*, *6*, 197-210.
- Daly, M., & Wilson, M. (1981). Child maltreatment from a sociobiological perspective. *New Directions for Child Development*, *11*, 93-112.
- Daly, M., & Wilson, M. (1980). Discriminative parental solicitude: A biological perspective. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *42*, 277-288.
- Daly, M., Singh, L., & Wilson, M. (May, 1993). Children fathered by previous partners: A risk factor for violence against women. *Canadian Journal of Public Health*, *84*, 209-210.
- Ganong, L., & Coleman, M. (2004). *Stepfamily Relationships: Development, Dynamics, and Interventions*. New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers.
- Gelles, R., & Harrop, J. (1991). The risk of abusive violence among children with nongenetic caretakers. *Family Relations*, *40*, 78-83.
- Giles-Sims, J. (1997). Current knowledge about child abuse in stepfamilies. In I. Levin & M. Sussman (Eds.), *Stepfamilies: History, Research, and Policy*. New York: Haworth Press.
- Giles-Sims, J. (1984). The stepparent role: Expectations, behavior, sanctions. *Journal of Family Issues*, *5*, 116-130.
- Giles-Sims, J., & Finkelhor, D. (1984). Child abuse in stepfamilies. *Family Relations*, *33*, 407-413.
- Glick, P. (1989). Remarried families, stepfamilies, and stepchildren: A brief demographic profile. *Family Relations*, *38*, 24-27.
- Glick, P. (1981). Children of divorced parents in demographic perspective. *Journal of Social Issues*, *35*, 170-182.
- Goode, W. (1971). Force and violence in the family. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, *33*, 624-636.
- Hermann, C., & Martin, M. (1988). Factors associated with hospitalization in confirmed cases of physical child abuse. *Early Childhood Development and Care*, *31*, 35-41.
- Kalmuss, D., & Seltzer, J. (1989). A framework for studying family socialization over the life cycle. *Journal of Family Issues*, *10*, 339-358.

- Larson, J. (1992). Understanding stepfamilies. *American Demographics*, 14, 36-39.
- Lightcap, J., Kurland, J., & Burgess, R. (1982). Child abuse: A test of some predictions from evolutionary theory. *Ethology and Sociobiology*, 3, 61-67.
- Malkin, C., & Lamb, M. (1994). Child maltreatment: A test of sociobiological theory. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 25, 121-133.
- McDonald & Associates. (2002). Child Maltreatment 2002. Washington, DC: American Humane Society.
- National Incidence Study on Child Abuse and Neglect. (1981). Washington National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect.
- National Research Council, Panel on Research on Child Abuse and Neglect (1993). *Understanding child abuse and neglect*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- Pasley, K., Ihinger-Tallman, M., & Lofquist, A. (1994). In K. Pasley & M. Ihinger-Tallman (Eds.), *Stepparenting: Issues in theory, research, and practice*. CT: Greenwood Press.
- Sariola, H., & Uutela, A. (1992). The prevalence and context of family violence against children in Finland. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 16, 823-832.
- Silverstein, L. B., & Auerbach, C. F. (1999). Deconstructing the essential father. *American Psychologist*, 54, 397-407.
- Sternberg, K. J. (1997). Fathers, the missing parents in research on family violence. In M. E. Lamb (Ed.), *The role of the father in child development* (3rd ed., pp. 284-309). New York: Wiley.
- Straus, M. (1991). Discipline and deviance: Physical punishment of children and violence and other crime in adulthood. *Social Problems*, 38, 101-123.
- Straus, M. (1979). Measuring intrafamily conflict and violence: The Conflict Tactics (CT) Scales. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 41, 175-88.
- U.S. Bureau of the Census. (1995). *Statistical abstracts of the United States: 1995*. (115th ed.). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Wilson, B. F., & Clarke, S. C. (1992). Remarriages: A demographic profile. *Journal of Family Issues*, 13, 123-141.
- Wilson, M., Daly, M., & Weghorst, S. (1981). Household composition and the risk of child abuse and neglect. *Journal of Biosocial Science*, 12, 333-340.