



COFCCA SPOTLIGHT ON...

Children Who Witness Arrests Have Elevated Symptoms of Post-traumatic Stress

The findings of this study are no surprise to child welfare professionals who know that a high percentage of the children we work with have witnessed arrests of family members. The study further supports the work involving Adversarial Childhood Experiences (ACEs), including the presentation at COFCCA's 2010 Annual Meeting by Dr. Heather Larkin of UAlbany.

A study reported in the April 2010 issue of *Children and Youth Services Review* documents that children who have been subjects of reports of maltreatment and who have “witnessed the arrest of someone with whom they lived had approximately a 57% greater likelihood of having elevated PTS symptoms relative to children who never witnessed an arrest.” Children who also had a parent arrested recently “had a 73% greater likelihood of having elevated PTS symptoms relative to children who had never seen an arrest and whose parents were not recently arrested.”ⁱ

This is a valuable study that adds to the increasing understanding of the impact of trauma on children and their future development. The findings of this study provide support to advocates who work with children with incarcerated parents, who observe that witnessing the arrest of a parent is traumatizing to children. The advocates promote collaboration among law enforcement and child welfare agencies in order to reduce the risk of helpers inadvertently imposing

trauma on children. *(Comment: This is an area of growing concern and will likely get more attention in the future. Experiences with the development and use of protocols between law enforcement and child welfare have demonstrated some positive results. For more information on this topic, please see endnotes.)*

Previous to this study there was little evidence to support or to challenge claims made by advocates. The research that had been completed on related topics did not control for confounding variables. While studies demonstrated elevated PTS symptoms displayed by children who had witnessed arrests of their parents, a possible conclusion was that these were effects of an accumulation of traumatic events the child had experienced in addition to observing the arrest of their parents. Multiple exposures to traumatic events have been associated with higher levels of PTS symptomsⁱⁱ. Prior analyses using the same data used in this study found that as the number of types of violence that children witnessed and were victims of in their homes increased, the likelihood of them having PTS symptoms markedly increased as wellⁱⁱⁱ.

Methods - This report is the result of a secondary analysis of data from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-being^{iv}. The analysis is based upon 1,869 children who were 8 years of age or older and who were subjects of maltreatment reports. The authors employed sophisticated statistical methods to complete the analysis that effectively controlled for confounding variables.^v

Findings and Conclusions - A surprisingly high percentage of children (39%) who are subjects of reports of maltreatment have witnessed the arrest of someone with whom they lived, and almost forty percent of those children witnessed multiple arrests. These children differ from other child welfare populations in that “ (1) they are more likely to have been victims of and witnesses to a broader range of violence in their homes...; (2) they have had greater exposure to nonviolent crimes... and (3) they are more likely to be living in families having difficulty meeting children's basic needs.” These differences are not surprising in that “higher levels of violence, drug involvement, and theft (each of which are correlated

with poverty) could result in arrests and, therefore, would help to explain why children witnessed arrests.”

Most interesting from this study is the finding that after other possible explanations are considered and controlled for, the witnessing of the arrest of a household member in and of itself is a distinct and significant predictor of PTS symptoms. This suggests that developing effective working protocols between law enforcement and children’s services is not just a good idea; it is essential to protect children from unnecessary trauma.

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Endnotes

- ⁱ Phillips, Susan D., Zhao, Jian (2010). The relationship between witnessing arrest and elevated symptoms of posttraumatic stress: Findings from a national study of children involved in the child welfare system. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 32, 1246-1254.
- ⁱⁱ Follette, V. M., Polusny, M. A., Bechtle, A. E., & Naugle, A. E. (2006). Cumulative trauma: The impact of child sexual abuse, adult sexual assault, and spouse abuse. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 9, 25–35.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Kolko, D. J., Hurlburt, M. S., Zhang, J., Barth, R. P., Leslie, L. K., & Burns, B. (2009). Posttraumatic stress symptoms in children and adolescents referred for child welfare investigation: A national sample of in-home and out-of-home care. *Child Maltreatment*, OnlineFirst.
- ^{iv} Dowd, K., Kinsey, S., Wheelless, S., Thissen, R., Richardson, J., Suresh, R., et al. (2003). National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being: Combined Waves 1–3 datafile user's manual. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect.
- ^v Pima Prevention Partnership (2007). Arizona children of incarcerated parents Bill of Rights project: Report and recommendations. Tucson, AZ: Pima Prevention Partnership Available from http://www.starsmp.org/PDFs/manual_of_strategies.pdf
- ^v Puddefoot, G., & Foster, L. K. (2007). Keeping Children Safe when their Parents are Arrested: Local Approaches that Work. Sacramento: California Research Bureau, California State Library. Available from <http://www.library.ca.gov/crb/07/07-006.pdf>
- ^v Follette, V. M., Polusny, M. A., Bechtle, A. E., & Naugle, A. E. (2006). Cumulative trauma: The impact of child sexual abuse, adult sexual assault, and spouse abuse. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 9, 25–35.
- ^v Kolko, D. J., Hurlburt, M. S., Zhang, J., Barth, R. P., Leslie, L. K., & Burns, B. (2009). Posttraumatic stress symptoms in children and adolescents referred for child welfare investigation: A national sample of in-home and out-of-home care. *Child Maltreatment*, OnlineFirst.
- ^v Dowd, K., Kinsey, S., Wheelless, S., Thissen, R., Richardson, J., Suresh, R., et al. (2003). National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being: Combined Waves 1–3 datafile user's manual. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect.

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