

## HOUSEHOLD COMPOSITION AND THE RISK OF CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

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**Summary.** The incidence of child abuse and neglect resulting in validated case reports to the American Humane Association in 1976 was determined in relation to household composition, family income and age of the victim. Abuse and neglect were both maximal in father-only homes and minimal in two-natural-parent homes. Mother-only households exceed those with one natural and one step-parent in neglect incidence, but the reverse is true for abuse incidence. Poverty is more strongly associated with neglect risk than with abuse risk, and probably cannot account for the high risks of abuse and neglect in father-only and step-parent families. Evidence that the presence of an unrelated adult filling a parental role exacerbates the risk of physical abuse is presented and discussed.

### Introduction

Does family composition affect the quality of parental care, and in particular the risks of child abuse and neglect? Samples of maltreated children so far studied include substantial proportions from reconstituted and single-parent families (e.g. Gil, 1970; Smith, Hanson & Noble, 1974; Ebbin *et al.*, 1969; Baldwin & Oliver, 1975; Fergusson, Fleming & O'Neill, 1972; Creighton & Owtram, 1977; Sills, Thomas & Rosenbloom, 1977), but quantitative estimates of the incidence of such maltreatment according to household composition are lacking. We here analyse a large sample of cases of abuse and neglect in America and estimate the proportions of various living arrangements of children in the population at large, in order to determine the incidence of validated cases in four categories of household composition.

### Methods

The sample consisted of case reports on 87,789 children abused or neglected or both. The term 'children' refers to persons under 18 years of age. These were all the validated cases reported in 1976 to the American Humane Association, Englewood, Colorado, from the 28 states and three territories, then comprising

44.6% of the total US population (US Bureau of the Census, 1978a), which were then full participants in a national programme for reporting standard information on suspected abuse or neglect. The sample was broken down into five age categories which were dictated by available data for the population at large. The percentages of abuse and neglect cases in each age category were as follows: 0-2 years old, 20.0%; 3-5, 18.1%; 6-9, 23.3%; 10-13, 21.3%; 14-17, 17.2%.

These case reports included information on the composition of the households in which victims dwelt. Comparable information on household composition for the population at large is nowhere available and was estimated as follows. The US Bureau of the Census (1977a) reported that 80.0% of American children in 1976 lived with 'two parents'. This figure included natural, step and adoptive parents. Glick (1976) estimated that 10% of American children in 1975 lived with a step-parent, and we adopted his estimate. This left an estimated 70.0% living with two natural parents. Available data do not permit estimation of the incidence of adoptive households in the population at large and such households were therefore subsumed under the natural-parents category in all tabulations; adoptive families accounted for just 0.7% of abuse and neglect cases in the 'two-natural-parents' category. Similarly, parent-plus-paramour households were of necessity included in the single-parent category in all analyses, since their incidence in the population at large could not be estimated; parent-plus-paramour households accounted for 2.8% of abuse and neglect cases in the natural-mother-only category and for 4.3% of those in the natural-father-only category. To obtain age-specific estimates, we then assumed that the relative increase by age in the proportion of children living with step-parents has not changed since 1967, for which year living arrangements of children were estimated from sample data by Sweet (1974). The resulting estimates of living arrangements of children are presented in Table 1.

Data on household composition and on income categories of the abuse and neglect families were combined with the household composition estimates for the population at large (Table 1) and with income data for the population at large (US Bureau of the Census, 1978b) in order to arrive at estimated incidence rates for abuse and neglect in various household composition and income circumstances.

**Table 1.** Estimated living arrangements of children in the population at large, US, 1976 (% distribution)

Household composition	Age of children (years)				
	0-2	3-5	6-9	10-13	14-17
Two natural parents	80.9	74.8	70.5	66.8	63.8
Natural parent + step-parent	2.1	5.7	9.9	12.5	14.7
Natural mother only	12.8	16.0	16.6	17.2	15.5
Natural father only	0.3	0.8	0.9	1.3	2.2
Other	3.9	2.7	2.1	2.2	3.8
No. of children	9,082,000	10,013,000	13,779,000	15,724,000	16,531,000

Results

Estimated incidences of neglect and abuse according to household composition are presented in Fig. 1.

The father-only household entails the highest risk of both abuse and neglect. In this household type, as compared to the population at large, risk of abuse and risk of neglect are elevated to the same degree. In the youngest children, both risks are elevated by a factor of almost 7, while in older children, the risks are elevated by factors of about 3-4. The mother-only household ranks second to father-only in risk of neglect with age-specific incidences 2.3 to 3.1 times as high as in the population at large. The step-parent household differs from other household types

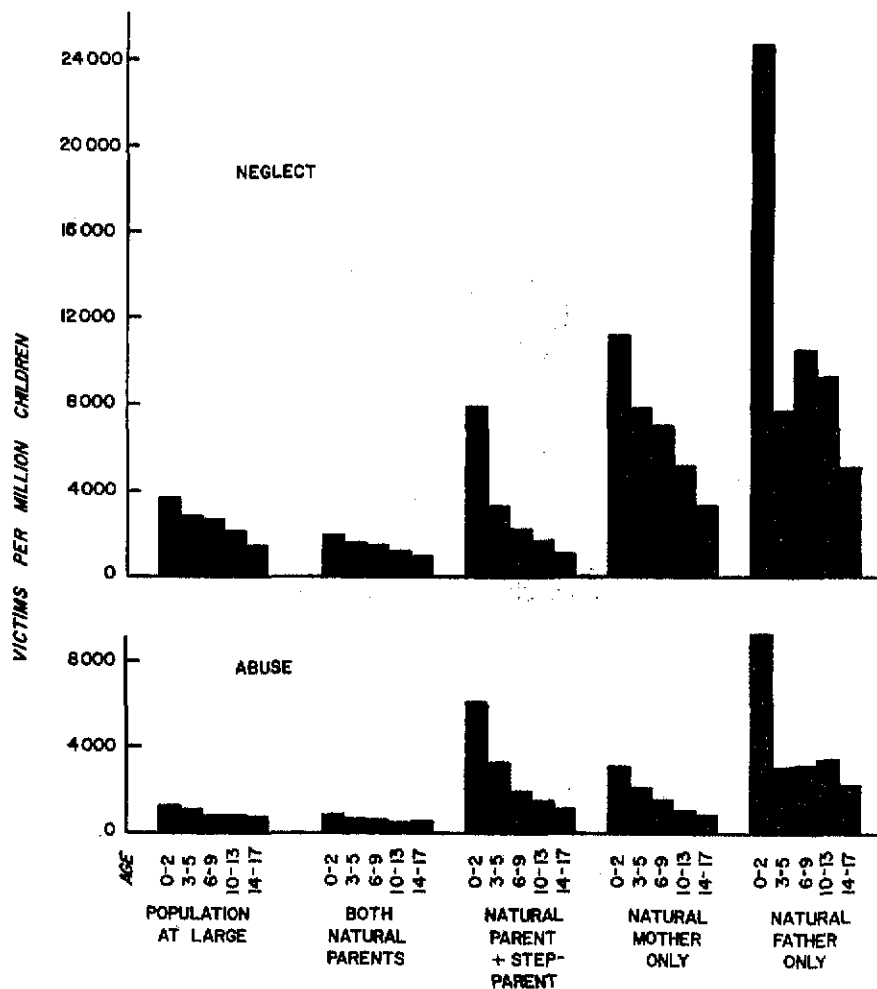


Fig. 1. Incidence of validated cases of neglect and abuse of children in US, 1976, by household composition and age of victim.

in that abuse is almost as prevalent as neglect. Age-specific neglect incidences are 0.7 to 2.2 times those of the population at large, whereas age-specific abuse incidences are 1.6 to 4.6 times those of the population at large.

In the present sample, victims were classified as abused only, neglected only, or both. The percentage of the total validated cases which involved abuse was determined for each of seven household composition types as follows: two natural parents, 34.4%; natural mother only, 21.2%; natural father only, 30.4%; other relatives, 30.9%; natural mother and father substitute (adoptive, step or paramour), 54.2%; natural father and mother substitute, 59.1%; adoptive or foster parents, 59.7%. Only the latter three household types include an adult unrelated to the victim and in each of these the proportion of cases involving abuse is significantly higher than in each of the first four categories ( $P < 0.001$  by chi-squared test for each comparison).

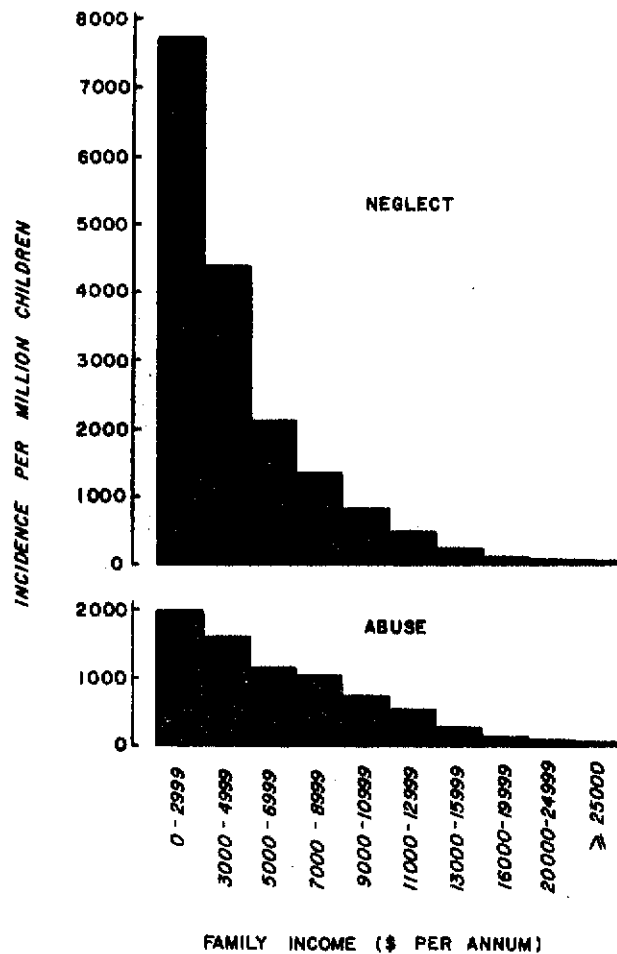


Fig. 2. Incidence of validated cases of neglect-only and abuse-only of children in US, 1976, by family income.

Figure 2 presents estimated incidences of neglect and abuse by household income. Poor financial circumstances is a factor in both abuse-only and neglect-only cases, but is considerably more relevant to neglect. At incomes above \$11,000 per annum, abuse incidence actually surpasses neglect incidence. Median family income for abuse-only cases was \$6885 and for neglect-only cases was \$4249 (American Humane Association, 1978). For families with children under 18 years of age in the US population at large, median income was \$15,388 (US Bureau of the Census, 1978b). In mother-only households, median income for 1976 was \$6050, whereas in father-only households, median income was \$12,758 (US Bureau of the Census, 1978b). The median income in two-parent families was \$17,550 (US Bureau of the Census, 1978b). Income for step-households was not estimable.

### Discussion

The data in Fig. 1 indicate that household composition is indeed highly relevant to the risk of abuse or neglect. We would caution against attaching great importance to the actual incidences in our figures. On the one hand, these represent only the actual numbers of cases validated and reported to the American Humane Association divided by the reporting population base and therefore surely underestimate the true incidence to an unknown degree. On the other hand, the criteria of abuse and neglect here employed (American Humane Association, 1978) are broader than those defining the smaller samples in most clinical studies of severely abused and grossly neglected children. For our purposes, the absolute incidences in Figs 1 and 2 are of less interest than the relative incidences as functions of household composition and income.

The data are presented in terms of household composition rather than of perpetrator for several reasons. While step-parents are relatively frequent perpetrators of abuse, so, to a lesser extent, are natural parents with step-parent spouses (see e.g. Sills *et al.*, 1977). The labelled 'perpetrator' is not necessarily the instigator (see e.g. Baldwin & Oliver, 1975), and moreover, one party may assume responsibility to protect another. In the case of neglect, identification of a single perpetrator seems inappropriate.

Some imprecision in the estimates in Fig. 1 derives from the necessity of subsuming adoptive parents under natural-parents categories and of treating paramours as absent. The error so introduced may be presumed small and insufficient to alter the general trends in Fig. 1, in view of the low frequency of these categories in the American Humane Association reports.

Another possible source of error in our estimates derives from the use of Glick's (1976) estimate of 10% of children living in step-parent households. Any such error is likely to be in the direction of conservatism, leading us to underestimate abuse and neglect risks in step-households. This is because Glick is likely to have over-estimated the prevalence of step-relationships, both because he (1) considered all children born between first and second marriage (8% of all children of women in intact second marriages) as step-children, regardless of paternity, and (2) estimated the proportion of children in maternal remarriages who were step-children, and

used the same figure for paternal remarriages. Glick moreover estimated the proportion of children living with one or more remarried parents in 1975 by extrapolating from 1970 data, and additional imprecision derives from our application of his estimate another year later. Our belief that the step-parent incidences in Fig. 1 are conservative is supported by data presented by the US Bureau of the Census (1977b): in June 1975, 14.3% of children aged 14–17 lived 'with father and mother' where one or both parents were remarried. This figure, which includes offspring conceived after the remarriage, constitutes an upper limit on the proportion in step-parent households, while the figure which we have estimated independently is 14.7%.

The association with family income (Fig. 2) has been noted by others (e.g. Pelton, 1978; Garbarino, 1976). But is it independent of the other factors considered?

A hypothesis that the household composition effects in Fig. 1 are entirely due to a correlated income variable is untenable for two reasons. In the first place, while single-parent households are indeed both poorer and at higher risk than two-parent households, the relative incidences of maltreatment in father-only versus mother-only households are the reverse of what should be expected on the income hypothesis. Poverty is indeed the likeliest explanation for the high risks (especially of neglect) in the mother-only household, but it cannot explain the still higher risks in father-only households. Rather, we would suggest that men left alone with children (and especially infants, in which group the relative risk of the father-only household was especially high) are not well prepared—whether emotionally or otherwise—to care for them adequately. Men participate directly in infant care in some but by no means all societies and are nowhere the primary carers of infants (Stephens, 1963). In America, men make various contributions as material providers, protectors, educators, and the like, but less often bathe, clothe and feed children (Benson, 1968; Parke & Sawin, 1976; Stafford, Backman & Dibona, 1977).

Income differentials also cannot explain the greater risks in step-parent as opposed to natural-parent households. While direct data to allow simultaneous analysis of these variables are not available, limited evidence suggests that income in step-parent households is not systematically different from that in other two-parent households. Sweet (1974) tabulated the proportion of children in two-parent households who were step-children, in relation to income levels, for each of eight age- and race-specific samples. If step-households are relatively poor, correlations between step-child proportion and family income should be consistently negative. Instead, these variables were unrelated; the mean correlation coefficient was 0.04. But direct data on this point are urgently needed, preferably from a large national sample of children's circumstances.

If future evidence confirms that step-households are not significantly poorer than natural-parent households, non-economic explanations for the much higher risks of both abuse and neglect in the former must be considered. A specific parental attachment process to newborn children (Klaus & Kennell, 1976), for example, may be a significant inhibitor of parental maltreatment (Lynch & Roberts, 1977; O'Connor *et al.*, 1977). Most step-parents have not experienced this

attachment process. Consequently, parent substitutes may not easily develop genuine parental affection for their wards. A study of step-parents in Cleveland, for example, found that only 53% of step-fathers and 25% of step-mothers could claim to have 'parental feelings' towards their step-children (Duberman, 1975).

A striking feature of the data in Figs 1 and 2 is that abuse and neglect are not identically related to the household composition and income variables. The two categories of parental maltreatment therefore deserve closer consideration. The great majority of abuse reports consist of cases of overt physical injury judged to be non-accidental, whereas neglect reports included large numbers of cases categorized as 'lack of supervision' and 'physical' and 'emotional' neglect and lesser numbers of 'medical' and 'educational' neglect and 'abandonment' cases. Poverty is clearly more relevant to neglect than to abuse (Fig. 2), as would be expected from the case report categories listed above. Possibly more surprising are the differential effects of household composition upon abuse and neglect risk: note the reversal in relative risk between step-parent and mother-only households (Fig. 1).

It is concluded that risk of neglect is more directly a function of poverty than risk of abuse, which is to some degree elevated independently of poverty by the presence of unrelated (unattached) adults filling parental roles. In the present study, case reports concerning households containing adults unrelated to the victim are much more likely to include physical abuse than are reports concerning households containing only related adults. Similarly, in a more severely maltreated sample of children (Kent, 1976), 77% of 91 cases from households containing a step-parent included non-accidental injuries to the victim, compared to 51% of 272 cases from households containing only natural parents ( $\chi^2$ , 1 df = 19.1,  $P < 0.001$ ). Other studies of cases of severe physical abuse support the conclusion that the step-parent household is particularly fertile ground for the risk of abuse: 22.8% of 556 such children in an English study lived with a step-parent (Creighton & Owtram, 1977); 19.6% of a group of 255 New Zealand children with non-accidental injuries lived with a step-parent in contrast to 9.3% of a comparison group of 108 children with injuries concluded to be accidental ( $\chi^2$ , 1 df = 5.22;  $P < 0.05$ ) (Fergusson *et al.*, 1972). Differences among these studies may be due to various factors including different criteria of abuse; what is of interest in the present context is the consistent implication of the step-relationship as a factor in elevated risk of physical abuse.

Both theoretical considerations and the data presented here suggest that in humans, as in other animals, parental feeling is most readily directed towards own offspring. In view of a large and growing incidence of reconstituted families, there is a need for more investigation of the parental attachment process and ways of facilitating the redirection of parental feeling.

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