



DOES VIOLENCE BEGET VIOLENCE?

A CAREER DEDICATED TO STUDYING
THE LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF CHILD
ABUSE AND NEGLECT

An interview with
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*Your career has a singular focus.
What do you address?*

I study the long-term effects of child abuse and neglect. When I began this work more than 30 years ago, the main question was whether children who experience abuse or neglect are destined to become adults who engage in crime and violence and someday abuse their own children. Many people—experts and laypeople alike—believed that the answer to the question was yes. But research was sparse and suffered from methodological limitations that made it difficult to draw firm conclusions to inform policy.

How does a researcher go about studying a topic like this?

We began with two groups of children – one that had been documented in a court case as having been abused or neglected and another composed of children without those histories who were similar in age, sex, race and ethnicity, and family social class. Both groups were followed into adulthood to learn about their behavior when they became parents. We interviewed them about their behavior toward their children and checked for reports of abuse and neglect in Child Protective Service records. This type of research, called a prospective cohort study design, is complicated because people often relocate and because at any point they can say “I don’t want to be in the study anymore.”

This sounds like a costly endeavor. Who funds your work?

It is very costly because of the large number of people in our study and because they are dispersed across the country. The federal government has been the primary funder; several branches of the National Institutes of Health along with the National Institute of Justice have funded the research at various points. The Doris Duke Charitable Foundation also has provided support.

You looked at physical abuse. What about other forms of maltreatment?

Actually, we looked at more than physical abuse – we looked at sexual abuse and neglect as well. That’s a strength of my program of research – it takes into account a more complete range of maltreatment.

Am I correct that you expanded beyond your initial focus on the cycle of violence?

Yes, that’s right. The original study focused solely on whether abused and neglected children were at increased risk for delinquency, crime, and violence. The research was expanded to assess mental health, alcohol and drug use and abuse, revictimization, physical health outcomes, service utilization, and economic productivity.

If you were to distill your work into a few sentences – no small task, I know – what are the key things that your research has found?

I’ll limit myself to three things. First, the serious and long-lasting consequences of child maltreatment warrant increased investment in preventive and therapeutic strategies from early childhood. Second, the negative consequences of childhood victimization are not deterministic or inevitable. Third, childhood neglect is far more important than people realized.

What are the implications of your work for practice?

Violence prevention policies and programs need to target maltreated boys and girls. Unsupported assumptions or incorrect conclusions lead to ineffective screening tools, harmful social policies, worker bias, and poor outcomes for children and families. Research is needed to understand why these families are more likely to be identified by the child protective system and whether it is because they present more opportunities for intervention (e.g., are using more services) or whether they are truly more dysfunctional.

There is a lot of talk these days about something called Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). How does that work compare to your work?

ACEs work is based on retrospective reports of what people remember about their childhoods, and we know that memory is faulty. We constantly rewrite our histories and memory is affected by all sorts of things, for example, people recall more negative memories when they are depressed. That’s why the longitudinal study designs that I use are so important – rather than require people to recall long-ago events and experiences, we assess behavior as it is happening.

However, let me be clear. Few would argue that being abused or neglected as a child or other negative experiences during childhood – for example, things such as witnessing intimate partner violence and having a parent incarcerated that are assessed by ACEs – are going to lead to better health. That said, it is important to study these things carefully so that we can learn what might be a “lever” to good or poor outcomes.

You have made important contributions to our knowledge and are far from done. What’s next?

Making sure that the work continues. I’m putting substantial effort, as I have for a long time, into training and mentoring young colleagues in the field of child abuse and neglect. A colleague at Washington University and I hold annual summer training institutes for research on child abuse and neglect with the purpose of building a pipeline of researchers in this field. I’m delighted to learn that a recent graduate of your PhD program has applied for the summer 2018 institute.

Cathy Spatz Widom, a highly-regarded researcher known for methodological rigor, has received multiple awards for her research. She served on the National Research Council committee that produced the 1993 report on child abuse and neglect and on the Institute of Medicine Committee that wrote the 2013 report on child abuse and neglect. She has been invited to testify before congressional and state committees about the consequences of child abuse and neglect. Professor Widom is a Scholar with the Ortner Center.

