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RESEARCH IN BRIEF

MALE PERPETRATORS OF CHILD MALTREATMENT: FINDINGS FROM NCANDS

The distribution and characteristics of male perpetrators are among the least studied aspects of child maltreatment. Nonetheless, generalizations regarding this group are common. This research used the case-level data from the National Child Abuse and Neglect System (NCANDS) for 2002 to analyze the characteristics of male perpetrators of maltreatment. The study utilized an 18-State data set of 192,392 perpetrators identified by the child protective services (CPS) system during 2002. The relationship of the perpetrators to the child victims, as well as whether the perpetrator acted alone or with another person, was considered along with demographic characteristics of both perpetrators and victims, and circumstances of the maltreatment.

Research questions and key findings are as follows:

What are the characteristics of male perpetrators of child maltreatment?

- Of all reported cases in the 18-State data set, slightly less than half of all perpetrators were male. Of these, about half (51%) were biological fathers, an additional one-fifth occupied some other parental role (adoptive fathers, stepfathers, mothers' boyfriends), and about one-quarter were in non-parental relationships (including relatives, foster parents, day care providers, or friends) to their victims. In comparison, among female perpetrators, 86 percent were biological mothers.
- Male and female perpetrators were similar in terms of race. Males were slightly older than females, with an age difference of about 5 years, and men were substantially less likely to be in a caregiver status to the child than were women (60% compared with 87%).

What specific patterns of child maltreatment are associated with male perpetrators?

- Male perpetrators were associated more often than female perpetrators with older victims and with female victims. This is consistent with the finding that male perpetrators were more likely than female perpetrators to be involved in sexual abuse.
- There are differences in the patterns of maltreatment among categories of fathers, in that biological fathers more likely to maltreat young children, more likely to maltreat both girls and boys, more likely to be involved in neglect cases and less likely than other male perpetrators to be involved in sexual abuse. These findings suggest that in comparison to other male perpetrators, the circumstances associated with biological fathers are more similar to biological mothers.

- Non-parent male perpetrators were much more likely than other males to be involved in sexual abuse cases.

What outcomes are associated with male perpetrators of child maltreatment?

- Post-investigation services were provided more often with female perpetrators than with male perpetrators.
- Recidivism rates were highest for biological fathers, mother's boyfriends, and non-parents, and lowest for adoptive fathers and stepfathers. The impact of the type of maltreatment or the male perpetrator's continued access to the child on this difference in recidivism rates is not known.

How does the presence of a mother co-perpetrator influence the circumstances surrounding the child maltreatment or the outcomes?

- Almost two-thirds of male perpetrators of child maltreatment were reported as being the only perpetrator, one-third acted with the child's mother and about 6 percent acted with someone other than the mother.
- Biological fathers were less likely than other male perpetrators to act alone. When acting in concert with the mother, biological fathers were more likely to be involved with younger children and more likely to be involved with neglect than other types of maltreatment.
- Biological fathers and father surrogates who acted with the mother were roughly twice as likely to repeat their maltreatments within 12 months as those fathers who acted alone.

Implications

These findings provide insights that may prove helpful in designing improved prevention and intervention programs. It is especially clear that if prevention and treatment interventions for child maltreatment are targeted primarily toward women, a large proportion of perpetrators will not benefit from these efforts. Similarly, in-home services, in their most narrow sense, may be missing the opportunity to involve men who maltreat children but are not living in the home.

The findings also make it clear that male perpetrators who are not biological fathers were more commonly associated with physical abuse and sexual abuse, older children, and female children. Similarly, when acting alone, biological fathers and father surrogates were more often perpetrators of physical and sexual abuse, but when acting with the mother were more often associated with neglect. The relatively large proportion of stepfathers and adoptive fathers associated with sexual abuse, as well as with older, female children, suggests the need for prevention efforts in blended and adoptive families.

The third area of findings with potential policy implications is that male perpetrators have many different relationships with their victims. The findings and the literature suggest that interventions that strengthen the role of fathers to prevent further child maltreatment and improve child well-being are a complex undertaking. This study provides insights into this complexity by identifying clear subgroups of perpetrators. Because of the distinct differences among these male perpetrators with different relationships to their victims, interventions of all types may need to be more highly differentiated.

A copy of the full report is available at <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/05/child-maltreat/>

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