

Children in Welfare Families Were Referred to Juvenile Court for Abuse and Neglect More Often Than Other Children

Background

The prevalence of child abuse and delinquency is a measure of the well-being of children who lived in families that received welfare (Aid to Families With Dependent Children--AFDC) and children who lived in families that did *not* receive welfare (at risk comparison group).

Child abuse and delinquency can be measured by using juvenile court records. Court records for abuse, neglect, and abandonment are known as “**dependency referrals**,” and entries for criminal offenses are known as “**delinquency referrals**.”

We matched the names of children in the **Family Income Study** (1988-1992) with juvenile court referral records. The records were available from the Juvenile Court Information System (JUVIS)--maintained by the Office of the Administrator for the Courts, and from the King County juvenile court system (see the Technical Appendix on the reverse side).

Family Income Study Findings

- **There was a statistically significant difference in the number of dependency referrals between children in AFDC families and children in at risk comparison group families; however, few dependency referrals occurred.** (2 percent of the children in the AFDC families had a dependency referral compared to less than 1 percent in the at risk comparison group.)
- **There was *not* a statistically significant difference in the number of delinquency referrals between children in AFDC families and children in at risk comparison group families; however, delinquency referrals occurred often.** (24 percent of the children in the AFDC families had delinquency referrals compared to 20 percent in the at risk comparison group.)

Discussion and Conclusions

Measured by *self-reported* information, 38 percent of women who received AFDC were sexually abused when they were growing up, compared to 30 percent of women in the at risk comparison group. Also, 27 percent of women who received AFDC were physically abused when they were growing up compared to 14 percent in the at risk comparison group (see *Child Abuse, Teenage Pregnancy, and Welfare Dependency: Is There a Link?* October 1993). This pattern of child abuse, early sexual activity, as well as higher rates of teenage pregnancy, and dropping out of school may well affect how women are able to raise their children.

It may not be surprising that abuse and neglect referrals occurred more often to children in welfare families, whose own mothers had a greater likelihood of being abused as children. A juvenile court referral is a more limited measure, and referrals do not reflect all incidence of abuse. When measured by *juvenile court referrals*, abuse occurred less frequently to the children in the **Family Income Study** than to their mothers.

When it does occur, child abuse can have a negative effect on the pattern of a child's life. Policies that prevent or mitigate child abuse may also influence the well-being of following generations.

Technical Appendix

*We measured the **dependency referrals** of children ages 2 to 17 years. There were 53 referrals of 2,594 children in AFDC families, and 1 referral of 689 children in the at risk comparison group.*

For a **dependency referral** to appear in the JUVIS or King County system, the child would have come to the attention of Child Protective Services (CPS) or of law enforcement. More cases are investigated by CPS and law enforcement than are entered into court records. A dependency petition is filed with the county juvenile court only if there is sufficient cause to believe the child might be in danger. Generally, the petition is filed by a deputy Attorney General, but a petition may be filed by a county prosecutor. When the dependency petition is filed, the case is entered into the JUVIS or King County system by court personnel.

*We measured the **delinquency referrals** of children ages 12 to 17 years. There were 120 referrals of 509 children in AFDC families and 33 referrals of 167 children in the at risk comparison group.*

For a **delinquency referral** to appear in the JUVIS or King County system, the child would have been arrested by law enforcement. Before a delinquency case is entered into court records, it is "screened" by the prosecutor. Some minor, non-violent cases are "screened out" of the adjudication process, and the child is offered a "diversion" contract to perform community service or pay restitution. More serious cases, and those in which a child does not accept or complete a diversion contract, go through adjudication. Cases are entered into the JUVIS or King County system by court personnel.