

Single-Parent Families and Domestic Child Violence: The Role of Low Income as a Mediating Factor

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ABSTRACT

Domestic violence against children can have a severe impact on a child's development and future outcomes, and this behavior is closely related to many family characteristics, such as single-parent families, low levels of parental education, low parental incomes, a history of parental mental illness, and spousal violence between parents, to name a few. Single parenthood is an important risk factor because single parenthood may affect all aspects of parenting, including the fact that single parents may not have enough energy to provide adequate attention to their children, that single parents are more likely not to have access to useful social support, and that single parenthood is more likely to be in a state of poverty. Low incomes, on the other hand, may result in children in single-parent families not having access to good resources and the stress of parenting, which is likely to increase violence against children.

KEYWORDS

Domestic Violence; Child Maltreatment; Single-Parent Family; Low Income.

1. INTRODUCTION

Domestic violence against children is one of the most talked about topics in contemporary society, and children witnessing, or even experiencing domestic violence can largely predict poor future outcomes, including a range of behavioral and mental health problems (Laurenzi et al., 2020). In this literature review, the goal is to examine whether violence against children is more prevalent in single-parent families, especially when single-parent families also face low incomes.

There are many recognized risk factors associated with children's exposure to domestic violence, including low income, parental mental health, parental exposure to or witnessing domestic violence in childhood, socio-cultural and community cohesion, etc. (Barnhart & Maguire-Jack, 2016; Berger, 2005). Research has shown that single parents, especially those living in low-income families are at greater risk of performing domestic violence against children (Berger, 2005; Gelles, 1989). Even though most of the findings focus on single mothers, this is probably because most children in single-parent families are raised by their mothers. Indeed, fathers also play an important role in the development of children. And, fathers are more likely to engage in abusive behavior toward children, especially severe abuse (Lee et al., 2009). Based on these studies, this paper hypothesizes that domestic violence against children is more likely to occur in single-parent families, especially when the factor of low income comes into play.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Domestic Violence Against Children in Single-Parent Families

Single-parent families face many problems, and previous studies have shown that women in single-parent families face a greater risk of financial stress, depression, and the onset of chronic illness (Brown & Moran, 1997). Especially in the economic sphere, single mothers face great difficulties, and they are at a great disadvantage compared to men or married women in terms of finding a job, the number of hours they work, and the effort they put into their work. Single mothers are also at high risk of developing depression due to the build-up of stress and changes in hormone levels after childbirth. Studies have shown that a range of negative emotions caused by postpartum depression, such as excessive worry and fear, are major predictors of child abuse (Choi et al., 2010). This association has been found in fathers as well, with studies saying that fathers' current postpartum depression is linked to behaviors and thoughts about child abuse (Takehara et al., 2017).

For this reason, children growing up in single-parent families are more likely to be at greater risk of growing up and experiencing more adverse life events, including domestic violence. Some empirical evidence does indicate that children in single-parent families are more likely to experience domestic violence than children in two-parent families (Gelles, 1989; Koskinen et al., 2001). Some studies have tried to shed light on the reasons behind this. Even though violence against children tends to be higher in single-parent families, marital status per se is not the main cause of this situation, other relevant factors include the parents' level of education, economic conditions, and other psychosocial factors (Guterman et al., 2009).

2.2. Economic Stress and Domestic Violence Against Children

Economic hardship and low incomes are also associated with a range of factors that are detrimental to children's development, including parental stress, life instability, and lack of resources, among others. Children living in low-income families are also more likely to be exposed to domestic violence (Gelles, 1989). This could be because low-income parents don't have many resources to offer their children, resulting in children not getting good education, healthcare, and other resources. Additionally, poor parents are more likely to face emotional problems and stress about their lives, which can lead to child neglect, including physical, emotional, educational, and medical neglect. Severe neglect is particularly detrimental to a child's development and can result in serious cognitive deficits, academic problems, and socialization issues (Hildyard & Wolfe, 2002). For example, a Canadian study found that children living in poor families are more likely to have developmental problems, and academic problems, and caregivers are more likely to have mental health problems, and that children living in poor families are twice as likely to be abused as other children (Lefebvre et al., 2017).

In addition, low-income families are more likely to live in neighborhoods that are not very safe, generally have lower levels of education, and have higher rates of violent crime, which may influence the way parents children, thus exacerbating child abuse. This may also be because low-income parents may take out the stresses of life on their children, because low-income parents are often more likely to be poorly educated and lack parenting knowledge and experience, or because they do not have enough money and resources to raise their children, leading to a surge in family conflicts. There are now some studies supporting this last idea. They found that increasing the minimum family income and increasing financial support for child rearing can effectively reduce domestic violence against children (Cancian et al., 2013; Raissian & Bullinger, 2017). Specifically, some researchers have found that increases in the minimum wage are associated with decreases in child maltreatment rates, particularly with decreases in reports of neglect, that the relationship between family poverty and child maltreatment is direct, and that the scarcity of resources resulting from family poverty, as well

as the lack of the basic ability of caregivers to meet the needs of the child, directly affects the likelihood and severity of child maltreatment, particularly neglect (Raissian & Bullinger, 2017).

2.3. Children Living in Poor Single-Parent Families are more Likely to Be Exposed to Domestic Violence Against Children

Living in a single-parent household and living in a low-income household are both risk factors for children's exposure to domestic violence, but they are not completely separate and may work together to contribute to children's domestic violence. Studies have shown that women living in single-parent households are twice as likely as married mothers to develop chronic illnesses such as depression and to fall into poverty (Brown & Moran, 1997). The many unique life and work problems faced by single parents combine to increase their psychological stress and therefore the likelihood that they will commit acts of violence against their children.

2.3.1. Single-Parent Families and Low-Income

On the one hand, single-parent families are more likely to face financial difficulties due to, for example, unemployment (Stack & Meredith, 2018). Single parents face this greater pressure in raising their children, for example, they have to take on all the responsibilities of guardianship of their children and take care of their starving children's lives on their stomachs without the help of other caregivers. Whether it's a sick child or a problem at school, the single parent needs to be there right away, which can lead to the single parent being away from their job at all hours, and also being distracted by other things in their day-to-day work, which can lead to them not being very popular in the job market. On the other hand, financial difficulties can create a range of disadvantages for single-parent families in child-rearing, such as lack of resources, insufficient time, mental stress, impact on the parent-child relationship, and so on. In addition, single mothers face somewhat more serious economic problems than single fathers. Studies say that single mothers generally earn less than single fathers, and in addition to objective factors, single mothers face a lot of discrimination in the job market, both against women as a whole and against but mothers themselves (Provencher & Carlton, 2018). Indeed, one study found that the impact of financial stress on child maltreatment was more pronounced in single mothers than in single fathers (Gelles, 1989).

2.3.2. Economic Hardship as a Mediator of Single-Parent and Child Domestic Violence

Numerous studies have shown that low income and economic hardship substantially increase the likelihood that single-parent families will engage in child violence and have raised the importance of focusing on the combination of economic hardship and single-parent families concerning child maltreatment (Gelles, 1989). In addition to the direct impact of economic hardship on the relationship between child maltreatment in single-parent families, poverty increases the likelihood of violence against children in the family by increasing the psychological stress of parenting and limiting the resources and support available. For example, if parents are unable to provide their children with good educational resources due to a lack of financial and information conditions, resulting in problems with their children's schooling, but the parents instead blame their children for their incapacity, causing them to fall behind in their studies, thus increasing the likelihood of child abuse. Besides, if the parents are hindered in their careers and bring pressure from work into the family due to discrimination in the workplace, the children are more likely to be exposed to domestic violence as a result of problems in the outside environment.

Research has also found that poverty can contribute to developmental disabilities in children, including impairments in expressive language, cognitive deficits, and problems related to self-control, and hazard identification (Piuck, 1975). Also, there is a relationship between poverty and cognition, and some studies say that people with cognitive impairment are usually economically poor (Fernqvist, 2015). So, in addition to the financial pressures on parenting, the issue of having a cognitive impairment can add to a lot of inappropriate parenting practices. For example, some parents may believe that educating their child by hitting him or her is good for the child and will help him or her

stop the incorrect behavior. This cognitive impairment can lead to many parenting problems and can even inadvertently increase child abuse.

3. DISCUSSION

This study has great practical implications because experiencing domestic violence in childhood can have a serious negative impact on a child's future internalization problems and externalization problems (Evans et al., 2008). Increasing the earnings of low-income families for child-rearing, raising the minimum income for single-parent families in difficulty, and providing relevant support for low-income families and single-parent families can help reduce the incidence of domestic violence against children in such families (Cancian et al., 2013; Raissian & Bullinger, 2017).

Although many studies say that the effect of financial stress on child violence is only more pronounced in families with single mothers and less significant in families with single fathers, research does show that fathers also have a very strong influence on their children, it might be because that there are fewer studies on single fathers at the moment, so that may contribute to the gender differences in question. So, in the future, more research on single fathers is needed, especially regarding child abuse by single fathers. Additionally, the impact of economic hardship and single-parent families on child violence may also not, or not entirely, be direct, and other factors, such as the level of parental education, support from other adults, community support, parental mental health status, child characteristics, and so on, may also play a role. More research is needed to explore other risk factors associated with child domestic violence, and relevant government departments and policymakers need to provide as much help and support as possible to these high-risk families and children based on cutting-edge research.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on these findings, it can be concluded that both single-parent families and low incomes are risk factors for child violence in the home, and children in single-parent families are more likely to be exposed to domestic violence, especially when there is a mediating factor of economic hardship (Gelles, 1989; Yang, 2015). Low-income and single-parent families are two interacting, closely related factors that can play a role in children's upbringing and experiences, either separately or together, and single-parent families are, themselves, more vulnerable to poverty. Poverty further hinders single-parent families' access to resources, increases stress, and further contributes to single-parent violence against children. Therefore, policies such as guaranteed minimum income and tax incentives can be used to help single-parent families cope with their difficulties and reduce child abuse.

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