

Societal Costs of Child Abuse

The costs of child abuse to society are considerable. In 2008, Prevent Child Abuse America released the second comprehensive report on the direct (immediate intervention) and indirect (long-term) costs of child abuse and neglect in America. The report estimates that the United States spends \$103.8 billion annually in response to child abuse (Wang and Holton, 2007).

The report analyzes information provided by the U.S. Census Bureau and the federal departments of Health and Human Services, Justice, and others. It estimates that the U.S. spends more than \$33.1 billion annually on the direct effects of child abuse. The largest cost was for the child welfare system: \$25.4 billion a year. Other direct costs included hospitalization/treatment of injuries (\$6.6 billion), mental health care (\$1.1 billion), and law enforcement interventions (\$33.3 million).

The report also projects the indirect or long-term effects of abuse. According to Prevent Child Abuse America, the amount spent annually treating all of the long-term, indirect effects of child abuse, including special education, mental and physical health care, juvenile delinquency, lost productivity, and adult criminality is more than \$70.7 billion.

There is a well-documented link between childhood abuse and long-term health effects. These long-term effects can include increased risk of teen pregnancy or sexually transmitted disease, central nervous system damage, speech problems, inhibited growth, mental and emotional disturbances, delayed language development, low self-esteem, and aggressive tendencies (Chalk, Gibbons, and Scarupa, 2002; Kelley, Thornberry, and Smith, 1997).

The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study also found that children who suffer maltreatment and/or are exposed to dysfunction in the home have an increased risk of smoking, obesity, depression, alcoholism, illicit drug use, heart disease, and hepatitis (1999). The new report estimates the costs of this long-term health and mental health care at \$67.8 million.

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Some of the most costly long-term effects are those associated with responding to adults who, because of earlier abuse, are involved in criminal activity. The report puts those costs at over \$27.9 billion annually. It bases that figure on a National Institute of Justice study that estimates that 13 percent of all adult violence can be linked to earlier child maltreatment. The report also includes \$7.2 billion in annual costs associated with juvenile delinquency, which is likewise linked to earlier abuse for many (Maas, Herrenkohl, & Sousa, 2008).

Another indirect cost the report cites is that of lost productivity to society from adult survivors of child abuse, who are disproportionately affected by unemployment and underemployment later in life. The report estimates the cost of lost productivity at \$33 billion annually.

The cost of child abuse - whether defined in terms of tax dollars or human suffering - documents a clear need for society to give priority to child abuse prevention efforts. The mission of Prevent Child Abuse Iowa - to end child abuse in the entire state of Iowa - recognizes the critical importance of statewide, coordinated prevention efforts.

Child Abuse, Juvenile Offenses, and Adult Criminal Behavior

Two studies show the extent to which early abuse is related to later juvenile crime. The first study used juvenile and criminal court records to identify 908 children that were abused in a Midwestern city from 1967 to 1971 (Maxfield and Widom, 1996). Researchers matched this group of abused children with a demographically similar group of 667 children who attended the same school and lived in the same five-block radius but who had not been abused. This matching process minimized the other demographic differences that can exist between groups of abused and non-abused children.

The study compared the juvenile offense records of the two groups in both 1988 and 1994. This comparison revealed significant differences between the groups in overall juvenile offenses, including those that involved violence. Twenty-seven percent of abused children were arrested subsequently for juvenile offenses, compared to 17 percent of the children who had not been abused. Abused children were also almost twice as likely to be arrested for violent offenses. A second study likewise confirms the linkage between abuse or neglect and juvenile crime (Smith and Thornberry, 1995). This study divided seventh and eighth graders in part of Rochester, New York into two groups based on whether or not a student had suffered maltreatment. The researchers then compared the delinquency behavior of the two groups based on official records and self-reports. They found that a history of childhood maltreatment "significantly increases the chances of involvement in delinquency" and "is a significant predictor of the prevalence of official, moderate, and violent delinquency when race/ethnicity, sex, social class, family structure, and mobility are held constant" (Smith and Thornberry, p. 468).

The researchers released an update of this study in 2001 after re-checking arrest records for the two sampled populations (Widom and Maxfield). They found that 42% of the abused and neglected children were arrested for a crime as an adult, compared to 33% of the control group. Those in the abused and neglected group were arrested more often on average than the control group, with 17% of the abused children having five or more arrests compared to 9% of the control group.

Several researchers used the same study design to examine 877 children that were abused in the state of Washington from 1980 to 1984 (English, Bradford, and Widom, 2002). The children were identified through court dependency records, meaning they had spent some time in an out-of-home placement. The study matched this group of abused children

with a demographically similar group of 877 non-abused children. Again, researchers examined the criminal records of both groups through 1998 and compared their rates of juvenile arrests, adult arrests, and arrests for violent crimes.

The differences they found between the two groups were more pronounced than in the previous study. Maltreated children were 4.8 times more likely to be arrested as a juvenile, twice as likely to be arrested as an adult, and 3.1 times more likely to be arrested for a violent crime than the matched control group. Researchers also found that the abused children were 11 times more likely to be arrested for a violent crime as a juvenile (8.8% versus 0.8% in the control group).

Furthermore, of the maltreated group, a total of 40.2% of the males were arrested for a violent crime compared to 16.4% of males in the matched control group. Female victims, too, were much more likely to be arrested for violent crimes, 15.4% of the abused and neglected females compared to 2.2% of the control group.