

Poverty, Stress, and Violent Disagreements in the Home among Rural Families



At the Heart of Public Health Policy

220 Stoneridge Dr., Ste. 204 ▪ Columbia, SC 29210 ▪ P: 803-251-6317 ▪ F: 803-251-6399 ▪ <http://rhr.sph.sc.edu>

Poverty, Stress, and Violent Disagreements in the Home Among Rural Families

Authors:

Charity G. Moore, PhD, MSPH
Janice C. Probst, PhD
Mark Tompkins, PhD
Steven Cuffe, MD
Amy B. Martin, DrPH

South Carolina Rural Health Research Center
220 Stoneridge Drive, Suite 204
Columbia, SC 29210
(803) 251-6317
Janice C. Probst, PhD, Director

August 2005

Funding acknowledgement:

This report was prepared under Grant No. 1 U1CRH 03711-01
Office of Rural Health Policy
Health Resources and Services Administration
US Department of Health and Human Services
Rockville, Maryland
Joan Van Nostrand, DPA, Project Officer

Executive Summary

Introduction

Violence in the home is not an “adults only” issue. Studies have shown that witnessing domestic violence increases a child’s chance of having emotional/ behavioral problems and being in abusive relationships in adulthood, even without co-occurring child maltreatment. The study reported here used information from a large, nationally representative telephone survey of households with children, carried out by the National Center for Health Statistics, to explore the prevalence of violent disagreements in the home. “Violent” disagreements are those that involve hitting or throwing, as opposed to heated argument or calm discussion. We also examined two factors, poverty and parenting stress, hypothesized to be associated with violent disagreement.

Key Findings

Poverty

- 40% or more of minority children were living at or below 100% of the Federal poverty level in 2003.
- Poverty increases as the child’s county of residence becomes more rural.
- In small rural counties, 77% of African American children, 77% of Hispanic children, 73% of “other” children, and 50% of white children lived in households at or below 200% of the Federal poverty level.

Parental Stress

- In general, parenting stress scale values were low, averaging only 4.82 on a scale with possible values from 3 to 12. Among parents in small rural counties, the mean parenting stress score was 4.74; this rose to 4.84 in urban areas ($p < 0.0001$).
- Only one rural group, African American families in medium rural counties, experienced higher stress than urban residents.
- White respondents generally reported lower parenting stress than did minority parents; this effect was consistent across different levels of rurality.
- For Hispanic and White respondents, the effects of poverty on parenting stress are minimal after factors such as family structure and employment are rendered equal.
- For African American and “other” families, reported parenting stress declines as income increases, with a possible threshold effect at the 200 - <400% of poverty income level.

Disagreements

- Nationally, 10.3% of children lived in homes where disagreement is expressed, at least occasionally, by hitting and throwing.
- The prevalence of violent disagreements varied slightly across different levels of rurality, but was lower in homes located in rural counties than in urban homes.
- An additional 31.5% of children live in homes where disagreement is expressed through heated argument and shouting. The prevalence of heated disagreement showed no clear pattern across levels of rurality.

- Parents reporting a high level of reported parenting stress had over 3 times the odds of reporting violent disagreements, that is, hitting or throwing, versus parents reporting less stress (OR 3.17, CI 2.91-3.47). Parents reporting high parenting stress also had the higher odds of heated disagreements (OR 1.99, CI 1.87-2.12), those involving arguing or shouting.
- Because parents were interviewed at a single point in time, we cannot state whether stress leads to violent disagreement, violent disagreement leads to stress, or some other effect is at work. This caveat applies for the link between violent disagreement and stress, and to the associations noted below between other types of problem and stress.

Emotional, Behavioral, and Development (EBD) Problems

- Across US children in 2003, 11.5% were reported to have diagnosed EBD problems, a value that did not vary significantly across levels of rurality ($p = 0.5912$).
 - The proportion of children whose parents reported diagnosed EBD problems was highest among African American children, followed by white children.
 - For whites and Hispanics, the proportion of children with diagnosed EBD problems did not vary across residence categories.
 - For African American children, the prevalence of diagnosed EBD problems was higher in urban and in medium rural counties.
- Parenting stress was positively associated with the presence of diagnosed EBD problems in the child. In families in which the child had a diagnosed EBD problem, parenting stress values averaged 5.96; in other families, the average was 4.67 ($p < 0.0001$). Effects were similar for rural and for urban parents, and for parents of differing race/ethnicity.

School problems

- For 30.01% of school-aged children, the school had contacted an adult in the household about problems the child was having. The proportion ranged from 27.43% among children living in large rural counties to 27.90% in small rural counties, to 30.61% in urban counties.
- African American children had the highest rate of reported school problems, both nationally and within the urban, large rural, and medium rural residence categories.
- Compared to households in which disagreements were discussed calmly, households with violent and heated disagreements were more likely to report children with school problems (Hit, throw: OR 1.62, 95% CI 1.45-1.80; Argue, shout: OR 1.29, 95% CI 1.20-1.38).

Conclusions

Rural children, all things held equal, were less likely than urban children to live in households where disagreements are expressed violently. Similarly, rural children were less likely to live in households with high parenting stress or low reported neighborhood

trust. Nonetheless, rural practitioners must still be sensitive to the possibility of exposure to violence. Key factors associated with parenting stress, and thus with violent disagreements, are more prevalent in rural areas. Poverty and low-income were more common among rural than urban children, and affected well over half of rural minority children, in particular. The situation of rural minority children is particularly troubling because so many of them, particularly African American children, live in high poverty counties where resources available to help individual poor families may be constrained. Further, medical and behavioral health resource availability is markedly constrained for rural children.

Questions for Future Research

- A broad range of programs have been developed to help families manage stress without violence. Research is needed to ascertain the degree to which services are available in rural areas and ascertain the degree to which specific interventions are suitable for implementation in rural areas.
- Programs that are efficient and effective in urban areas may not perform similarly in rural communities. Research is needed to determine:
 - Types of worker needed to conduct programs (bachelors versus masters trained social workers, for example, lay intervention staff);
 - Minimum referral services needed, within what distances;
 - Economic break-even points associated with interventions among less concentrated rural populations;
 - The types of networks (school, health care, social services, law enforcement) most suited to rural communities.