

## **Domestic violence is not just a family matter.**

Domestic violence takes place behind closed doors, but its effects reverberate throughout society. We see some of its results in homeless shelters, emergency rooms, and unemployment lines. Others are more subtle: family instability, long-term health problems, and reduced productivity, to name just a few.

Even more overlooked are the effects of domestic violence on children. Although children are less likely than women to be direct victims of domestic violence, they are often present when violence occurs. One in ten children in the U.S. are exposed to domestic violence, and the majority of them are under six years old.<sup>1</sup> Witnessing family violence is a traumatic experience: seeing or hearing a family member being threatened or beaten can shatter a young child's sense of safety and security, with long-term consequences for brain development and emotional well-being.

With the current economic crisis, domestic violence has become even more salient. When unemployment goes up, so does domestic violence. Furthermore, the rate of violence in couples experiencing financial strain is over three times higher than the rate among other couples.<sup>2</sup> More family violence, in turn, means more costs to the criminal justice and health care systems. In short, domestic violence is a public health problem of epidemic proportions.<sup>3</sup>

## **How is domestic violence defined?**

Most states include domestic violence as a category in their civil and criminal codes, but definitions vary according to the types of relationships included and the types of acts considered violent. In Tennessee, domestic violence laws apply to adults and minors related by blood, adoption, or marriage, as well as those currently or formerly in an intimate relationship. Violent acts include inflicting bodily harm, causing reasonable fear of bodily harm, and making "extremely offensive or provocative" physical contact.<sup>4</sup>

One in four women has been a victim of domestic violence. Families affected by domestic violence are more likely than other families to be non-white, low-income, and headed by a single mother.<sup>3</sup> Children from homes like these are already at risk for impaired brain development due to their greater chances of poor health, negative parenting, and other risks. Seeing or hearing violence in their family adds yet another threat to their development.

## **Domestic violence rates for Memphis and Tennessee are high.**

Rates of domestic violence are higher in Tennessee than in many other states. For example, Georgia reports a rate of 602 incidents per 100,000 people. Tennessee's rate — 1,323 per 100,000 — is 120% greater. Similarly, in Memphis, the domestic violence rate is higher than that of many other Tennessee cities. For example, the Memphis rate is 2,949 per 100,000 compared to 2,015 for Nashville.<sup>5</sup>

Compared to statewide trends, Memphians involved in domestic violence tend to be younger. Across Tennessee, victims as well as offenders tend to be between 25 and 44; in Memphis, both are more likely to be between 18 and 34 years of age.<sup>5</sup>

## **Domestic violence hurts children even when they are not direct victims.**

National research shows that in about half of reported incidents, children are present. In about 80 percent of these cases, children directly see or hear the violence.<sup>3</sup> Every year, between 10 and 15 million children witness domestic violence.<sup>6,7</sup>

Witnessing high levels of domestic violence can have lifelong effects on a child's cognitive, emotional, and social development. For example, adults who witnessed domestic violence as children are more likely than others to have relationship difficulties and emotional problems.<sup>6,7</sup>

Children younger than six are at higher risk than older children for directly witnessing domestic violence.<sup>3</sup> There is a general belief that infants and young children are less affected than older children by seeing or hearing violent conflict.<sup>8</sup> However, research shows that exposure to domestic violence affects even very young children:

- Some effects can be seen as early as infancy: one-year-olds who have been exposed to domestic violence are more disturbed than other babies when they hear adults arguing.<sup>9</sup>
- Children under three who witness violence toward a family member are at increased risk for psychological problems.<sup>10</sup>

- Cognitive development can also be affected: Children exposed to high levels of domestic violence in early childhood have IQs at age 5 that are up to 8 points lower than those of other children.<sup>11</sup>

## **Domestic violence affects children’s brain development.**

Although there is little specific research on how witnessing domestic violence affects the developing brain,<sup>8</sup> many studies show that stress and trauma in general can impair children’s brain development. Some studies have found that adults who experienced significant early life stress have differences in brain structure compared to people who experienced low levels of early stress.<sup>12</sup>

Early stressful experiences, including exposure to violence, can influence an infant’s stress reactivity — the ability of her brain’s stress response system to turn on or off appropriately. This can have lifelong effects on psychological and physical health.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, domestic violence can affect a child even before she is born. Domestic violence often begins or grows more intense during pregnancy,<sup>8</sup> and the resulting maternal stress can interfere with fetal brain development.<sup>13,14</sup>

## **Domestic violence is a threat to our community’s children.**

Children are less likely than women to be direct victims of domestic violence. Of over 19,000 domestic violence reports in Memphis, only 387 victims were less than 10 years old. Of these, 56 were less than a year old.<sup>5</sup>

On the positive side, the percentage of Memphis victims younger than 10 is lower than the statewide percentage (2% vs. 2.9%).<sup>5</sup> On the negative side, the city’s higher prevalence of domestic violence means that Memphis children are at higher risk for witnessing domestic violence than are other Tennessee children.

Local survey data<sup>15</sup> suggest that about half (48%) of Shelby County women who have been victims of domestic violence have children under 18 living with them. Among these women, more than half (64.4%) say that their children witnessed the violence. This figure is lower than the national estimate of 80 percent,<sup>3</sup> but the discrepancy may be due to how “witness” is defined. For researchers, witnessing the violent act can mean seeing or hearing it. In the

Shelby County poll, however, respondents may have only reported cases in which their children saw the violence.

## **The Exchange Club of Memphis is helping families break the cycle of domestic violence.**

The Exchange Club is a Memphis nonprofit organization that provides services to families affected by violence and abuse. The Exchange Club recognizes that because children who witness domestic violence are more likely to be involved in violent relationships as adults, helping children deal with the consequences of witnessing violence in the home is a crucial element in breaking the cycle of family violence.

The Children's Domestic Violence Program is one of the organization's key services. The program is a 9-session group intervention designed to help families improve problem-solving skills, create individual safety plans, and address psychological and behavioral symptoms. While children meet together in age-appropriate groups, parents receive group training in positive parenting, anger management, and family safety. Children younger than age four receive one-on-one play therapy.

The program is based on evidence-based practices,<sup>16</sup> and a recent evaluation verifies that the program makes a meaningful difference in the lives of children and their caregivers. For example, children who completed the program experienced significant reductions in behavioral problems. Parents who participated made significant improvements in the use of appropriate and consistent discipline strategies.<sup>17</sup> The success of the Children's Domestic Violence Program (just one of the Exchange Club's numerous services) shows that the Exchange Club is a leader among community efforts to end the cycle of violence.

All families are not the same, nor is all domestic violence the same. To protect all children in our community from the effects of domestic violence, we need a variety of high-quality accessible programs. There are several opportunities for improving the existing network of services in Memphis and Shelby County. Home visiting programs and pediatric care providers, for instance, are settings where screening and treatment could be improved by expanding staff education and training.<sup>18,19</sup> Investment in these and other initiatives can strengthen the safety net for children and families at risk.

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