

The blow of domestic violence on children's health outcomes

by *Mireia Jofre-Bonet, Melcior Rossello-Roig and Victoria Serra-Sastre*

Domestic Violence in the UK

The 2013/14 Crime Survey for England and Wales reveals that there were approximately 1.4 million reported cases of domestic abuse and roughly 1.1 million reports of partner abuse. Domestic violence leads to an average of two women being murdered each week in the UK. Further, it accounts for 16% of all violent crime in the UK although it is the violent crime least likely to be reported. The costs to the criminal justice system, health services, social care and housing have been estimated to be about **\$23 billion annually**.

Effects of Domestic Violence on Victims

Domestic violence in the form of Intimate Partner Abuse (IPA) is **harmful** for the victims' labour outcomes, mental health and sense of self-worth and integrity. Indeed, for young women, IPA increases the risk of suffering major depressive disorders, post-traumatic disorders and substance **abuse disorders**. Parenting is obviously affected by this environmental stressor. IPA is associated with **parental depression** and **anxiety**. Victimized mothers tend to be more impulsive and to use harsh punishment on their children.

Does Domestic Violence affect children living with it?

An equal opportunities commission report in 2007 estimated that around 750,000 children witness domestic violence in the form of IPA in the United Kingdom. Pediatric literature suggests that those children suffer from a cumulative disadvantage when living in a hostile environment. Exposure to domestic violence may have detrimental effects for their well-being and interpersonal **functioning development**. Those witnessing domestic violence are prone to be engaged in antisocial behaviour (i.e., delinquency and running away) as well as having problems self-regulating themselves in terms of mood, emotional expressivity, aggressive behaviour and **hostile reactivity**. Research highlights the fact that they are more likely to have poor self-esteem and are at greater risk **of substance abuse later on in life**. Evidence also shows that aggressive behaviour during infancy may lead to rejection by **their school peers**.

A major negative consequence of IPA is the children's mimicking process. Children may internalize the use of violence as a normal mean to impose their criteria. Psychiatric literature has established that children who witness domestic violence are more likely to use physical or psychological violence against **their future partners**. Overall, it is difficult to disentangle a unique mechanism on how Domestic Violence can affect child's health. Moreover, there may be different factors, such as the purely biological consequences of living under stressful and fearful environments. There is increasing evidence that stress early in life may induce changes in multiple **neurochemical systems** and promote multiple alterations in the serotonergic system and reduce of the hippocampal volume.

Depression, subsequent poor quality of parenting, higher risk taking and antisocial behaviours have been reported in adults that were exposed to early life stressors such as living in a household with domestic violence. A **study** related to our analysis, provides evidence of the negative effect on birth weight of children born to mothers suffering domestic violence while pregnant. In particular, hospitalization episodes of pregnant women due to violent assault reduces the birth weight of their off-springs. Further, there is evidence that children who witness domestic violence at home also show poor academic performance and generate negative external **ity effects** on the performance of their **peers**. ^

But, while the evidence in the pediatric literature highlights a cumulative disadvantage on children's socio-emotional development, overall, the economic literature has not yet succeeded in quantifying effect of IPA on children's health.

What we do: Measuring the spillover effects of Domestic Violence on children

In our paper, [The Blow of Domestic Violence on Children's Health Outcomes](#), drawing results from the UK Millennium Cohort Study, we estimate the existence and magnitude of this spillover effect. We find that there is a *strong negative externality of household violence on children's health outcomes*. In particular, children living in a household in which there is domestic violence appear to be between 55% and 61% less likely to have their health rated as *Excellent*. Our results are robust to multiple specifications, including those that address the simultaneity between child health and domestic violence by using an instrumental approach.

Our paper not only sheds light on the negative impact of domestic violence on children's health but provides a robust quantification of this effect. Most importantly, it highlights the need to put in place systems to prevent and stop domestic violence. Our results corroborate that the *negative effects* of domestic violence surpass those on the health and wellbeing of victimized mothers and outspread very significantly onto the health and wellbeing of their children.

Further information:

Jofre-Bonet M, Rossello-Roig M, Serra-Sastre V (2016) [The Blow of Domestic Violence on Children's Health Outcomes](#). *LSE Health Working Paper Series in Health Policy and Economics*. LSE

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