

CFRP POLICY BRIEF

Families at Risk: Understanding the Characteristics of Relationship Violence among Unmarried Texas Parents

Children who grow up witnessing or experiencing violence in the home are at serious risk for a range of negative outcomes. Moreover, research shows children of unmarried parents—already beset by a number of economic and developmental disadvantages—are more likely to grow up in violent households than children in other family structures. This brief examines the dynamics of relationship violence among unmarried parents with newborns, paying special attention to the common characteristics and trajectories that typify violent relationships in the period surrounding a nonmarital birth. We find that a staggering 1 in 5 unmarried mothers report experiencing relationship violence from the father of their child at least once since becoming pregnant. The majority of these mothers traverse a prenatal period marked by breakups and minimal assistance from the father, and most will end their relationship with the father by the time the child is three months old. A smaller contingent of mothers remains with the violent father over this same period; often, these sustained relationships have longer and more physically violent histories than those that dissolve. Prenatal violence screenings and interventions designed to connect at-risk families with legal and community-based resources may help improve the safety of mothers and children in these circumstances.

Violence between partners can take many forms. From verbal, psychological, and emotional manipulation to physical, sexual, and economic abuse, relationship violence relies on the tactics of intimidation to establish power and control over the victim. Not only do these behaviors pose a serious threat to the wellbeing of adult victims, but they also jeopardize the wellbeing of children who witness them. Even when violence is not directed at children, it has been shown to have serious negative impacts on child development, including higher rates of depression and anxiety, poor school performance, and an increased long-term risk of emotional and behavioral problems.^{1,2} National data

Families at Risk: Understanding the Characteristics of Relationship Violence among Unmarried Texas Families

CFRP Policy Brief | B.013.0914

September 2014

suggest roughly 4 in 5 victims of relationship violence are women, and of these, single mothers appear to be at the highest risk. In fact, over the last two decades, single-mother households with children have experienced relationship violence at more than 10 times the rate of married households with children, and 6 times the rate of single female-headed households with no children.³

Given the outside prevalence of violence among single mothers, this brief takes a closer look at the characteristics and predictors of abuse among a sample of 800 Texas mothers who recently gave birth outside of marriage.^a This large and diverse group offers a unique opportunity for broadening our understanding of the context in which violence happens, and why some relationships end while others endure. Prior research makes clear that violent perpetrators are a diverse group, and vary with respect to the frequency and severity of their abusive behavior. For many men, relationship violence reflects a general pattern of control and coercion. These men engage in violence that is more frequent, more physical, and more likely to escalate when the partner tries to leave. For other men, violence may be sporadic, situational, and less severe.⁴ Our results reflect this dichotomy. Though most mothers reporting violence navigate a prenatal period peppered by breakups and a lack of financial or emotional support from the father, the majority will find a path out of the relationship by the time the child is 3 months old. A smaller, but still sizable group of mothers, remain tangled in relationships characterized by long-term physical abuse and may find it difficult to leave—especially with the introduction of a child. Mothers in these relationships are often torn between competing desires to provide their children with involved fathers while simultaneously protecting them from unhealthy or dangerous interaction. Prenatal violence screenings, and interventions designed to connect at-risk families with legal and community-based resources, may improve the safety of mothers and their children.^b

Relationship Violence During Pregnancy is Pervasive among Unmarried Parents

Research suggests women are at an especially high risk of relationship violence during the prenatal period. Past studies show the risk of violence is approximately 36 percent greater for pregnant women than non-pregnant women,⁵ and the onset of pregnancy has been linked to a significant uptick in both the frequency and severity of violence.⁶ Sexual and psychological aggression also climb during this time.⁷ The suggestion that pregnancy correlates with high rates of violence dovetails with original data collected by CFRP. In surveys conducted shortly after birth, we find that nearly 1 in 5 unmarried mothers report experiencing relationship violence from the father of their child at least once since becoming pregnant. More staggering still, this number is likely to be an underestimate given that many women in abusive relationships do not disclose their experience with violence. Though it is difficult to know with certainty the true prevalence of abuse, prior

Nearly 1 in 5 unmarried mothers report experiencing relationship violence from the father of their child since becoming pregnant.

^a Given that both men and women are victims of relationship violence, data gathered from fathers would ideally also inform this brief. However, too few fathers completed the CFRP survey to constitute a representative sample. As a result, this brief focuses solely on relationship violence reported by mothers and perpetrated by fathers.

^b This research brief is part of a series exploring the dynamics of nonmarital parenting. For other briefs in this series, as well as additional information about the studies that guide this research, please visit <http://childandfamilyresearch.org/>.

Families at Risk: Understanding the Characteristics of Relationship Violence among Unmarried Texas Families

research indicates that as many as one-third of all Texas women have experienced relationship violence—a figure that is likely much higher among the subgroup of unmarried women.⁸

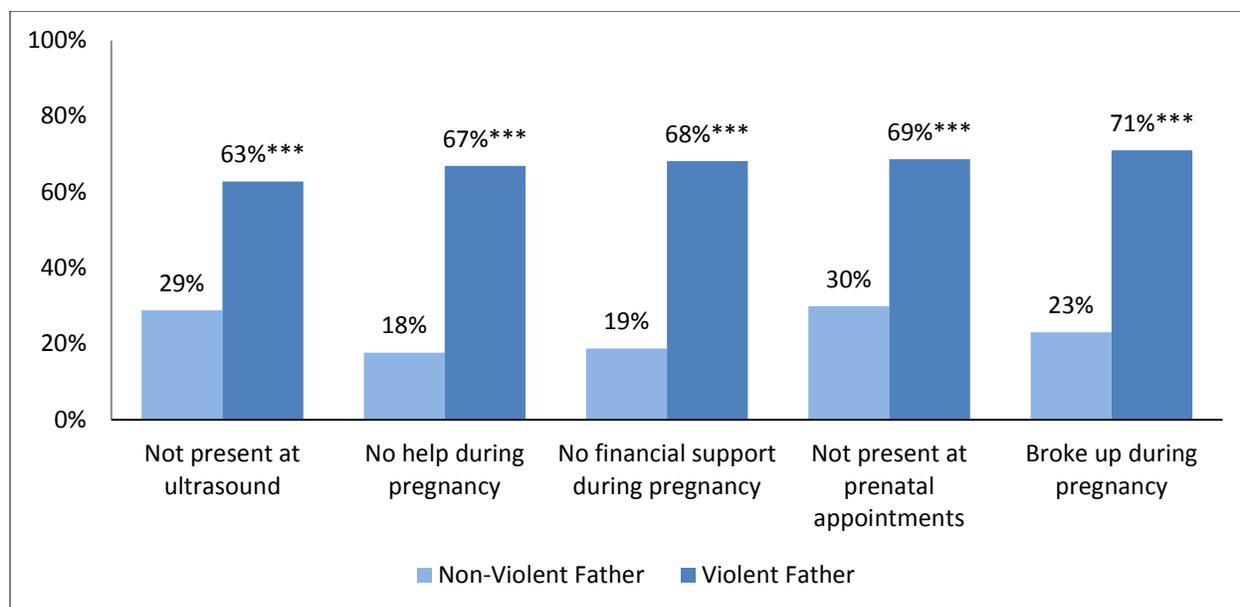
Violent Fathers Are More Likely To Be Disengaged During the Pregnancy

The high prevalence of relationship violence among unmarried parents calls for a better understanding of those who are most at risk of becoming entangled in an abusive relationship. CFRP analyses help to highlight the factors that predict violence in these relationships. Findings suggest that demographic characteristics of fathers such as race, age, and education are not significantly associated with the presence of abuse. Prenatal father involvement and the quality of the parents' relationship during pregnancy, however, both act as red flags for the existence of relationship violence.

Low prenatal father involvement and poor relationship quality during the pregnancy act as red flags for the existence of relationship violence.

As shown in Figure 1, roughly two-thirds of violent fathers did not attend the 20-week ultrasound or other prenatal appointments. Similar numbers did not help the mother with transportation, chores, or financial support during pregnancy, and more than 7 in 10 experienced a breakup with the mother before the baby's birth. By contrast, non-violent fathers were less than half as likely to display unsupportive prenatal behaviors, and fewer than a quarter experienced a breakup with the mother during pregnancy.

Figure 1: Violent Fathers Are More Likely to be Disengaged Before Birth



Source: PES Mothers at 3 months, weighted. Child and Family Research Partnership.

Note: *** $p < 0.01$; Indicates Violent Fathers are statistically different from Non-Violent Fathers

Families at Risk: Understanding the Characteristics of Relationship Violence among Unmarried Texas Families

CFRP Policy Brief | B.013.0914

September 2014

Together, these common indicators reveal a portrait of abusive fathers this is marked by an early and pervasive lack of commitment to the mother. Though this broad pattern of withdrawal crystallizes during the prenatal period, it is unclear whether violence causes fathers to disengage, or whether the two phenomena simply tend to coexist. Regardless, the extensive detachment of abusive fathers is likely a preferable outcome for battered mothers and their unborn children, especially if the father is submitted to legal measures that ensure safe visitation with the family, and an enforceable financial responsibility to the child.

The majority of couples reporting abuse end their relationship either during pregnancy or soon thereafter—a time when most parents are drawing closer. Over 70 percent of couples in abusive relationships break up during pregnancy [Figure 1], and another 6 percent were never in a formal relationship to begin with. Although some of these couples will get back together by the time the child is 3 months old, the vast majority will not. Three months after the birth, nearly 60 percent of couples reporting abuse are not in any type of relationship. Almost all abusive fathers who are not in a relationship with the mother also withdraw themselves from the lives of their children.^c

Over 70 percent of couples in abusive relationships break up during pregnancy, and another 6 percent were never in a formal relationship to begin with.

Violent Relationships That Persist Have Longer and More Physically Abusive Histories

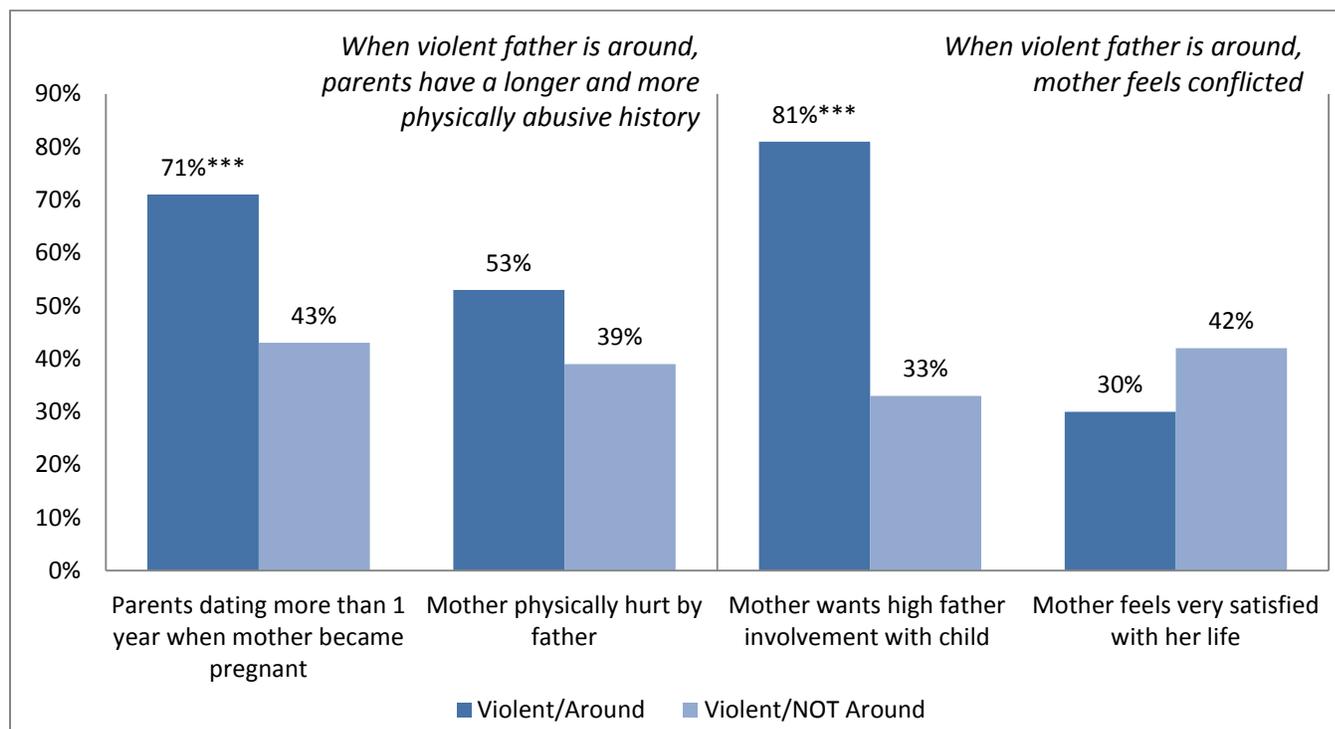
Although most mothers reporting abuse have no relationship with the father shortly after birth, a substantial number remain in violent relationships characterized by regular support and involvement, cohabitation, and in some cases, marriage. Overall, roughly 4 in 10 abusive fathers continue to maintain a strong presence in the mother's life following the birth. Compared to abusive fathers who are no longer around, those who remain involved with the mother tend to be younger, more educated, and to have had significantly longer relationships with the mother. These fathers are also more likely to provide prenatal support, be present at the birth, and be involved in the child's life. Although these types of involvement are typically seen as positive, in the context of a long-term abusive relationship they may double as a tool for exercising control and power over the mother. Alarming, mothers associated with these violent fathers who are still around report higher levels of *physical* violence. In contrast, mothers associated with fathers who have mostly disengaged tend to characterize their experience of abuse as non-physical, including threats of violence or feeling that they are at risk of harm.

Overall, 4 in 10 abusive fathers continue to maintain a strong presence in the mother's life following the birth.

^c Three months after birth, 91 percent of abusive fathers who are not in a relationship with the mother are also uninvolved in their child's life.

Families at Risk: Understanding the Characteristics of Relationship Violence among Unmarried Texas Families

Figure 2: Violent Relationships that Persist are Qualitatively Different



Source: PES Mothers at 3 months, weighted. Child and Family Research Partnership.

Note: *** $p < 0.01$; indicates Violent/Around fathers are statistically different from Violent/NOT Around fathers.

Mothers who remain in violent relationships with the father may be unable to leave as a result of emotional and physical intimidation. Prior research shows mothers in violent relationships are often faced with an internal conflict: while they want their child to grow up with an involved father, they also want to ensure that the father is a positive and healthy role model for their child. Hoping that the father will change, many mothers in abusive relationships find themselves both endorsing and warily monitoring the father’s involvement with their child.⁹ CFRP data reflect this paradox. As shown in Figure 2, mothers who remain in an abusive relationship are significantly more likely to want the father involved with the child; at the same time, these mothers also feel less satisfied with their current situation than mothers who have cut ties with the violent father.

Conclusion

Nationally, relationship violence is in decline. Between 1994 and 2010, the overall rate fell by 64 percent across the U.S.¹⁰ In spite of these promising trends, we find that a remarkable 1 in 5 unmarried Texas mothers still live under the threat of emotional or physical abuse during, and in the months following their pregnancies. The prenatal period remains an especially high-risk time for many women, and in some cases, appears to trigger the onset or escalation of violence. The content and character of this violence falls into two broad types. In the majority of abusive relationships, an unsupportive father

Families at Risk: Understanding the Characteristics of Relationship Violence among Unmarried Texas Families

CFRP Policy Brief | B.013.0914

September 2014

withdraws from the mother over the course of the pregnancy and is largely disconnected from his new family by the time the child is 3 months old. Although most mothers in these circumstances manage to break free of the abusive relationship, they may find it difficult to access the emotional and financial resources needed to help them raise their children. The second, and perhaps more concerning, group of abusive fathers remain thoroughly intertwined in the mother's life following the birth of the child. These relationships typically have longer, more physically violent histories, and many feature a dynamic of control that leaves mothers feeling trapped or otherwise unable to renounce the relationship.

Understanding the factors associated with abusive relationships is a first step toward designing appropriate policy interventions. Studies show the vast majority of pregnant women welcome prenatal screenings for relationship violence,¹¹ and are more apt to disclose when asked multiple times throughout the pregnancy.¹² Policymakers should work with the medical community to develop universal screening procedures for prenatal appointments, and women should be made aware that disclosure does not trigger mandatory reporting to the state unless the victim was seriously injured or was wounded with a lethal weapon. Women who disclose violence should be provided with information on community resources and safety planning, including the phone numbers of domestic violence hotlines, area shelters, and legal services. For unmarried parents in particular, informational campaigns on how to establish paternity and child support safely should be integrated into prenatal visits, thereby laying the groundwork for shared legal and financial responsibility to the child. Following the birth, there remains a role for family courts to play in setting legal parameters that protect the safety of unmarried mothers and their children through supervised visitation arrangements and legal enforcement services. Other services, such as mediation, co-parenting education, and batterer intervention programs have also shown promise in improving outcomes for these families.¹³ Though the dynamics of relationship violence are complex and, collectively, seem unlikely to yield to any single intervention, a serviceable mix of public and community-based efforts may help stem the prevalence of violence in women's lives while offering refuge to those most at-risk.

¹ Evans, S. E., Davies, C., & DiLillo, D. (2008). Exposure to domestic violence: A meta-analysis of child and adolescent outcomes. *Aggression and Violent Behavior, 13*(2), 131-140.

² Wolfe, D. A., Crooks, C. V., Lee, V., McIntyre-Smith, A., & Jaffe, P. G. (2003). The effects of children's exposure to domestic violence: A meta-analysis and critique. *Clinical child and family psychology review, 6*(3), 171-187.

³ Catalano, Shannan. (2012). Special Report: Intimate Partner Violence, 1993-2010. Bureau of Justice Statistics. NCJ 239203. Retrieved from: <http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/ipv9310.pdf>

⁴ Cavanaugh, M. M., & Gelles, R. J. (2005). The Utility of Male Domestic Violence Offender Typologies New Directions for Research, Policy, and Practice. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 20*(2), 155-166.

⁵ Gelles, R.J. (1998). Violence and pregnancy: Are pregnant women at greater risk of abuse? *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 50*:841-847.

⁶ Martin, S.L., Acara, J., & Pollock, M.D. (2012, December). Domestic Violence During Pregnancy and the Postpartum Period. Harrisburg, PA: VAWnet, a project of the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence.

⁷ Martin, S. L., Harris-Britt, A., Li, Y., Moracco, K. E., Kupper, L. L., & Campbell, J. C. (2004). Changes in intimate partner violence during pregnancy. *Journal of family Violence, 19*(4), 201-210.

⁸ Busch-Armendariz, N., Cook Heffron, L., Bohman, T. (2011). Statewide Prevalence of Intimate Partner Violence in Texas. Institute on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault, Center for Social Work Research, School of Social Work, University of Texas at Austin. Retrieved from <http://www.utexas.edu/ssw/dl/files/cswr/institutes/idvsa/publications/DV-Prevalence.pdf>

⁹ Waller, M. R., & Swisher, R. (2006). Fathers' risk factors in fragile families: Implications for "healthy" relationships and father involvement. *Social Problems, 53*(3), 392-420.

Families at Risk: Understanding the Characteristics of Relationship Violence among Unmarried Texas Families

CFRP Policy Brief | B.013.0914

September 2014

¹⁰ Catalano, Shannan. (2012). Special Report: Intimate Partner Violence, 1993-2010. Bureau of Justice Statistics. NCJ 239203. Retrieved from: <http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/ipv9310.pdf>

¹¹ Renker, P. R., & Tonkin, P. (2006). Women's views of prenatal violence screening: acceptability and confidentiality issues. *Obstetrics & Gynecology*, 107(2, Part 1), 348-354.

¹² Martin, S.L., Acara, J., & Pollock, M.D. (2012, December). Domestic Violence During Pregnancy and the Postpartum Period. Harrisburg, PA: VAWnet, a project of the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence.

¹³ Florsheim, P., et al. (2014). Framing the Future of Co-parenting Evaluation Research for the Fatherhood Research and Practice Network.; Buttell, F. P., & Carney, M. M. (2006). A large sample evaluation of a court-mandated batterer intervention program: Investigating differential program effect for African American and Caucasian men. *Research on Social Work Practice*, 16(2), 121-131.; Coulter, M., & VandeWeerd, C. (2009). Reducing domestic violence and other criminal recidivism: Effectiveness of a multilevel batterers intervention program. *Violence and Victims*, 24(2), 139-152.

© September 2014, Child and Family Research Partnership, All Rights Reserved.

The Child and Family Research Partnership (CFRP) is an independent, nonpartisan research group at the LBJ School of Public Affairs at The University of Texas at Austin, specializing in issues related to young children, teens, and their parents. We engage in rigorous research and evaluation work aimed at strengthening families and enhancing public policy.