

**RESEARCH INTO VIOLENT BEHAVIOR:  
DOMESTIC VIOLENCE**

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**HEARINGS  
BEFORE THE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON  
DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL SCIENTIFIC  
PLANNING, ANALYSIS AND COOPERATION  
OF THE  
COMMITTEE ON  
SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY  
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
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DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION, AND WELFARE

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STATEMENT

BY

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BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL  
SCIENTIFIC PLANNING, ANALYSIS, AND COOPERATION

COMMITTEE ON SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Tuesday, February 14, 1978

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am honored to have this opportunity of testifying before you today. In your letter of invitation, you requested that I address three topics: (1) the research activities and interests of the National Institute of Mental Health's Center for Studies of Crime and Delinquency in the area of household violence, (2) the relationship between these activities and the Center's long-standing program of research on problems of individual violent behavior, and (3) recommendations for the future development of a well-conceptualized and effective program of research in the area of household violence. My plan will be to address each of these topics in order and rather briefly in view of the large number of other witnesses from whom you would like to hear this morning.

I

Since 1968 the Center for Studies of Crime and Delinquency has been the focal point in NIMH for research and training activities in the areas of crime and delinquency, related law and mental health issues, and individual violent behavior. The Center operates with an annual budget of approximately \$5,000,000 in research and training grant funds, and has a staff of seven professional and four support staff. The Center's program is conducted primarily through means of research and training grants which are awarded on a competitive basis to investigators working in various fields of behavioral science, social science, biomedical science, and law.

The problem of household violence is one that has been of concern to the Center ever since its inception. With the funds available we have managed since 1968 to fund several research and training projects which have been concerned in whole or in part with this area. We have not funded these projects all at once, but rather at a pace of one, two, or three projects per year as our resources have allowed. In so doing, the Center has managed to keep up a persistent effort in the household violence area, and the development of our program has mirrored the evolution of family violence studies in the United States.

Initially, in the late 1960's, the Center became involved with the problem of household violence because of our concern with the need to find ways of improving police responses to peacekeeping situations in which there is a potential for unnecessary violence to erupt between police officers and citizens. Although important work had already been done in the domestic disturbance area by Dr. Morton Bard in New York City, it was felt that there was a need for police to test alternative approaches to the domestic disturbance problem which might prove to be more cost-effective. The Center accordingly sponsored a research and training effort in the Oakland Police Department which led to the development of what has been called the "Oakland model" of domestic disturbance management.<sup>1</sup> This model uses a minimum of outside consultants and is based primarily on the notion that one

apt way to develop a good domestic disturbance program is to draw systematically on the accumulated practical wisdom of experienced police officers who have demonstrated unusual effectiveness and competence in the management of domestic disturbances. The "Oakland model" subsequently became the basis for a police training film developed by the State of California for dissemination to law enforcement agencies within the state.

Another research project sponsored by the Center in the early 1970's concerned the police departments of Minneapolis-St. Paul. The investigator on this project used a new type of portable field electronic device for the purpose of making instantaneous and computer-readable digital recordings of highly detailed observational data on 4,800 encounters between police officers and citizens. Rather than taking an entire encounter as the basic unit of data collection, the investigator categorized each utterance or gesture by a police officer or citizen, thus permitting a deeper and more fine-grain analysis of the interaction sequences than had hitherto been possible.<sup>2</sup> The Minneapolis-St. Paul study involved research on police responses to domestic disturbances and also had an unexpected bonus. A researcher working in the field of infant studies found that the electronic observation recording technology developed for the police research could be used for highly detailed observations of interactions between premature infants and their mothers. Since preliminary research showed that premature infants have an exceptionally high risk (compared to normal term infants) for later becoming victims of child abuse,

this researcher was awarded a grant from the Center for a study aimed at identifying and hopefully correcting abnormal interactions between premature infants and their mothers which can lead to child abuse.

By the early 1970's it had become evident to NIMH and to the research community that a broader view of family violence was needed than was being reflected in much of the work on child abuse and on police responses to domestic disturbances. Support was accordingly provided by NIMH for a new program of research on intrafamily violence which Professor Murray A. Straus had established at the University of New Hampshire. Out of this initial effort came the idea for the national survey which Professors Straus, Richard J. Gelles, and Suzanne K. Steinmetz have recently conducted. The purpose of this research was to determine the nature, incidence, and severity of household violence in the United States. Our Center has funded both this survey and a related research training project which is being conducted by Professor Straus in an effort to remedy the current shortage of skilled researchers in the area of household violence.

Thanks largely to the impetus provided by Professors Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz, research on household violence is now reaching toward a new level of interest and activity that can have important implications for future public policies and programs. Our Center plans to assist this development insofar as our resources will allow, and insofar as our efforts do not duplicate those of

other Federal agencies which are or may become interested in this field. Among future research efforts planned by the Center are studies which will add significantly to our understanding of: (1) the battered woman problem, (2) the extent to which hospitals are responding adequately to medical and related needs of battered women, and (3) the extent to which abusive parenting is associated with earlier exposure as children to home environments in which physical abuse occurred.

## II

The second topic on which I have been asked to comment is the relationship between our Center's activities in the area of household violence and our concern with problems of individual violent behavior more generally.

In my view, there is a tendency in the United States towards periodic upsurges in public alarm and apprehension over the incidence in our society of homicides, aggravated assaults, and other types of individual violent behaviors. There are ample grounds for such public concerns since the United States does have a higher level of internal violence than perhaps any other advanced industrial society.

The National Institute of Mental Health is primarily concerned with research that can lead to improved understanding of human behavior, especially behavior which may stem from mental illness and behavior which is seriously deviant, maladaptive, or violent. The NIMH thus

has a major and continuing programmatic interest and responsibility in the area of individual violent behavior and constitutes an important resource for dealing with research and related needs in this area.

The Center for Studies of Crime and Delinquency, as indicated earlier in this testimony, was established in 1968 for the purpose of increasing and enhancing the NIMK research effort in the area of individual violent behavior. In order to carry out this mission in a responsible and accountable way, the Center adopted the following guidelines for its program efforts. These guidelines were and are as follows:

1. The use of public funds for research related to individual violent behavior should be premised on utilitarian goals -- i.e., the ultimate translation of new information and research into tangible public benefits -- and not on the pursuit of new knowledge for its own sake.

2. Given this orientation, the Center has a responsibility to be sensitive to public concerns in the area of individual violent behavior and to develop a research program that will respond as effectively as possible to such concerns.

3. A major research need in the area of individual violent behavior can be -- and often is -- the development of improved data on the incidence, prevalence, and seriousness of such behavior. To the extent that such data are not being gathered by other Federal



agencies, the Center has an obligation to develop additional data that can assist the future development of improved programs in the areas of research, prevention, and treatment.

4. Since individual violence is a highly complex phenomenon, the Center also needs to sponsor research that encompasses several disciplinary and substantive areas. For example, even though resort to violent behavior may some times be a reflection of individual psychopathology or mental illness, these characteristics alone do not generally provide an adequate explanation of individual violent behavior, as is glaringly evident from the fact that by far the vast majority of psychotics and other seriously disturbed persons do not commit acts of violence. Hence, it is critical that research examine not only biological, psychiatric and psychological factors which may be associated with individual violence, but also how any of these factors interact with specific social, environmental, familial, and larger institutional forces.

The Center's previous, ongoing, and planned studies in the area of household violence provide examples of our efforts to bring multidisciplinary perspectives to bear on a phenomenon that has attracted great public interest and concern. Another example (out of several that might be cited) concerns the research which the Center has supported in response to extensive speculation -- as well as some premature assertions -- in scientific journals and in the mass media about the existence of a possible link between the 47,XYY

chromosomal abnormality and violent behavior. Our concern was that public policies as well as criminal justice system responses might be based upon incomplete and possibly misleading information concerning individuals with the XYY anomaly.

The Center funded several studies, beginning in the late 1960's, in efforts to gain better understanding of the behavioral implications of such chromosomal variations. Recognizing, also, that public needs often require that important policy determinations be made before definitive research results are available, the Center sponsored a two-day conference in June 1969 to assess the current state of knowledge on the XYY issue. The conference involved experts from the fields of genetics, medicine, psychiatry, psychology, criminology, and law. The conferees came to the conclusion that until more precise knowledge became available, no decisions should be made about an individual based simply upon the fact that he had this chromosomal condition. The published report of the conference thus served as an interim guide to policy-makers until further research findings became available.<sup>3</sup>

Subsequently, one major study funded by our Center, and involving the screening of several thousand men, yielded no evidence that males with the XYY chromosomal constitution were unusually aggressive or violent. Instead, the researchers found that while the XYY males did have a somewhat elevated crime rate, their crimes mostly involved property offenses.<sup>4</sup>

## III

The third topic which I have been asked to address concerns my recommendations for the future development of a well-conceptualized and effective Federal research effort in the area of household violence.

The problem of household violence, like any other phenomenon of individual violent behavior, is inherently complex and many-faceted. Given the complexity of the problem, it seems to me that a Federal research strategy with respect to household violence should avoid the pitfalls of excessive compartmentalization. There will certainly be needs for some highly focused research on specific types of household violence and on various factors associated with the distribution, rates, nature, seriousness and other characteristics of such behaviors. However, there is a continuing need also for research within a broader and multi-disciplinary framework concerning problems of violent behavior more generally. Stated differently, violence within the household is a sub-category of individual violent behaviors, and our improved understanding of the broader category should offer valuable insights about more specific manifestations within particular social contexts and settings.

Another important consideration is the need for a realistic understanding on the part of all concerned as to how much and what can reasonably be expected of a Federal research effort in the area

of household violence and over what period of time. The desired improvements in our knowledge and understanding of household violence are apt to come slowly. The findings from initial studies will often need to be tested and refined by subsequent studies before there can be expectations of more tangible benefits from research in the form of improved service programs and public policies.

It is my view that a steady and long-term period of support is essential for developing and refining important new knowledge about household violence. Short term and "crash" efforts are not likely to provide the solid base of knowledge that will be of more enduring social value. Nor is it likely that research findings produced in a "crash" approach will offer reliable guides for policy or find expression in carefully tested programs of prevention and treatment.

In closing, Mr. Chairman, I am honored to appear before this distinguished Subcommittee, and will be pleased to respond to any questions you may have.

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4. Herman A. Witkin, et al., "Criminality in XYY and XXY Men," Science, Vol. 193, August 13, 1976, pp. 547-555.