

US: Economic stress drives rise in child abuse and domestic violence

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As families confront the impact of the current economic crisis, social service agencies across the US are seeing growing numbers of cases of domestic violence and child abuse. The correlation between financial stress and the growing incidence of such cases is shown in increased calls to hotlines, visits to emergency rooms and the utilization of social services and shelters.

Lisa Rivera, a staff attorney at the Domestic Violence Clinical Center in New York, told the *New York Lawyer*, "When you speak with victims of violence, they talk about the stressors in their lives and the stressors in their abusers' lives—loss of a job, loss of income."

"This is a very stressful time," Baltimore Health Commissioner Dr. Joshua Sharfstein told the *Washington Afro American*. "Everyone's waiting for the next shoe to drop."

As the recession deepens, social workers and medical professionals expect the situation to worsen. And while more women and children—the primary targets of this violence—become victims, funding for programs to assist them is being cut back. The impact is being felt in states across the country.

Domestic violence shelters in **Texas** are experiencing an unprecedented jump in families seeking emergency assistance. Of the 29 shelters surveyed by the Allstate Foundation this year, 83 percent reported a dramatic increase in hotline calls, walk-ins, and/or families staying at their shelters.

Walk-ins at one Texas shelter were up by 240 percent over one year ago, and the number of women and children staying in shelters has increased by as much as 71 percent

in some cases. Calls to many emergency shelter hotlines have doubled.

"Every year the stresses of the holiday season send women and children fleeing for safety," Paige Fink, executive director of Family Place in Dallas, told the Allstate study. "But this year, the financial pressures of the holiday season are compounded by the weakened economy."

Shelter directors in Texas said they expect the situation to worsen, as many women try to keep their families together during the holidays, only to seek shelter in January when their home situation becomes untenable.

In **Florida**, the number of calls received by the state's Department of Children and Families' hotline is up by more than 12,000 over the 12-month period ending in October. DCF Secretary George Sheldon attributes the rise to the financial stresses of job loss and dwindling family budgets.

By state officials' estimates, one in five cases reported to the hotline represents a legitimate child abuse case, which would translate into 2,400 children in danger. Despite the urgent need for care, Florida is likely to carry out cuts to social services programs in order to deal with an estimated \$2 billion budget deficit.

Child welfare experts in the Sacramento, **California** region are concerned about the number of children at risk for abuse as the economy worsens. Sacramento County Child Protective Services is seeing an increase in both the number and severity of child abuse cases. In October, there were 460 reported situations where a child's safety was in such immediate risk that an investigator was required to respond immediately.

The Child Abuse Prevention Council of Placer County (Calif.) handles cases involving sexual and physical abuse, abandonment and medical and educational neglect. The council has seen a 65 percent increase in need for its services, and is struggling to keep up with demand.

Placer County, with the region's highest per capita income, saw its unemployment rate rise to 7.4 percent in October from 5 percent a year earlier. Median home sale prices plunged by 20.5 percent in the same period. The county recorded 1,833 foreclosures from January through October, up from 668 for the same period last year, according to MDA DataQuick.

Deanne Thornton, executive director of the Placer County council, told the *Sacramento Bee*, "Parents are losing their jobs and their health plans. Families are facing foreclosure and they don't know where to turn."

Rhode Island has recently seen a 25 percent increase in felony-level domestic violence crimes. Victims' advocates say that economic stress contributes to more frequent and violent abuse, posing grave dangers to the victims, who have fewer opportunities to seek help or to get away from their abusers.

From 2005 to 2007, the rate of domestic violence-related homicide in **Massachusetts** tripled, according to the *Boston Globe*. Researcher Jaclyn Campbell identified the risk factors contributing to this horrific statistic as limited access to services for the victim and joblessness for the person committing the crime.

In **Fairfax County, Virginia**, investigations of child neglect have surged by 152 percent, comparing July-October 2008 to the same four-month period in 2007. Many of these investigations are the result of families living without heat or electricity, or failing to provide children with medical care. Abuse and neglect investigations combined rose by 23 percent.

In nearby Washington DC, the nation's capital, there was an 18 percent increase in child neglect and abuse investigations during the same period. Allison Jackson, medical director of the Children's National Medical Center, has noticed an increase in the number of children coming to the emergency room with burns, broken bones, fractured skulls and injured stomachs.

Jackson told the *Washington Post*, "We are all questioning whether it's the economy and the stresses that come with a bad economy."

The need for shelters and services for victims of domestic violence is immense. A 24-hour census conducted in 2007 by the National Network to End Domestic Violence found, in one day, that more than 53,000 women, men and children across the US received services from domestic violence programs.

Over 25,000 of these individuals were able to find refuge in emergency domestic violence shelters or transitional housing, while more than 7,700 victims did not receive help because the programs lacked adequate funding and resources.

Need for these services will surely rise as more families face the loss of a job, wage cuts, lose their medical coverage, or go into foreclosure. A September 2004 study released by the National Institute of Justice revealed a direct link between such stress and domestic violence:

- Women whose male partners experience two or more periods of unemployment over the five-year course of the study were three times more likely to be abused.
- Couples under "financial strain" had triple the domestic violence rate of other couples in the population.

Despite such data, as the demand for services grows under the weight of these economic strains, federal funding to a key program that serves victims of domestic violence has been cut: \$2.1 million was slashed from The Family Violence Prevention and Services budget earlier this year.



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