Generational Cycles of Intimate Partner Violence in the US: A Research Brief

Do individuals involved in intimate partner violence (IPV) have children who grow up to become involved in IPV themselves? According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, IPV refers to psychological, physical, or sexual harm committed by either a current or former partner or spouse. (CDC, 2010). IPV may include “intense criticisms and put-downs, verbal harassment, sexual coercion and assault, physical attacks and intimidation, restraint of normal activities and freedoms, and denial of access to resources” (Browne, 1993, p. 1077). Involvement in IPV can have lifelong consequences (Ehrensaft et al., 2003; Ireland & Smith, 2009; McNeal & Amato, 1998). This research brief provides a summary of results from a recent study designed to examine the relationship between parent’s involvement in IPV and their children’s later experiences with IPV. The full study is currently being prepared for publication in a scientific journal and is entitled “Intergenerational Continuity of Intimate Partner Violence: Findings from the National Youth Survey Family Study.”

Sample
This research is drawn from the National Youth Survey Family Study (NYSFS), which is a nationally-representative sample of US respondents originally consisting of 1,683 families assessed across three generations covering a 27-year period from 1976 to 2004. Overall, eligibility, participation, and retention rates are quite reasonable compared to other longitudinal studies—generally ranging from 70% to 90% depending on the respondent and wave of data collection (Menard, 2012; Menard et al., 2011). Results presented here focus on the second generation parents and their offspring.
Prevalence of Intimate Partner Violence

To begin, the current study examined each generation’s involvement in IPV, separately. Parent and offspring respondents were asked about their experiences with violent and minor perpetration of IPV. Across all interviews, 67.6% of parent respondents reported perpetrating violent IPV at least once. In addition, 33.7% of their adult children also reported perpetrating violent IPV. In total, the prevalence of IPV perpetration appears to have decreased 33.9% from one generation to the next. Across all interviews, 92.1% of parents reported perpetrating minor IPV at least once. Showing more stability across generations, 81.7% of offspring respondents also reporting perpetrating minor IPV.

Types of Intimate Partner Violence

In addition to examining the prevalence of IPV, this study investigated the number of different types of IPV occurring within an interview period, which can help document the magnitude or severity of IPV. When considering the 10 different types of IPV perpetration measured for the parent generation, 73.2% did not perpetrate any IPV while 25.2% perpetrated 1 type, 11.3% perpetrated 2 types, 14.6% perpetrated 3 types, and 41.1% perpetrated 4 or more types of IPV. For the offspring, 17.3% did not perpetrate any IPV while 45.1% perpetrated 1 type, 14.4% perpetrated 2 types, 5.9% perpetrated 3 types, and 17.3% perpetrated 4 or more types of IPV. Across both generations, more than 20% of respondents reported perpetrating 3 or more types of IPV.

Intergenerational Continuity of IPV

Turning next to the prevalence of victimization, parent and offspring respondents were asked similar questions about their involvement with violent and minor IPV victimization. Across all of their interviews, 66.2% of parent respondents reported being violently victimized by an intimate partner at least once. In contrast, 36.1% of their offspring reported being violently victimized—which is a 30.1% decrease across the two generations. In terms of minor victimization, 93.4% of the parents and 78.8% of their adult children reported experiencing minor victimization from an intimate partner.

Next consider IPV victimization. When examining the 10 different types of IPV victimization measured for the parent generation, 5.3% did not experience any IPV victimization while 27.8% experienced 1 type, 15.9% experienced 2 types, 8.0% experienced 3 types, and 43.1% experienced 4 or more types of IPV victimization. For the offspring, 19.8% did not experience any IPV victimization while 44.6% experienced 1 type, 8.9% experienced 2 types, 7.4% experienced 3 types, and 19.3% experienced 4 or more types of IPV victimization. For both generations, over a quarter of respondents experienced three or more types of IPV victimization.

Intergenerational Continuity of IPV

The overarching research question for this study asks whether or not parent respondents with a history of IPV are more likely to have offspring with a history of IPV. As such, we first investigated intergenerational continuity of IPV perpetration and, then, intergenerational continuity of IPV victimization. For each type of intergenerational continuity, we divided the sample of families into four groups: (1) parents who were never involved in IPV who have adult offspring also never involved in IPV, (2) parents who were never involved in IPV who have adult offspring also involved in IPV, (3) parents who were involved in IPV but whose adult offspring were never involved in IPV, and (4) parents who were involved in IPV who also have offspring involved in IPV.

Conclusion

Studies of intergenerational relationships are difficult to conduct and most do not meet the methodological criteria needed to draw valid conclusions (for a review, see Thornberry, Knight, & Lovegrove, 2011). This research brief summarizes findings from a methodically-rigorous study on intergenerational continuity of IPV by analyzing prospective, longitudinal, and multigenerational data collected from the National Youth Survey Family Study. The findings are threefold. First, the results presented here indicate that most respondents, regardless of generation, are involved in IPV perpetration or victimization. Second, findings highlight that at least one-fifth of the sample was involved in 3 or more different types of IPV. Third, very few families were able to desist, generationally, from IPV altogether. Most parents who had experienced IPV had children who eventually grew up to experience IPV themselves.

The practical implication of this research for victim services involves improving knowledge of the various pathways to IPV, which can then be used to help inform policy and program recommendations. Clearly, parents’ own involvement in IPV represents an important pathway for children’s later experiences of IPV. Past theoretical (Giordano, 2010) and empirical work (Hines & Saudino, 2004) supports these findings. Future research, however, is needed to determine how to interrupt the cycle of IPV that occurs both across the life course and in subsequent generations.

References


