

Domestic abuse on rise as economy sinks

Hotline calls up from last year as are cases of shaken baby syndrome

Associated Press

April 10, 2009

GARDEN CITY, N.Y. - Some hospitals report seeing more than twice as many shaken babies as a year ago. Deaths from domestic violence have increased sharply in some areas.

Calls to domestic-violence hotlines have risen too, and more than half the callers said their families' financial situation has changed recently.

Across the country, these and other signs point to another troubling effect of the recession: The American home is becoming more violent, and the ailing economy could be at least partially to blame.

"Our children and families are suffering," said Alane Fagin, who runs a Long Island nonprofit group called Child Abuse Prevention Services. "With more layoffs expected, the threat of foreclosure looming over so many and our savings disappearing, even the best parents can feel stressed out and overwhelmed."

Nationwide government data will not be compiled for months, so the evidence suggesting an uptick in child abuse and domestic violence has been largely anecdotal.

But the Child Welfare League of America, a coalition of public and private agencies, has been surveying state child welfare agencies to determine whether the numbers reflect a spike in violence.

"I think a lot of people are very concerned that we are in the early phases of this," said Linda Spears, vice president for policy and public affairs.

Eighty-eight percent of law enforcement officials surveyed nationwide believe the economic crisis has led, or will lead, to more child abuse and neglect, according to top police officials from Los Angeles, Boston, Milwaukee and Philadelphia who recently held a news conference in Washington.

"Those of us on the front lines of law enforcement know that there is a correlation between economic distress and increased child abuse and neglect," said Los Angeles Police Chief William Bratton. "We have to get in front of this problem now."

Funding for support agencies shrinking

Just as the need appears to be growing, the recession is drying up funding to many agencies that fight domestic violence.

"This period of time may well be our perfect storm: a struggling economy, an increase in stress and a decrease in funding of programs," said Fagin, the Long Island child abuse prevention advocate.

Not everyone is convinced domestic violence and child abuse are increasing.

"So far from what I've read there is no evidence that is the case," said Ben Tanzer of Chicago-based Prevent Child Abuse. "Certainly we're concerned that certain communities may be in crisis, but we just don't know."

Earlier this month, the U.S. Administration for Children's Services released its annual report on child abuse, which found the number of children being maltreated actually fell in recent years, from 904,000 victims nationwide in 2006 to 794,000 the following year.

But those figures do not include the worst of the recession, which began in late 2007. Still, additional signs abound that violence is rising:

- The National Domestic Violence Hotline reported calls were up 21 percent in the third quarter of 2008 compared with a year earlier. A six-week survey found 54 percent of callers answering "yes" when asked if there had been a change in the family's financial situation in the past year.
- Workers at Children's Hospital Boston and Massachusetts General Hospital reported seeing nine infants with shaken baby syndrome in three months, compared with four in the same period last year. The chairman of pediatrics at Schneider Children's Hospital on Long Island said his facility has had five cases in the past six months; only one or two cases arose during the previous year.
- Milwaukee reported a 40 percent increase in homicides related to domestic violence in the first three months of 2009. Police Chief Edward Flynn cannot say for sure whether the increase was caused by the recession, but he believes the two are related.

- The San Diego County Domestic Violence Hotline reported a 20 percent increase in calls in January 2009 over the prior year. "As the economy worsens, it's likely that trend will get even worse," District Attorney Bonnie M. Dumanis said.
- The Women's Center of San Joaquin County, Calif., says the number of clients seeking aid in obtaining restraining orders against abusers has increased 50 percent for the first three months of 2009, and counselors blame the economy. The county leads the nation in foreclosures.
- Maine saw domestic violence-related homicides double in the past year. Gov. John Baldacci urged health care professionals to look even more carefully for signs of violence and sexual assault.
- Just outside the nation's capital, the number of abuse and neglect cases rose 23 percent in Fairfax County, Va.; 29 percent in Montgomery County, Md.; and 18 percent in the District of Columbia in 2008. Neglect investigations appear to have increased most, as struggling families live without heat or electricity or fail to get children medical care.

Amy Wicks, a spokeswoman with the National Center on Shaken Baby Syndrome, said her organization has received reports from pediatricians around the country concerned about a spike in cases.

"It's not just shaken baby, it's other forms of physical abuse," Wicks said. "A lot of fathers, or male caregivers, have been laid off and now they're home with the screaming baby. Sometimes the stress of a crying baby is just too much on top of everything else."

Individual cases also raise questions about the role economic troubles may have played.

Police on Long Island were called last month to the home of an out-of-work stagehand arguing with his wife over money. After repeatedly punching her in the face in front of his house, the man barricaded himself inside with her and their seven children as hostage negotiators pleaded for their release.

The siege in East Rockaway ended after the man's wife fled and he was tackled by police outside the house. The children were not harmed.

Days later in Stockton, Minn., a man held a 4-year-old hostage for about five hours before surrendering. A woman told police her husband was intoxicated and had become "verbally violent" with her, noting he was depressed about being laid off at a die-casting company.

Mindy Perlmutter, spokeswoman for the Nassau County Coalition for Domestic Violence, cautioned that the economy is not the only factor in abuse cases — a common refrain among social workers.

"It doesn't cause someone to be abusive," she said. "There are many poor people who never abuse their loved ones. But if you're inclined to be abusive, if you are an abuser, losing a job and being home 24/7 may give you more opportunity."

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