

FAMILY VIOLENCE IN AMERICA

Breaking the Cycle for Children Who Witness



Recommendations from the 1997 IACP Summit

... Breaking the cycle of family violence requires a transformation of values that places victims, their families, and communities at the center of a network of support provided collaboratively by the justice, education, victim advocate, health care and social services systems.

From the IACP Family Violence Summit

1997



We need to create a future where the children at the scene of a domestic violence incident are treated like real victims – not bystanders. They are real victims – and ones that may well grow up to become victims or perpetrators of domestic violence if we don't help them right now. We need urgently to help them unlearn what they're learning through the violence they see.

Darrell Sanders
IACP President

We are here today to deal with this critical aspect of domestic violence. We continue to give tremendous support to the women who are the predominant victims of domestic violence, and your efforts to extend additional support to their children in the midst of this violence is critical, and urgently needed. We must help both victims and their children simultaneously.

Noël Brennan
Deputy Assistant Attorney General
U.S. Department of Justice

Dealing with children who witness domestic violence isn't just a police issue – it's a community issue – and the police can be instrumental in helping to coordinate that community response. It seems to me that this critical intervention with children who witness is a core activity of true community policing.

Joe Brann
Director
Office of Community Oriented Policing Services

I am so glad to see the 'Breaking the Cycle' title for this summit. Domestic Violence is, indeed, a vicious cycle of violence, and you can truly break that cycle with the right intervention at the right time. VAWGO, COPS and all of you at the IACP summit have a chance to develop policies that can break the cycle at its most urgent point – where children are damaged by the violence they see and hear.

Bonnie Campbell
Director
Violence Against Women Office

Domestic Violence is all about the children who witness this type of violence. My brother and I witnessed enough of it so that we tried (very unsuccessfully, thank heavens) to kill our own father for what he did to our mother. We were truly 'children who witness' and we needed help and needed it bad.

Sgt. Mark Wynn
Nashville Police Department

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We are indebted most to the Summit participants who worked so diligently and productively to fashion the recommendations which appear in this report. We hope we have synthesized and conveyed their contributions faithfully and accurately. Each is acknowledged later in this report.

EXECUTIVE OVERVIEW

Too many American children witness violence in their communities and homes. Too many of these children are physically abused themselves. Routine exposure to the violence that pervades our culture is damaging to children. Witnessing family violence is particularly traumatic for children and youth. Child witnesses of family violence are at higher risk for substance abuse, failure in school, and, for boys, aggressive behavior, and for girls, depression. These behaviors can later contribute to violence against future partners and others in their families and communities.

Domestic violence has received increasing attention during the past decade from legislators, justice system policymakers and practitioners, and women's and children's advocates. Reforms initiated by these stakeholders have two primary goals: 1) to reduce the incidence of domestic violence, which in turn will reduce the number of children traumatized by witnessing family violence and 2) to improve the effectiveness of interventions designed to protect and support battered partners and their children.

Much is already being done to prevent domestic violence, to shelter and support its victims, and to ensure the safety and positive development of children and youth who witness it. Nevertheless, much remains to be accomplished. In April of 1997, the International Association of Chiefs of Police convened a body of influential policymakers and practitioners to appraise the state of current policy and practice and to develop innovative strategies to help communities break the intergenerational cycle of family violence. Participants brought wide-ranging knowledge and perspectives on current policies, practices, and resource requirements to the Summit.

Two categories of recommendations emerged from the Summit, 43 recommendations in all. The first 31 recommendations focus on capacity building:

- ***Capacity-Building Recommendations*** to enable community organizations in and public service agencies to intervene in the family violence cycle more effectively. For example, organization and agencies are urged to:
 - **Restructure criminal justice, social, community, education, and health service systems to intensify collaborative planning and policymaking.**
 - **Clarify and unify statutes, written policies and protocols to facilitate intervention on behalf of children who witness.**

- **Augment management and staff training for all law enforcement and social service system providers.**
- **Improve performance measurement and outcome evaluation of programs designed to intervene on behalf of children.**
- **Enhance public awareness of children who witness, issues and the consequences of the problem.**

A second set of 12 prevention and intervention recommendations are also presented:

- **Prevention and Intervention Recommendations** to expand the continuum of effective services, from prevention-focused initiatives to treatment and justice system interventions for victims and perpetrators of family violence. For example, organizations and agencies are urged to:
 - **Strengthen the family through an array of programs, available to all, that includes such promising approaches as home visitations for new parents and parenting and family skills training.**
 - **Create *prevention* initiatives that are *community-based*, *coordinated* across agencies and settings, and *sustained* over time.**
 - **Prepare children and youth to deal with violence and solve conflicts constructively, through school-based conflict resolution and life skills education.**
 - **Develop screening protocols to enable first responders, including law enforcement officers, health care providers and domestic violence shelter workers to make appropriate referrals to health care providers, support groups, and other treatment options.**
 - **Offer safe haven to children of high-conflict or violent families, in respite day care centers and “relief nurseries” as well as supportive services to battered parents and immediately available community counseling.**
 - **Provide educational and therapeutic interventions to adults who witnessed family violence as children, especially those who are**

parenting, are substance abusers, and/or under correctional supervision.

- **Ensure that the justice system holds perpetrators fully accountable for the impact of their abusive behavior while it protects and supports child victims and witnesses.**

The report concludes with a **Law Enforcement Action Agenda**. Law enforcement agencies can and must play a central role in breaking the cycle of family violence. Summit participants identified key elements of a Law Enforcement Action Agenda.

- An internal focusing on children who witness violent incidents.
- Rapid response to and support for children who witness.
- Effective collaboration with treatment and service providers, including child services and advocates.
- Exhaustive and continuing recruit and in-service training in the causes, significance, and prescribed interventions of and for the problem.
- Continuing evaluation of the effectiveness of prevention and intervention strategies.

Achievement of Action Agenda goals can be facilitated, measurably, by mobilizing current research and expertise in the field and by placing children who witness issues at the center of community policing/problem-solving programming.

Family violence and its impact on child witnesses cannot be eradicated through the effort of a single agency or organization. Breaking the cycle of family violence requires a transformation of values that places victims, their families and communities at the center of a network of support provided collaboratively by the justice, education, victim advocate, health care and social service systems.

Every public agency, service provider and community group that touches the lives of children who witness family violence must help to actualize the recommendations of this Summit. Summit recommendations should serve as a framework to help communities comprehensive and detailed strategies to prevent and intervene in family violence. Law enforcement agencies must play a special leadership role in breaking the cycle of family

violence, by galvanizing public awareness of the traumatic impacts of family violence on child witnesses and by forming local, collaborative responses to the problem.

SUMMIT BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

It is widely understood that children who witness domestic and other family violence have a propensity to become abusers or victims of violence themselves in adulthood. Early intervention seems to hold tremendous promise for keeping children who witness from further damage or commission of crimes as they mature. **Breaking The Cycle** was the controlling focus of the 1997 Summit. The primary objective of the Summit was to recommend actions to break the generational cycle of violence.

Breaking the Cycle

The cycle of family violence is depicted in Graph 1. Adult abusers produce a pattern of family violence, which is frequently witnessed by children. These “witnesses” are damaged physically and emotionally, preparing them, in many cases, to continue the cycle of violence as they reach adulthood. Only a dramatic and coordinated intervention can stop this cycle. If put in place, this coordinated intervention can have a multi-generational impact on the problem.

The Summit Process

The significance of the issues and the objectives of the Summit were addressed by IACP President Darrell Sanders and other dignitaries at an opening plenary session. A panel of experts on children who witness violence summarized the nature and extent of the problem. The majority of the two-day summit was devoted to work sessions in which colleagues collaborated to develop promising ideas to help intervene with children who witness.

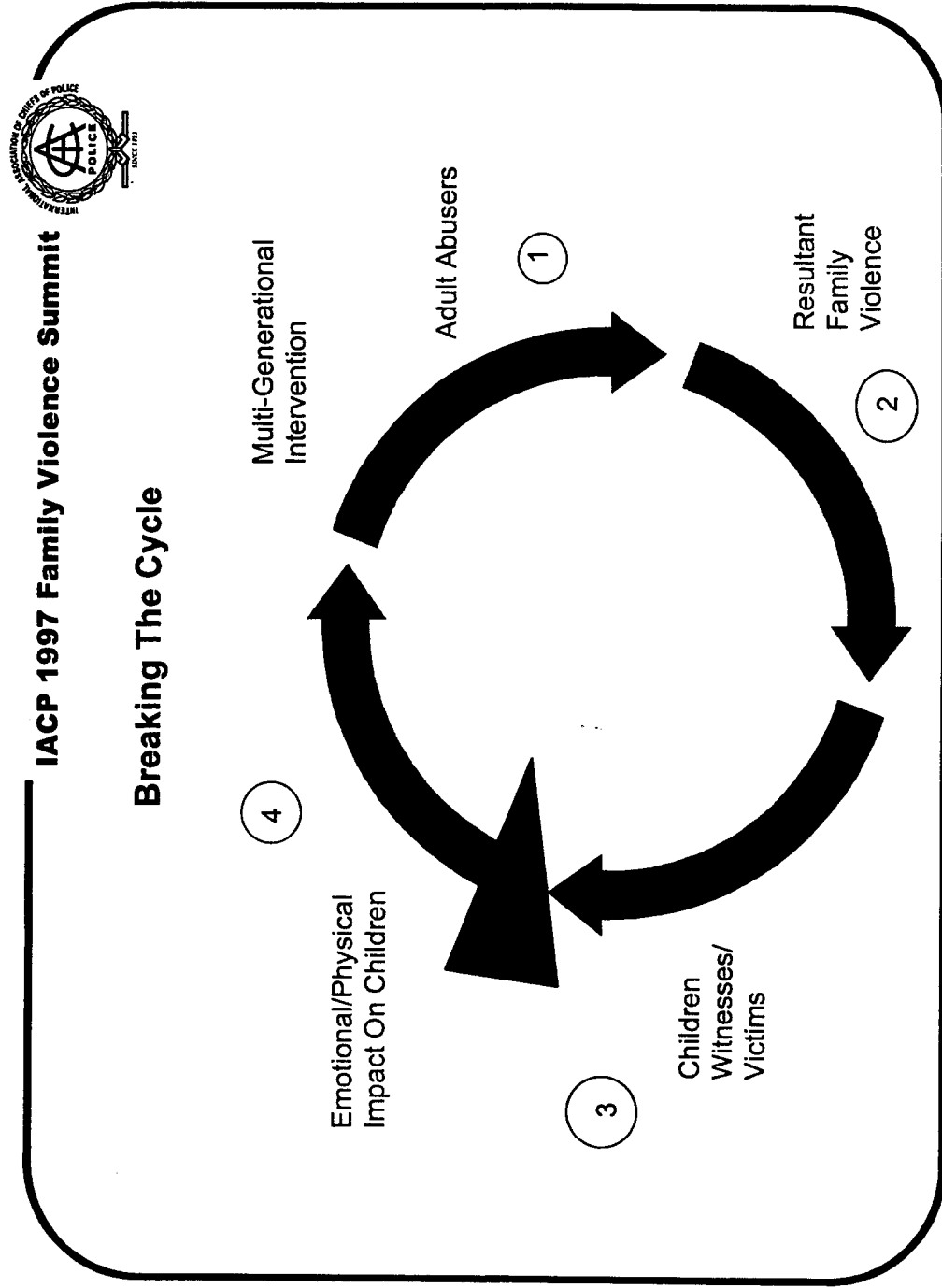
Work groups, were structured to include representatives of key stakeholder groups that must be involved in planning and implementing policy and program changes on behalf of children who witness family violence: *Communities; Education Systems; Families; Health Organizations; Juvenile and Adult Justice Systems; Law Enforcement; and Social Services*. Participants brought wide-ranging knowledge of current policies and practices to the table as well as perspectives on knowledge and resource gaps. Each group developed recommendations for improvements or changes to help break the intergenerational cycle of family violence. On the second day of the Summit, at a

plenary session, a representative from each work group reported on the recommendations his or her group produced.

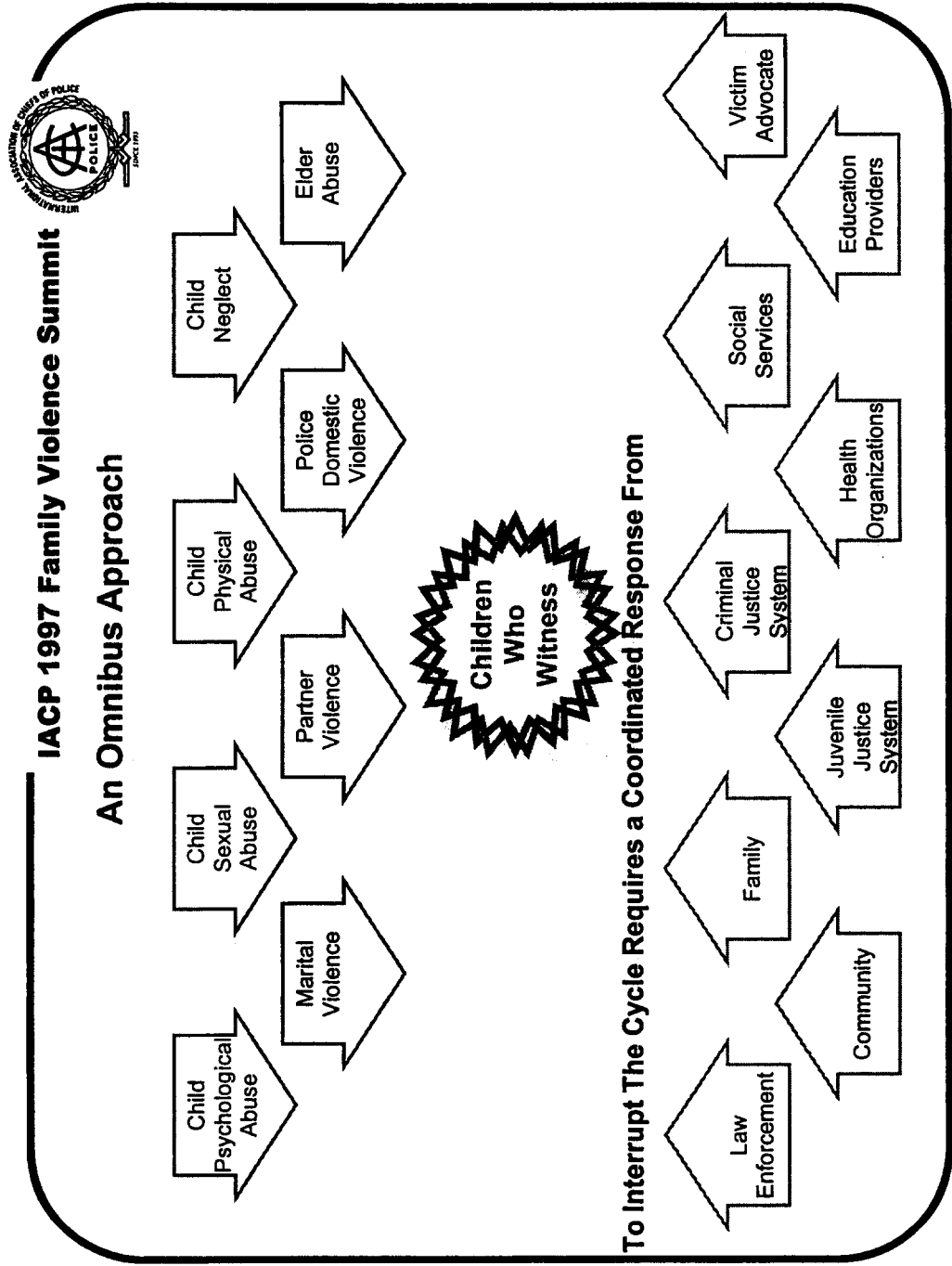
Omnibus Response

Summit proceedings were governed by the belief that successful intervention with children who witness requires an omnibus approach -- attention from all of the societal entities that have or can have a stake in the outcomes. The primary justice and societal entities which can have an impact are shown in Graph II.

Graph I



Graph II



FAMILY VIOLENCE AND ITS IMPACT ON CHILDREN WHO WITNESS

Family violence includes physical, sexual, and/or psychological abuse, sometimes accompanied by economic coercion, perpetrated by a family member in order to exert power and maintain control over an intimate partner (usually referred to as domestic violence), an elder (elder abuse), or any other adult or juvenile family member. It is a pervasive national problem that cuts across cultural, racial, ethnic, religious and economic boundaries:

- Nearly one in three individuals that responded to a 1995 national poll conducted for the Family Violence Prevention Fund said they know someone who is a victim of domestic violence. In a survey conducted in early 1995, 31 percent of women reported they had been physically abused by a husband or boyfriend some time in their lives.¹
- A six-year study of very low-income women in Worcester, MA by the Better Homes Fund of Newton documents that 61 percent of the women had been physically abused by intimate partners, and more than one-third (36%) of those abused had sustained injuries severe enough to require medical treatment.²
- According to the National Center on Elder Abuse (NCEA) there were 241,000 reported cases of elder abuse during 1994, in which the majority of the victims (62 percent) and half of the perpetrators (52 percent) were female. Assuming that most cases are not reported, the NCEA estimates that over 800,000 Americans were victims of elder abuse during that year.³

The impacts of family violence are far-reaching extending well beyond the significant harms inflicted directly upon victimized family members. The impacts include the traumatic effects upon children and youth who witness it.

Far too many of America's children are victims of violence. An even more alarming number are witnesses to violence in their homes and in the larger community. In 1994:

- Youth, ages 12 to 17, made up approximately 10% of the population over 12 years of age, but were victims of 22% of all violent crime (approximately 946,000 of a total of 4.3 million serious violent crimes.)⁴

- Public welfare agencies reported the number of child abuse or neglect cases to be 63% higher than 1985.⁵

Children *witness* violence more often than they directly experience it. The violence may be either “virtual” or a tragic reality.

- In a recent study, 40 percent of New Haven 6th, 8th and 10th graders in low income areas reported witnessing at least one violent crime in the previous year.⁶
- Nearly one-third of 5th and 6th grade students from low-income areas surveyed in Washington, DC reported having witnessed a shooting, while 17 percent had witnessed a murder.⁷
- In a study of Boston children seen at their primary health care clinic, one out of every ten had witnessed a shooting or a stabbing before the age of six; one-half of these incidents occurred in their homes.⁸
- The Cultural Indicators project, begun in 1968 and continuing as the longest-running media research undertaking in the world, estimates that the average American child witnesses more than 8,000 murders and 100,000 other violent acts on television by the time he or she leaves elementary school.⁹

It is estimated that every year, more than 3 million children in the U.S. are at risk of witnessing domestic violence in their homes.¹⁰ Studies indicate that from 40 to 90 percent of these children do actually witness incidents of family violence.¹¹

There can be no doubt that routine exposure to the violence that pervades American culture can be harmful to many children. Research suggests that witnessing parental violence is a better predictor of later abusing a partner than is having been a victim of child abuse.¹² A majority of men (63%) in a batterer’s intervention program in Washington state reported witnessing domestic violence as children.¹³ In a Baltimore batterer’s program, 75% of the men reported witnessing their fathers beat their mothers, while only 50% reported that they had been abused as children.¹⁴

In a longitudinal study of Rochester, NY youth, 38 percent of the youth from non-violent families reported involvement in violent behavior, while 60 percent of those whose families engaged in one of three forms of family violence (generalized hostility;

domestic violence; or child maltreatment) reported committing violent acts. The rate increased to 73 percent for those who were exposed to two forms of family violence, and to 78 percent for those who witnessed all three types of family violence.¹⁵ Adolescent boys exposed to abuse of women are significantly more likely to hit their mothers¹⁶ and to be physically abusive in dating relationships¹⁷ than non-witnesses. Girls who witness their mothers being abused are more likely to view violence as an integral part of intimate relationships, and may therefore show a higher tolerance for dating relationships that are abusive.¹⁸

Witnessing family violence not only affects children's propensity to instigate or tolerate aggressive behavior, but their emotional and physical health, developmental progress and performance in school. Since 1980, there have been at least 23 studies of the impact of witnessing domestic violence on children, 16 conducted with children in shelters and seven with children in various types of treatment programs.¹⁹ Despite methodological shortcomings, these studies provide the first systematic evidence that children and youth who witness domestic violence experience a range of behavioral and emotional problems, and that these problems differ for children of various ages and for girls and boys:

- Infants may exhibit "failure to thrive" symptoms such as slow or low weight gain, eating and sleeping disturbances, and difficulties bonding to adults.
- Children between 18 months and six years may experience eating and sleeping difficulties, mood swings, sadness and delay in language or social development.
- Children from 6 to 12 years of age frequently are anxious, depressed, fearful, or socially isolated. They may exhibit the short attention span, easy distractibility, and aggressive behavior often associated with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder seen in other survivors of violence.²⁰ They may have a variety of difficulties with performance in school and social interaction due to below-average self concept, reduced ability to empathize, inability to concentrate, or various developmental delays.
- For youth older than 12, some impacts of witnessing domestic violence vary significantly by gender. Adolescent boys who witness family violence are more likely to act out aggressively. Teen girls are more likely to become depressed, withdrawn or even suicidal, and are at higher risk for becoming pregnant.²¹ For

both boys and girls, exposure to family violence is a risk factor significantly associated with delinquency, drug and alcohol abuse, low academic achievement, and dropping out of school.²²

The National Woman Abuse Prevention Project²³ and the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee cite research documenting that children in homes where domestic violence occurs are physically abused or seriously neglected at a rate 1500% higher than the national average of the general population. Children may be hit trying to protect their mothers or merely because they are in the way, or may be specific targets of abuse. Although domestic violence perpetrators commit the majority of child abuse in families where domestic violence occurs,²⁴ battered women also abuse and neglect their children at a much higher rate than mothers who are not abused.²⁵ In violent families, abused partners are often unable to pay sufficient attention to children's needs due to their deteriorating physical and emotional health, substance abuse, and/or lack of social and financial resources.²⁶ Helping women escape from violent partners substantially reduces the risk that the batterer will continue to harm their children.

Clearly, family violence can no longer be considered "simply" a family problem. It affects not only the abused victims, but children present in the home, who are traumatized by witnessing violence in what should be the safest of havens, their own homes. Frequently, these children also become victims of abuse or neglect. In general, children who live with family violence are at a higher risk for substance abuse, school failure, and aggressive behavior. For boys, this aggressive behavior often escalates later in life to violence against their future partners and others in their families and communities.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE INITIATIVES AND CHILDREN WHO WITNESS

Domestic violence has received increasing attention during the past decade, from legislators, justice system policymakers and practitioners, and women's and children's advocates. Federal, state and local domestic violence reforms include:

- Changes in laws to provide greater protection for battered parents (mostly women) and their children and stiffer sentences/punishments for batterers
- New policymaking structures to engage entire communities in developing strategies to prevent and intervene in domestic violence
- Modified service delivery models to encourage collaborative, system-wide interventions and support for domestic violence victims
- Providing better information about the extent and nature of domestic violence
- Expanded training opportunities for justice system policymakers and staff and encourage its inclusion in educational curriculum
- Enhanced public information, education and outreach efforts
- Improved performance measures and more comprehensive research to ascertain what works to reduce the incidence of domestic violence
- Increased resources for prevention programs and crisis intervention and shelter care for abused women and their children.

Taken as a whole, these reforms have two primary goals: 1) to reduce the incidence of domestic violence, which in turn will reduce the number of children traumatized by witnessing family violence, and 2) to improve the effectiveness of interventions designed to protect and support battered partners and their children.

Quincy, Massachusetts is one of the pioneers of a coordinated response to domestic violence, by criminal justice and other organizations, which incorporates forceful law enforcement, aggressive prosecution, sensitive but firm court action, intensive supervision and mandatory treatment for batterers, and comprehensive crisis and

support services for abused women and their children. The Center for Law and Justice of the Council for State Governments reports that “no woman has died as a result of domestic violence in more than a decade in Quincy, MA,” and suggests that “states might look to Quincy as they seek the newly available federal funds to strengthen their efforts.”²⁷

The Family Violence Project was initiated by the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges in 1987. In collaboration with other policymakers and advocates, and with funding from the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, the Council developed a Model State Family Violence Code, which was published in 1994. The Code provides a legal framework within which victims of domestic violence can be *protected* “in a fair, prompt and comprehensive fashion” and through which future violence can be *prevented* “in every family where such violence has been discovered.”²⁸ Multnomah County, Oregon Judge Stephen Herrell, who chaired the Project Committee, emphasizes that “most important of all, we must insure that our children do not continue to suffer the emotional abuse that comes from growing up in a violent home.”²⁹ The Model Code strongly recommends that where custody of a child is at issue, the child’s safety and well-being should be the court’s central concern.

At a national conference sponsored by the State Justice Institute in 1993, judicially-led teams from every state developed action plans to address family violence and its consequences. These plans called for creation of state and local domestic violence coordinating councils to encourage and enable development of effective intervention strategies consistent with local values and tailored to communities’ needs.³⁰ Since then many states have acted to create statewide councils, and numerous counties in these states have followed suit. Coordinating councils include broad representation from the justice system, service agencies, victim advocates and community representatives, and serve as ongoing forums for goal-setting, policymaking, and performance measurement in the arena of domestic violence.

The 1994 Violence Against Women Act provides incentives for states and localities to “create a seamless response system to aid victims and deal with perpetrators of domestic crime and sexual assault.” The Act provides grants to states that can be used to train police officers, hire additional prosecutors, improve data collection and tracking systems, and develop more effective strategies to prevent violence against women.³¹ The Act also created new federal crimes of domestic violence and stalking, and new gun laws.

**STRATEGIES TO BREAK THE CYCLE OF FAMILY VIOLENCE:
SUMMIT RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Summit produced 43 recommendations. They fall into two categories:

- **Capacity-Building Recommendations** to enable community organizations and public agencies to prevent and intervene in the family violence cycle more effectively.
- **Prevention and Intervention Recommendations** to expand the continuum of effective services, from prevention-focused initiatives to treatment and justice system interventions for victims and perpetrators of family violence.

Summit participants articulated basic principles to guide capacity building and design of effective prevention and intervention approaches and fashioned a Law Enforcement Action Agenda, to help put these strategies in place.

Family violence and its impacts on child witnesses cannot be eradicated through the efforts of a single agency or organization. Breaking the cycle requires a transformation of values that places victims, their families, and communities at the center of a network of support provided collaboratively by the justice, education, victim advocate, health care and social service systems. Recommendations from Summit participants should serve as a framework to help communities craft comprehensive and detailed strategies to prevent and intervene in family violence.

Prevention and Intervention Principles

In advance of developing specific recommendations, summit participants identified several prevention and intervention principles that must guide all policy development. Communities and agencies should observe the following principles as they build capacity and design effective prevention and intervention approaches for children who witness family violence.

- **Both prevention initiatives and intervention services are essential for reducing family violence and its traumatic impacts on child witnesses.**

A full continuum of strategies stretching from community-wide prevention to targeted intervention approaches should be put in place to break the cycle of family violence.

- **To be optimally effective, prevention efforts should be community-based, coordinated across agencies and settings, and sustained over time.**

Strategies to prevent family violence through strengthening families should be developed by local communities based on a shared vision and consistent principles. Providers should use mutually supportive methods and offer support to families and children "from cradle to grave."

- **To be effective, interventions should be:**

- *introduced as early as possible* in the family violence cycle
- made available in a *timely* fashion
- *readily accessible* in a variety of community and agency settings
- *based on comprehensive assessments* of victims, witnesses and family dynamics
- *the least intrusive capable of achieving desired outcomes* (e.g., *education rather than therapeutic interventions should be the first resort for most child witnesses*)
- *built on strengths and resiliencies* of families and individuals
- *responsive to individual characteristics and circumstances*
- *culturally sensitive and appropriate*
- *inclusive of follow-up support* of families and individuals
- *based on objective "what works" research findings.*

- **Law enforcement and justice system responses to family violence and child witnesses should:**
 - prioritize protecting children exposed to violence in their homes
 - fast-track domestic and family violence cases that involve child witnesses
 - facilitate immediate supportive, therapeutic, and/or medical intervention on behalf of victims and witnesses, even when arrests are not made, through mandatory referral to health agencies
 - consolidate cases (criminal, civil, juvenile) that involve a family into a single court process
 - provide legal, logistical and emotional support to victims and child witnesses involved in court processes
 - hold perpetrators accountable for all impacts of their abusive behavior and provide treatment/intervention for batterers
 - be based on consistent policies and protocols collaboratively developed by all justice system and service provider agencies.

Capacity-Building Recommendations

To prevent and intervene in the family violence cycle more effectively, community organizations and public agencies are urged to: restructure the many systems that respond to victims and witnesses of violence in order to intensify collaborative planning and policy making; clarify and unify statutes, policies and protocols; augment current levels of training for service providers; enhance public awareness of children who witness issues and the consequences of the problem; improve performance measurement and outcome evaluation.

Intensify Collaborative Planning & Policymaking

1. Establish a clear vision and meaningful missions.

Vision statements describe the future that we would like to actualize. *Mission* statements clarify what we are committed to do to move closer to that vision. It is

essential for agencies, groups of agencies, organizations and systems that plan and deliver services to children who witness family violence to have a cohesive vision of the future and a roadmap to move toward that vision. Recommendations from this Summit can serve as a foundation for both vision and mission statements.

2. Establish Multidisciplinary and Interagency Policy and Planning Arrangements.

All Summit work groups stressed the critical importance of establishing and maintaining policy planning and service delivery systems that are multidisciplinary and interagency. These systems should include representatives of public and private agencies, as well as business leaders, victim advocates, police officers, and private citizens.

3. Clarify roles, responsibilities and lines of communication among high level policy- and decision-makers.

Successful collaboration depends upon clarifying the authority and responsibilities of all high level policy- and decision-makers, both at agency and individual staff levels. Agency missions, organizational structures, job descriptions and policies regarding decisionmaking and information-sharing must be carefully defined to provide a basis for effective communication and ongoing cooperation in the effort to reduce family violence and its impacts.

4. Promote consistency in decisionmaking policies, procedures and criteria.

Decision-makers must develop a common language and consistent criteria for making choices about victims and perpetrators of family violence. Choices ranging from arrest to referrals will benefit from collaborative, community-based planning. Clarified statutes, policies and procedures will enhance consistency.

5. Nurture community involvement and empowerment in strategy development.

To reduce family violence and its impacts on children, key players in local communities must be involved in developing and implementing prevention strategies. With the ongoing participation of grassroots community activists, church groups, youth groups and other key players, a community can work toward

long-term solutions rather than invest in simplistic quick fixes to this complex social problem. Locally-based policymaking can also be more culturally sensitive and consider differences between urban and rural jurisdictions.

6. Pool monetary and other resources to accomplish shared goals.

Collaborative planning and policy development will present an opportunity to look beyond the confines of agency budgets and to develop strategies to make optimal use of all available resources. Since resources are not likely to ever be sufficient to fully meet identified needs, prevention and intervention goals are most likely to be attained through comprehensive interagency resource allocation. Directors of victim advocate agencies, judges, prosecutors, police chiefs, hospital administrators, and the heads of community service organizations can work together to plan resource sharing.

7. Integrate family violence victims and witnesses databases.

To eliminate duplication of information-gathering and assessment functions, and to promote consistency of responses to victims, agencies should integrate information systems and share appropriate information about clients in a way that doesn't compromise victim safety. This requires that protocols for screening and assessment of children who witness family violence, and their families, be *comprehensive* in scope and *consistent* in format across agencies. Protocols for access to such systems must balance privacy and confidentiality considerations with system efficiency and response goals.

8. Consolidate and share knowledge on critical issues and effective practices.

Mechanisms should be established to enable policymakers and practitioners to share information on the incidence and nature of family violence and its impacts on children, as well as on effective prevention and intervention approaches. Model public education and professional training curricula should also be widely disseminated.

Clarify and Unify Statutes, Policies and Protocols

9. Redefine child abuse to include witnessing family violence.

To raise public and professional awareness of the traumatic impacts of exposure to family violence on children, child abuse should be redefined to include witnessing family violence. It is important to clarify that the perpetrator of domestic or family violence alone, is the abuser of child witnesses.

10. Develop guidelines to encourage appropriate and consistent responses to family violence incidents where children are present.

It is essential that agencies called to respond to family violence incidents be consistent in their treatment of child witnesses, particularly first responding police officers to 911 calls. Consistency of policies, procedures and intervention approaches should grow out of locally-based collaborative planning across traditional agency boundaries. National guidelines can suggest general intervention approaches based on knowledge of effective practices, while leaving room for local creativity and fine-tuning.

11. Preserve the family by placing children with the non-abusive parent.

To serve the best interest of children, most child welfare agencies are committed to supporting and enabling family preservation. Children who witness family violence should not be further traumatized by unnecessarily removing them from non-offending parents. Domestic violence advocates recommend that, when possible, the offending parent be removed from the home. When not possible, the battered partner and children should be placed together in a safe environment. Substitute care should be utilized only as a last resort, when the non-offending parent is unable or unwilling to care for the children.

12. Establish national guidelines for reporting children who witness family violence incidents.

Mandatory or other guidelines for reporting of children who witness family violence is needed. Policy makers must be aware that the practice could have unintended negative consequences. In particular, it might reduce the willingness of victims and child witnesses to disclose family violence information to health care, school

and social service personnel. The Family Violence Prevention Fund has developed a prototype state statute that outlines a "permissive" or voluntary reporting standard that could serve as a model for developing reporting policies for children who witness family violence.

- 13. Prohibit consideration of victims' battering for their health, disability or life insurance eligibility.**

Neither battered victims of family violence nor child witnesses should be denied insurance coverage solely because of their status as abused or formerly victimized persons. Federal and state statutes should prohibit this form of discrimination.

Augment Training of Service Providers

- 14. Ensure that police and family violence professionals receive comprehensive training to identify, assess and refer children who witness family violence.**

Professionals who should be trained include all first responders — law enforcement, fire department and EMT workers; religious leaders; teachers and other school personnel; child care workers; health care providers; social service providers — mental health, pastoral care, substance abuse, domestic violence, child welfare and public assistance workers and volunteers; prosecutors; defense attorneys; and judges. Training should be tailored to local contexts, taking into account community values and available resources.

- 15. Ensure that first responders receive training in empathy, child development issues and interpersonal and support skills.**

A supportive response increases the likelihood that victims and children will be willing to talk openly to first responders. Training in empathy, and interpersonal and support skills is crucial.

- 16. Foster interagency, multi-disciplinary training.**

To implement consistent policies and practices, to foster mutual trust and respect, and to establish ongoing communication, professionals from various agencies should collaboratively design and utilize training opportunities. New Haven's Child Development – Community Policing program is a promising example of cross-

disciplinary training designed to promote effective intervention in family violence by teams of community policing officers and mental health professionals.

17. Continually update pre-service, in-service, and continuing education curricula.

Because knowledge about family violence and its impacts on child witnesses is continually expanding, training of professionals and volunteers who work with them must be continuous and constantly updated.

Enhance Public Awareness

18. Focus attention on the traumatic impact of family violence on children who witness and the long-range implications for public safety.

The importance of heightening public awareness of the seriousness of this problem is often overlooked. Citizens are more likely to be motivated to take positive actions to reduce family violence and intervene with victims if they understand the link between family violence and community well-being.

19. Ensure that information provided to the public is credible, consistent, understandable and culturally relevant.

Facts about family violence and its impacts on children should be clearly and accurately presented. The format and timing of messages should be tailored to target audiences and local contexts. Agencies should coordinate public information efforts to maximize cost-effectiveness.

20. Reassure children and youth that they are not to blame for violence in their families and that support is available from a variety of sources.

Employ age-appropriate media. Messages for children can be communicated via comic books, cereal boxes, television advertising during children's programming, posters in schools, and palm cards. Children inherently attribute family unhappiness to aspects of themselves that adults have described as mad or misbehaving. Children often blame themselves for divorce, parental strife and sibling unhappiness.

- 21. Encourage hospitals and health care providers to supply information about children who witness family violence at health fairs, at public forums and through other public education opportunities.**

Health care professionals should use their credibility and influence with community members to promote awareness of and responsiveness to the issues of family violence and children's exposure to it.

- 22. Ensure that law enforcement and justice system professionals maximize opportunities to speak out about the impacts of family violence on children.**

Police officers, prosecutors and judges make presentations to schools, community groups and business associations on a variety of topics. They can help direct public attention and galvanize community action on issues of family violence and its traumatic impacts on child witnesses.

- 23. Urge the media to provide thoughtful and accurate news coverage, as well as public service and educational messages.**

Policymakers and practitioners who work with family violence victims must educate members of the media who report on these incidents. The media (TV, newspapers, and radio) should be discouraged from sensationalizing or exploiting family violence incidents, and encouraged to protect the privacy and dignity of all victims, particularly child witnesses.

Improve Performance Measurement and Outcome Evaluation

- 24. Compile baseline information on the rates of children who witness family violence.**

To determine whether prevention and intervention efforts are reducing incidence of children who witness family violence, the current baseline incidence must be documented by each community, county and/or state. This will require standardization of reporting protocols by law enforcement and other first responders.

25. Design agency information systems to support both case management and program evaluation.

Information systems should be designed to provide case managers with essential information on individual clients and families and to provide data for program outcome measurement.

26. Ensure that performance measures focus on outcomes, not simply on program activity levels.

It is not enough to document the volume of families or child witnesses served, or the number of activities performed with or for them. It is essential for agencies to define programs in *measurable outcome terms* and document the extent to which intended impacts are achieved.

27. Ensure that performance measures are culturally-sensitive.

Outcome measures should be developed, reviewed and approved by a team of individuals representative of the cultural-ethnic backgrounds of the target populations.

28. Design performance measures to reveal positive definitions of success as well as reductions in negative outcomes.

It is certainly desirable to measure reductions in the incidence of children who witness family violence. Many other outcomes of prevention and intervention strategies can and should be measured, such as increases in stability of families, enhanced quality of interactions between parent and child, and/or increased availability of social support resources for parents and children.

29. Distinguish between short-term objectives and long-range goals when designing program monitoring and evaluation strategies.

It may take a relatively long time in some communities to achieve a significant reduction in family violence, and thus a reduction in the incidence of children who witness it. Accordingly, it is important to define shorter-range *interim indicators* to permit a community or jurisdiction to assess whether it is moving in desired directions.

30. Undertake research to document the impacts of witnessing family violence on children and youth.

Although some excellent research has already been conducted in this area, many unanswered questions remain. It is particularly important to *separately* document the impacts on children who witness violence in the media, in their communities, and in their families. Enhanced understanding of the full range of risk and protective factors that affect children of violent families will contribute to development of more effective prevention and intervention strategies.

31. Establish and maintain collaborative links between practitioners and researchers to ensure that evaluations are user-friendly.

Researchers should work closely with practitioners to ensure that research designs and analyses of information are understandable and provide useful information useful for policy and practice.

Prevention and Intervention Recommendations

To expand the continuum of effective services community organizations and public agencies are urged to:

1. Strengthen the family through an array of programs that include:

- ***Comprehensive prenatal care for expectant mothers***, to help ensure healthy babies and support women to become competent, nurturing parents.
- ***Home visitation for new parents***, to enable public health nurses early interventionists or public health trainers, to assess family violence risk factors and initiate long-term supportive services for high-risk families.
- ***Parenting skills training***, which can be offered in many settings, including schools, community-based family resource centers, and health care facilities.
- ***Family skills training***, to enhance interpersonal communication, conflict resolution and time management skills. This “family coaching” can be particularly effective when offered to families in their homes.

2. Prepare children and youth to deal with the violence in the outside world and give them the skills to solve conflicts constructively. Schools should provide:

- **Conflict resolution education** through such methods as
 - a process curriculum approach, in which “the principles and processes of conflict resolution are offered as a distinct lesson or course”³²
 - peer mediation, wherein trained youth work with their peers to resolve conflicts
 - peaceable classroom and peaceable school approaches in which conflict resolution principles are incorporated into core subjects, classroom management strategies, and school policies and practices.
- **Life skills curricula** which focus on topics such as violence prevention, parenting skills, and abusive dating relationships.
- **Cooperative learning approaches** that empower children and youth through peer leadership and collaboration.
- **Parent education offerings** on topics such as the impacts of family conflict and domestic violence on children, conflict resolution and parenting skills.

3. Ensure that schools and other community-based agencies provide:

- **information to parents and children** regarding available support and services for victims and witnesses of family violence
- **curriculum offerings for children** that teach coping skills and safety planning
- **safe environments** in which children and youth can talk about concerns and fears regarding family violence and/or abusive dating relationships, and be reassured that they are not to blame if they are a victim or witness
- **referral to appropriate child protective, justice system and/or treatment resources** for child witnesses and victims

- **ongoing monitoring and support** for child witnesses and family victims.

4. Revamp law enforcement's approach to domestic violence calls that involve children who have been witnesses to violence.

Even with current sensitivities to the issue of domestic violence, police responding to 911 calls still do not have sufficient protocols and policies to deal with the children present at these calls. Using a "victim response continuum" model, police must be clear on their mandate to assist the children who witness, providing instant support from officers at the scene, but also setting in motion a series of follow up actions and visits by professionals in the field of victim services and children's services.

5. Offer safe haven for children of high-conflict or violent families in respite day care centers and "relief nurseries," as well as supportive services to battered parents.

Such centers can provide a variety of family strengthening and preservation services, including therapeutic interventions for children, parent education and counseling, and crisis response.

6. Make shelters and affordable housing available for battered parents and their children.

Children who witness domestic violence should not be further traumatized by separation from their non-battering parent. All victims and witnesses of family violence should have access to safe emergency housing, including transportation to safe locations as needed.

7. Develop screening protocols for children to enable first responders, including shelter workers, to make appropriate referrals to health care, support groups, and other treatment options.

Since all children entering shelters with battered parents have at least witnessed family violence, and perhaps were targets themselves, shelters should systematically assess their needs, and either provide or refer them to appropriate support and intervention services.

- 8. Arrange for health care screening to identify and refer victims and child witnesses of family violence to appropriate education, treatment and justice system resources.**

Health care providers are often the first to notice evidence of family violence, and are thus in a position to ensure that appropriate interventions occur as early as possible, to minimize both physical and emotional damage.

- 9. Organize multidisciplinary teams to provide specialized mental health and treatment services for appropriate children as needed.**

Although not all children who witness domestic violence will require intensive, long-term psychotherapy, assessment systems should identify those for whom specialized treatments are appropriate. Both assessment and treatment services should be provided through multidisciplinary teams of specialists drawn from a wide range of agencies and service providers.

- 10. Make follow-up and support services for victims and child witnesses of family violence available on a continuing basis.**

Because the impacts of witnessing family violence are not always immediately apparent, many child witnesses of family violence will continue to require supportive and educational services long after their immediate needs for safe haven and crisis intervention are met.

- 11. Provide therapeutic and educational interventions to adults who witnessed family violence as children, especially those who are parenting, are substance abusers, and/or correctional supervision.**

Many adults who witnessed family violence as children did not receive appropriate or adequate support or services at the time. Since the negative impacts of witnessing family violence can be pervasive and long-lasting for many victims, it is essential that they have access to appropriate treatment and interventions throughout their lifetime. Adults who are substance abusers and/or who are under correctional supervision (in prison and on probation or parole) are particularly likely to have been witnesses to family violence as children.

- 12. Create community-based prevention and intervention initiatives that are coordinated across agencies and settings, and sustained over time.**

Community-based programs need to be available through a variety of organizations including churches, schools, and social service agencies in order to ensure that prevention education and strategies are made available to anyone in need of such initiatives.

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Law Enforcement Action Agenda

Every agency, service provider and community group that touches the lives of children who witness family violence can help to implement and actualize Summit Recommendations. Law enforcement agencies can and must play a central role to break the cycle of family violence. Police leaders and law enforcement officers should:

- 1. Prioritize the issue of children who witness family violence at the top of the community policing agenda by convening local summit meetings and speaking out about the impacts of family violence on children.**
- 2. Position domestic violence and children who witness issues at the center of the problem-solving agenda.**
- 3. Ensure rapid response to children who witness family violence and support from responding officers.**
- 4. Exert leadership by bringing key players, including elected officials, agency administrators and community activists, to the strategy-making table.**
- 5. Encourage the media to provide thoughtful news coverage and accurate information about family violence.**
- 6. Participate in public education and outreach efforts that seek to prevent family violence by strengthening families and communities.**
- 7. Collaborate in the development of comprehensive and coordinated assessment and referral protocols to be used by all first responders to family violence incidents.**
- 8. Develop consistent incident reporting and recordkeeping systems that facilitate sharing information about victims and witnesses of family violence with all decisionmakers and service providers.**
- 9. Participate in compiling baseline information on the rates of children who witness family violence.**

10. **Ensure that police officers receive pre-service and continuing training in assessment, support and referral of children who witness family violence.**
11. **Organize and participate in opportunities for interagency, multidisciplinary training.**
12. **Support objective evaluations of the outcomes of prevention and intervention activities in which they participate.**
13. **Help to advocate for resources for a full continuum of effective family violence prevention initiatives and intervention services.**

One of the most basic rationales for police to protection and intervene on behalf of children who witness is that these children are at higher risk for gang association, drug use, partner violence and other crimes. Allowing children to continue to witness violence has a multi-level impact on jurisdictional crime. Protecting and intervening on behalf of these children will more than likely prevent future crimes from being committed.

Many law enforcement agencies, through grants and program support from the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS), have already embraced the philosophy and methods of community policing, which seeks to engage the public in enhancing its own safety while also more clearly defining the role of police officers in protecting and empowering citizens. By encouraging localized, collaborative responses to the problem of children who witness family violence, law enforcement agencies can continue the transaction of community policing and contribute significantly to the safety and health of the communities they serve.

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Endnotes

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