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PREVALENCE OF PARENTAL ALIENATION

In epidemiology, *prevalence* refers to the number of cases presently existing in given population at any particular time. In contrast, *incidence* refers to the number of new cases of any condition that develop in a given population during a particular period of time. It is possible to estimate both the prevalence of PA (i.e., the mental condition experienced by the child) and the prevalence of ABs (i.e., the activities of the alienating parent to undermine the child's relationship with the other parent). The prevalence of PA among children and adolescents in the U.S. can be roughly estimated considering the following three factors.

First, consider the percentage of children under the age of 18 who live with separated or divorced parents. The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that about 12 percent of individuals less than 18 years old live with only one of their biological parents.¹ For most affected individuals, that is due to parental separation or divorce, although a smaller number of cases are related to death of one of the parents.

Second, approximately 23 percent of separated or divorced parents can be considered high conflict, based on the extensive research of E. Mavis Hetherington and John Kelly since the 1970s in the Virginia Longitudinal Study of Divorce and Remarriage. They commented, "As obviously destructive as conflict is to all involved in this dilemma, it was surprising to discover that six years after divorce, 20 to 25 percent of our couples were engaged in just such conflictual behavior; former spouses would make nasty comments about each other, seek to undermine each other's relationship with the child, and fight openly in front of the child."² Also, Garrity and Baris estimated that a "quarter of all divorced parents ... remain locked in a bitter struggle that is likely to last throughout the children's formative years."³

Third, among high-conflict cases of separation or divorce, approximately 20% involve some degree of PA. That estimate is based on the following studies:

- In 1998, Kopetski reported that PA occurred in 20% of the 413 families evaluated by The Family and Children's Evaluation Team between 1976 and 1990.⁴
- In 2001, Berns reported on a study of divorce judgments from 1995 to 2000 in Brisbane, Australia, where PA was found to be present in 29 percent of reviewed cases.⁵
- In 2007, Baker surveyed mental health professionals who conducted custody evaluations. When asked how frequently they identified PAS in their cases, the responses ranged widely from zero percent to 55 percent; the average rate for all respondents was 11.2 percent.⁶
- In 2009 Bow and his colleagues surveyed mental health and legal professionals who were experienced with PA. They said, "When respondents were asked [in] what

percentage of child custody cases was parental alienation an issue, the mean reported was 26%”⁷

Multiplying these three factors together (0.12 x 0.23 x 0.20) gives a prevalence of about 0.5 percent of all children in U.S. having some degree of PA. There are about 74 million children, so that comes to about 370,000 children and adolescents experiencing PA. For comparison purposes, the prevalence of PA is greater than the prevalence of autism spectrum disorders among children and adolescents in the U.S.⁸

PREVALENCE OF ALIENATING BEHAVIORS

The reader should be aware that ABs are much more common than PA; most children exposed to ABs do not develop PA. Clawar and Rivlin studied “brainwashing” and “programming”—their terms for ABs—in a large sample of 1,000 child custody evaluations. They referred to “the pervasiveness of programming-and-brainwashing in marital separations, divorces, custody conflicts,” and similar circumstances.⁹ They found that in about 86% of the 1,000 cases, there was some element of parental programming in an effort to implant false and negative ideas about the other parent, with the intention of turning the child against that other parent.¹⁰ Their work focused on programming and persistent brainwashing, which sometimes resulted in severe PA.

Harman, Leder-Elder, and Birigen conducted a telephone survey of 610 adults in North Carolina. The interviewer provided a definition of ABs and asked whether the respondent was aware of the term “parental alienation.” Almost 69 percent of the respondents said they knew someone who had experienced ABs. Furthermore, 13.4 percent of the parents in the poll reported being alienated from their own children. The authors estimated that more than 22,000,000 adults in the U.S. “are currently being alienated from their children by the other parent.”¹¹

A recent collaborative study between the Vincent J. Fontana Center for Child Protection and New York University revealed that about 28% of adults in a community sample (i.e., not selected because of a precondition related to divorce or custody) reported that when they were children one parent tried to turn them against the other. These data are striking in that a significant portion of the sample was probably raised in an intact family. Not surprisingly, the proportion that reported that they had been exposed to ABs was higher in the subsample of individuals who had been raised by a stepparent, at 44%.¹²

¹ U.S. Census Bureau, *Living Arrangements of Children under 18 Years and Marital Status of Parents: 2016*, AMERICA’S FAMILIES AND LIVING ARRANGEMENTS: 2016 Table C3, <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2016/demo/families/cps-2016.html> (last visited May 13, 2019).

² E. MAVIS HETHERINGTON & JOHN KELLY, FOR BETTER OR FOR WORSE: DIVORCE RECONSIDERED 138 (2002).

³ CARLA B. GARRITY & MITCHELL A. BARIS, CAUGHT IN THE MIDDLE: PROTECTING THE CHILDREN OF HIGH-CONFLICT DIVORCE 28 (1994).

⁴ Leona M. Kopetski, Deirdre Conway Rand & Randy Rand, *Incidence, Gender, and False Allegations of Child Abuse: Data on 84 Parental Alienation Syndrome Cases*, in THE INTERNATIONAL HANDBOOK OF PARENTAL ALIENATION SYNDROME: CONCEPTUAL, CLINICAL AND LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS 65, 66 (Richard A. Gardner et al. eds., 2006).

⁵ Sandra Spelman Berns, *Parents Behaving Badly: Parental Alienation Syndrome in the Family Court – Magic Bullet or Poisoned Chalice*, 15 AUSTL. J. FAM. L. 191, 199 (2001).

⁶ Amy J.L. Baker, *Knowledge and Attitudes About the Parental Alienation Syndrome: A Survey of Custody Evaluators*, 35 AM. J. FAM. THERAPY 1, 9 (2007).

⁷ James N. Bow, Jonathan W. Gould & James R. Flens, *Examining Parental Alienation in Child Custody Cases: A Survey of Mental Health and Legal Professionals*, 37 AM. J. FAM. THERAPY 127, 134 (2009).

⁸ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Data & Statistics on Autism Spectrum Disorder*, AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER, <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/data.html> (last visited Dec. 14, 2018).

⁹ Clawar & Rivlin, *supra* note 19, at 401.

¹⁰ *Id.* at 420.

¹¹ Jennifer J. Harman, Sadie Leder-Elder & Zeynep Birigen, *Prevalence of Parental Alienation Drawn from a Representative Poll*, 66 CHILD. & YOUTH SERV. REV. 62–66 (2016).

¹² Amy J.L. Baker, *Adult Recall of Parental Alienation in a Community Sample: Prevalence and Associations with Psychological Maltreatment*, 51 J. DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE 16 (2010).