

Who are these parents involved in child neglect? A differential analysis by parent gender and family structure

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Abstract

Studies about fathers and child neglect are scarce. Current research, which tends to focus on mothers, does not allow to fully understand the influence of all parental figures on child protection. This research aims to compare socio-demographic characteristics and personal problems of mothers to those of fathers in 1266 neglecting families. The data, from the *Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect — 2003*, was collected by workers in a representative sample of 63 child welfare service areas. The findings suggest that parental situations vary greatly according to gender and family structures. Mothers (biological and surrogates) face more issues than fathers (biological and surrogates). For example, they face more mental health issues. Biological mothers are in worse position than surrogate mothers but, inversely, surrogate fathers are in worse position than biological fathers. Parental characteristics and problems also differ according to family structures but the way those issues affect mothers could explain most of those differences. Overall, single female-headed families seem particularly vulnerable and fathers present better socio-demographic characteristics and struggle with less personal problems than mothers. Implications for research and action with mothers and fathers will be discussed.

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1. Introduction

Neglect is a form of child maltreatment that does not involve an assault but instead stems from a failure to provide the care required. It can be defined as persistent failure to meet a child's basic physical, intellectual or emotional needs (Dubowitz, Black, Starr, & Zuravin, 1993) by not assuming parenting tasks and responsibilities (Minty & Pattinson, 1994).

Child neglect comes with significant social costs (Blanchard, Bouchard, H  lie, & Mayer, 2002). Paradoxically, although neglect is the most common form of maltreatment and continues to increase in Canada (Trocm   et al., 2005), it is one of the least studied (Behl, Conyngham, & May, 2003) and one for which the effectiveness of intervention is the least firmly established (Dufour & Chamberland, 2004). Differential research based on the sex of the parents involved in situations of neglect would facilitate the development of more effective intervention strategies, but research of this kind is virtually nonexistent. The *Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect* (Trocm   et al., 2005) provides original data that can be used to explore this aspect of neglect.

2. Problem Definition

Research into the differences between fathers and mothers has essentially been limited to Caucasian, middle-class, two-parent families with no particular problems, to the detriment of adults playing the role of parents in families grappling with major issues (Dufour & Bouchard, 2003; Lane, 2002; Marshall, English, & Stewart, 2001). Aside from research into sexual abuse, child maltreatment is no exception in this respect (Dubowitz, Black, Kerr, Starr, & Harrington, 2000; Lamb, 2001; Lane, 2002; Marshall et al., 2001; Muller & Diamond, 1999; National Research Council, 1993; Pittman & Buckley, 2005; Ryan & Little, 2000). Fathers in maltreating families are often identified as perpetrators, but in reality, very little is known about them (Sternberg, 1997). Despite the fact that some progress has been made over the last decade, "a significant gap persists concerning knowledge of fathers' roles in child maltreatment" (Dubowitz, 2006, p. 461).

The scientific literature tells us that men are more likely to abuse children sexually, that women are more likely to be deemed responsible for the protection of children and that physical violence within the family is just as likely to be perpetrated by men as by women (May-Chahal, 2006). Neglect appears primarily to affect single-parent families headed by women who are socially isolated and struggling with a variety of social and health problems (Crittenden, 1999; Garbarino & Collins, 1999; Gaudin, 1993; Jones & McCurdy, 1992; Swift, 1995). Lachar  t   (2001) and Radhakrishna, Bou-Saada, Hunter, Catellier, and Kotch (2001) have argued, however, that men are in fact much more present in neglectful families than past research suggests. In support of this view, Mayer, Dufour, Lavergne, Girard, and Trocm   (2006) have recently established that fathers, whether biological or surrogate, are present in the vast majority of situations of neglect. In Canada, in 2003, biological mothers were identified as the perpetrators in 83% of situations of neglect, yet men contributed in a significant fashion: 36% of the identified perpetrators were biological fathers, while 9% were male common-law spouses or step-fathers (Trocm   et al., 2005).

Studies suggest that the presence of a man in the family increases the risks of neglect and other forms of maltreatment. The presence of *biological* fathers, for instance, in the company of "at-risk" teenage mothers appears to increase the risks rather than reduce them (Bolton & Belsky, 1986). Similarly, the presence of *surrogate* fathers in the company of children also appears to

increase the risks of maltreatment (see reviews by [Daly & Wilson, 1996, 1999](#)). In a study by [Radhakrishna et al. \(2001\)](#), children living with a surrogate father were twice as likely to be reported for abuse or neglect as those living with their two biological parents or as those living only with their mothers. According to [Coohey and Zhang \(2006\)](#), the characteristics of the mother's partner play a crucial role in the recurrence of supervisory neglect. The families in which this form of neglect is most likely to occur are those in which, aside from the fact that no one recognizes the problem or takes responsibility for it, the mother's partner is not the biological father of all the children, or is battling serious mental health or substance abuse problems. According to a recent study by [Ethier, Couture, and Lacharité \(2004\)](#), chronically neglectful or abusive families are frequently two-parent families, as families that have solved their abuse or neglect problems tend to be headed by single mothers.

At the same time, other studies suggest that the support provided by surrogate fathers can have a protective effect. The support given by the male partner to the maltreating mother, or to the mother who is at risk of maltreating, seems to reduce the risks of the occurrence of maltreatment ([Biller & Solomon, 1986](#); [Egeland, Jacobitz, & Sroufe, 1988](#); [Turcotte, Dubeau, Bolté, & Paquette, 2001](#)). In [Coohey \(1995\)](#), the partners of mothers struggling with neglect provided less instrumental support, such as child care, but just as much emotional support as the partners of the control group. However, these women do not always perceive their partner's support as being helpful ([Dubowitz, 1999](#); [Lacharité & Robidoux, 1996](#); [Polansky, Chalmers, Bittenwieser, & Williams, 1981](#)).

As can be seen, little is known about fathers involved in situations of neglect. There appear to be two reasons for this. First, mothers have traditionally been regarded as the primary care-givers for children, with fathers seen as secondary parents ([Allen & Epperson, 1993](#); [Dulac, 2001](#); [Muller & Diamond, 1999](#); [Sternberg, 1997](#); [Swift, 1995](#); [Taylor & Daniel, 2000](#)); and second, methodological considerations such as recruitment problems would seem to explain, at least in part, the absence of fathers from what research has been done ([Finkelhor, Hotaling, & Yllö, 1988](#); [Guille, 2004](#); [Lamb, 2001](#); [National Research Council, 1993](#); [Sternberg, 1997](#)).

The resulting distorted perspective makes it more difficult to understand the phenomenon, however ([Nobes & Smith, 2000](#)): research into the characteristics of *all* parental figures in maltreating families is absolutely essential ([Ryan & Little, 2000](#)). An ecological interpretation of the phenomenon (see [Belsky, 1980, 1993](#); [Prilleltensky, Nelson, & Peirson, 2001](#)) is impossible without a sound understanding of the place of the father ([Bolton & Belsky, 1986](#); [Dubowitz et al., 2000](#); [Muller & Diamond, 1999](#)) and the mother. As noted by [Allen and Epperson \(1993, p. 548\)](#): “unique characteristics differentiate female-perpetrated from male-perpetrated child neglect, characteristics that could be incorporated into more refined theoretical formulations and used to enhance the effectiveness of treatment and preventive programs.” Although biological and surrogate fathers have a strong influence on the quality of care and protection afforded to children, intervention with them is marginal, ill adapted to their reality and subject to all kinds of stereotypes and prejudices ([Dulac, 2001](#); [Leashore, 1997](#); [Taylor & Daniel, 2000](#)). Yet ensuring children's well-being and safety requires a better understanding of the problems experienced by fathers as well as those faced by mothers.

3. Research objectives

Our research had the following objectives: (1) describe the different family structures characteristic of families grappling with neglect in order to distinguish the place of mothers *and* fathers in these families; (2) compare socio-demographic characteristics and personal problems

between the fathers and mothers in these different family structures (*intergender differences*); and (3) compare socio-demographic characteristics and personal problems between fathers (both biological and surrogate) and between mothers (biological and surrogate) (*intragender differences*).

4. Method

4.1. Sample

The data we used are taken from the *Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect — 2003* (CIS) (Trocmé et al., 2005), which documents 11,562 child maltreatment investigations, between October 1 and December 31, 2003, using a representative sample of 63 child welfare service areas (CWSAs). This representative sample was selected by means of a four-stage stratified cluster sampling process, which provided in particular for the selection of at least one CWSA in each province or territory (except for Quebec),¹ as well as a certain number of other CWSAs according to the proportion of Canadian children that come under the jurisdiction of the provinces and territories.²

The sample for our study was constituted by randomly selecting one child per family among the 2077 children whose situations of neglect were substantiated, whether or not there was co-occurrence with other forms of maltreatment, for a total of 1266 neglectful families in the study (first research objective). The mean number of children per family was two (standard deviation=1.13). The mean age of the children was 7 (range 0–15 years, SD=5.10). The mothers and fathers were generally in their thirties (mode=31–40 years). Most of the parents were Caucasian (64% of mothers and 71% of fathers); the next largest group was Aboriginals (26% of mothers and 19% of fathers), followed by other ethnocultural groups (11% of mothers and 11% of fathers). Close to 15% of the families were living in unsafe housing conditions, and 11% were living in overcrowded dwellings. To meet the second and third objectives of the study, we selected all the 1110 two- or single-parent families from among the 1266 neglectful families, that is, 1037 mothers and 558 fathers (which meant excluding the 156 families classified as belonging to other family structures).

4.2. Data collection instrument and procedure

The form used in *CIS-2003* was an improved version of the one used for *CIS-1998* (Trocmé et al., 2001), the first edition of this vast pan-Canadian survey. It is based largely on other instruments from similar surveys, such as the *Ontario Incidence Study* (Trocmé, McPhee, Kwan Tam, & Hay, 1994) and the *National Incidence Study* (Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996) in the United States. The form contains some fifty questions on the characteristics of the report, the reported child, the child's living environment, parental figures, the maltreatment the child has suffered and, lastly, any decisions made as a result of the assessment. Only some of this information was used in our study. After receiving training, the child welfare workers had to complete the form at the very end of the assessment of each report accepted for investigation. To help them fill out the form, the workers also had the use of a guide book and could avail

¹ Since Quebec has adopted a different sampling and collection procedure, Quebec data are not included in this study.

² Readers who wish to find out more about the four stages of the sampling process should consult Trocmé et al. (2005).

themselves of the help of a research officer assigned to their child welfare services agency. The completion rate was greater than 99% for all the questions on the form. The mean participation rate was estimated to be 93%.

4.3. Definition of variables

4.3.1. Situations of neglect

Situations of substantiated neglect include failure to supervise leading to physical harm or sexual abuse, a permissive attitude toward criminal behavior, physical neglect, medical neglect, failure to obtain treatment for a psychological condition, abandonment, and educational neglect. Clinical definitions of these various forms of neglect were provided to social workers in the guide book.

4.3.2. Family structures

Family structures may be defined on the basis of two criteria. First, through identification of the adults playing the role of parents and residing with the neglected child, that is, the adult or adults whose role is to provide the daily, continuous care required for a child's physical, social, cognitive, and emotional development. The quality of care is not taken into consideration in this analysis, however. The second criterion is whether or not a biological parent is present in the life of the child but does not reside with the child. Thus:

- A *two-parent family* is considered to be *intact* if it consists of two biological or adoptive parents who live with the child.
- A *two-parent family* is considered to be *blended* if it includes a biological or adoptive parent living with the child as well as a partner of the other sex who is residing with them. A blended family is said to be *with nonresident biological parent* if that adult is present in the life of the child, and *with absent biological parent* in the other cases.
- A *family* is considered to be a *single-parent family* if it includes a biological or adoptive parent who alone plays the role of parent residing with the child. A single-parent family is said to be *with nonresident biological parent* if that adult is present in the child's life, and *with absent biological parent* in the other cases.
- *Other family structures* include foster families, same-sex couples, families with one biological parent and one adult other than the biological parent's partner, and families in which one or two adults other than the biological parents play the roles of parents.

It should be noted that the family structure definitions reflect the situations observed when the data were collected. They do not take into consideration the length of the spousal relationship, the quality of the relationship, or the possible existence of lovers who visit the single parents but do not reside with them.

4.3.3. Socio-demographic characteristics of parents

The socio-demographic characteristics of the parents are the young age of the parent (21 or younger at the time of the study), the low level of education (parent has not graduated from high school) and exclusion from the job market (parent does not earn any employment income).

4.3.4. Personal problems of parents

The social workers had to identify, from a list of possible problems (see Table 1), those with which the parents were struggling. These problems could be "substantiated," that is, diagnosed,

Table 1

Socio-demographic characteristics and personal problems of fathers and mothers (biological or surrogate) (percentage and number, $n = 1595$)

	Fathers $n = 558^a$	Mothers $n = 1037^b$	Chi-square
Young parents	2% (11)	8% (79)	21.378***
Little education	56% (100)	63% (286)	3.226 <i>ns</i>
No employment income	30% (149)	59% (555)	113.284***
Alcohol abuse	36% (202)	34% (355)	0.618 <i>ns</i>
Substance abuse	28% (157)	29% (305)	0.287 <i>ns</i>
Criminal activity	23% (126)	15% (155)	14.566***
Cognitive impairment	13% (74)	17% (176)	3.779*
Mental health issues	20% (114)	38% (390)	49.532***
Physical health issues	13% (71)	14% (146)	0.567 <i>ns</i>
Few social supports	41% (229)	51% (529)	14.469***
Maltreated as a child	21% (115)	34% (353)	31.567***
Victim of domestic violence	11% (63)	40% (413)	141.100***

ns = nonsignificant; * $p = .05$; ** $p = .001$.

^a Except for the variables (a) age: $n = 551$; (b) education: $n = 180$; and (c) employment: $n = 499$.

^b Except for the variables (a) age: $n = 1034$; (b) education: $n = 452$; and (c) employment: $n = 935$.

observed personally by the social worker or a colleague, or mentioned by the subject, or they could be “suspected” if the social worker believed his or her suspicions were sufficient to mention the problem in a written assessment of the household or in a summary of the case to be submitted to a colleague.

4.4. Analyses

Groups were compared by chi-square analysis and subsequently by post-hoc adjusted residual analysis when more than two groups were compared.

5. Results

Fig. 1 illustrates the absolute and relative proportions of the various family structures in situations of substantiated neglect (first objective). With the exception of “other” families, a solid-line box identifies structures in which there is a paternal presence, whether it be an adoptive, biological, or surrogate father, while a dotted-line box identifies structures in which there is no paternal presence. Almost half the families are single-parent families, while 38% are intact or blended two-parent families. The figure also illustrates the proportion of biological fathers who do not reside with their children but are nevertheless present in their lives. For example, in 35% of the single-parent families headed by a woman, the biological fathers are still present.

The following results concern the differences between parents living with children in two- and single-parent families (second objective).

Table 1 shows that, for all family structures taken together, mothers (biological or surrogate) are proportionally more likely to be grappling with various personal problems than are fathers (biological or surrogate), although the fathers are more likely than the mothers to be involved in criminal activity. Other analyses comparing fathers and mothers in various family structures (e.g., fathers or mothers of intact families, etc.) show the same trend, except for cognitive impairment, where the difference is no longer significant (results not presented here).

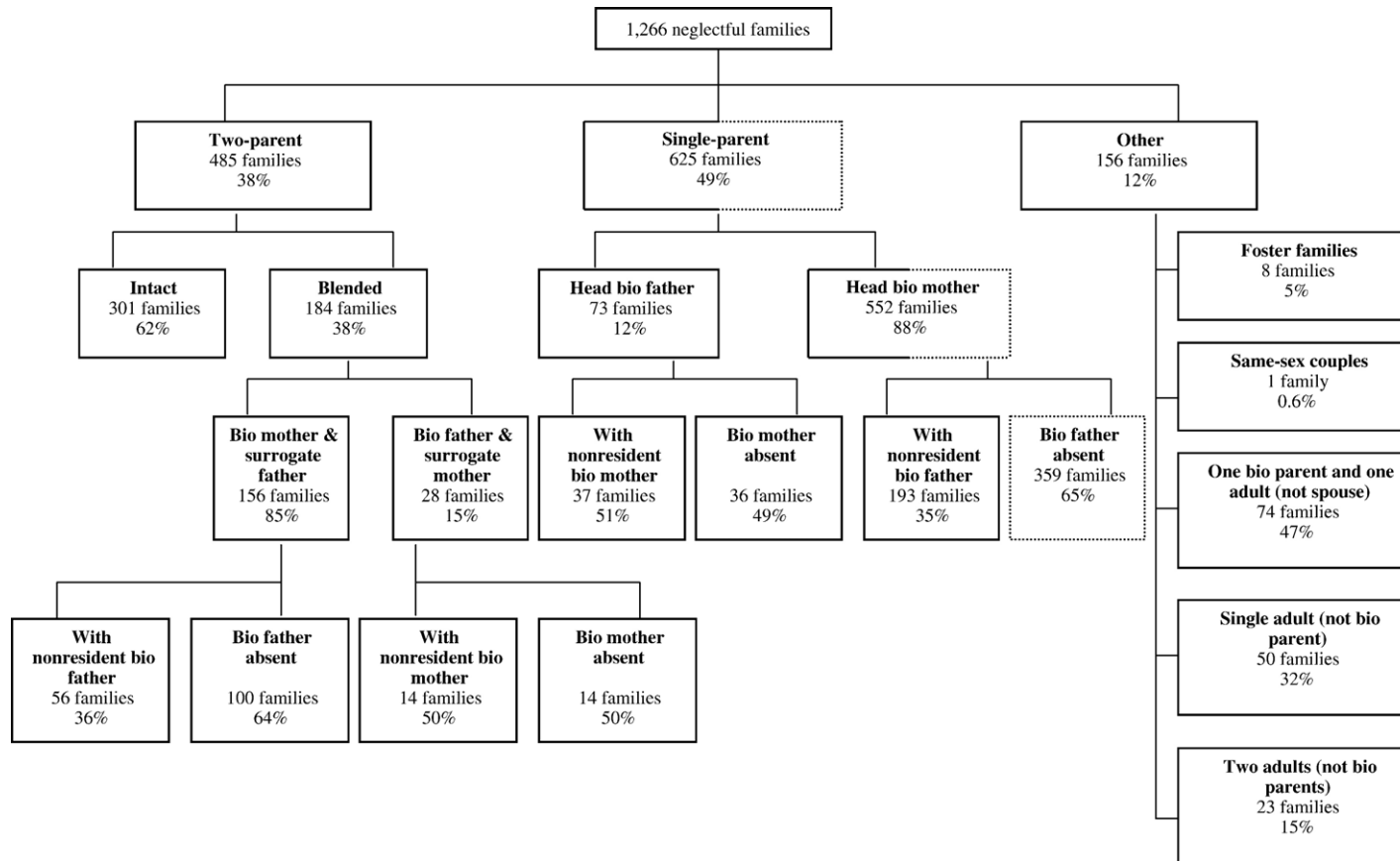


Fig. 1. Different types of family structures in which neglect is substantiated.

Table 2

Socio-demographic characteristics and personal problems of parents (biological or surrogate), by family structure (percentage and number, $n=1595$)

	Intact families $n=602$	Blended families $n=368$	Single-parent families (father only) $n=73$	Single-parent families (mother only) $n=552$	Chi-square
Young parents	5% (28)	2% ⁻ (8)	0% ⁻	10% ⁺ (54)	31.102***
Little education	53% ⁻ (114)	73% ⁺ (93)	47% (14)	63% (165)	16.497***
No employment income	42% ⁻ (224)	36% ⁻ (120)	42% (27)	66% ⁺ (333)	90.046***
Alcohol abuse	28% ⁻ (171)	39% (144)	37% (27)	39% ⁺ (215)	18.193***
Substance abuse	22% ⁻ (135)	33% (121)	37% (27)	32% ⁺ (179)	20.754***
Criminal activity	16% (98)	21% (76)	25% (18)	16% (89)	6.420 <i>ns</i>
Cognitive impairment	15% (87)	13% (49)	15% (11)	19% (103)	5.972 <i>ns</i>
Mental health issues	26% ⁻ (156)	28% (103)	25% (18)	41% ⁺ (227)	36.015***
Physical health issues	13% (80)	10% (38)	18% (13)	16% (86)	6.346 <i>ns</i>
Few social supports	44% ⁻ (267)	42% ⁻ (154)	52% (38)	54% ⁺ (299)	17.550***
Maltreated as a child	26% ⁻ (159)	25% (94)	25% (18)	36% ⁺ (197)	16.550***
Victim of domestic violence	20% ⁻ (123)	30% (110)	11% ⁻ (8)	43% ⁺ (235)	80.621***

⁺ = adjusted residual > 1.96; ⁻ = adjusted residual < -1.96.

ns = nonsignificant; *** $p=.001$.

The breakdowns of parents' socio-demographic characteristics and personal problems differ depending on family structure (see Table 2). Single-parent families headed by women have to cope with the most severe situations, whereas intact families are, on the whole, relatively better off. Tables 3 and 4 again show the breakdown of socio-demographic characteristics and personal problems by family structure, but this time controlling for parents' sex. Aside from the fact that the fathers of intact families are less likely to have problems with alcohol and substance abuse and

Table 3

Socio-demographic characteristics and personal problems of fathers (biological or surrogate), by family structure (percentage and number, $n=558$)

	Intact families $n=301$ fathers ^a	Blended families $n=184$ fathers ^b	Single-parent families (father only) $n=73$ fathers ^c	Chi-square
Young parents	2% (7)	2% (4)	0% (0)	1.721 <i>ns</i>
Little education	52% (49)	67% (37)	47% (14)	4.627 <i>ns</i>
No employment income	29% (79)	26% (43)	42% ⁺ (27)	5.828*
Alcohol abuse	32% ⁻ (95)	44% ⁻ (80)	37% (27)	7.044*
Substance abuse	23% ⁻ (70)	33% (60)	37% (27)	8.194*
Criminal activity	19% (58)	27% (50)	25% (18)	4.289 <i>ns</i>
Cognitive impairment	13% (39)	13% (24)	15% (11)	0.239 <i>ns</i>
Mental health issues	19% (56)	22% (40)	25% (18)	1.613 <i>ns</i>
Physical health issues	13% (40)	10% (18)	18% (13)	3.219 <i>ns</i>
Few social supports	40% (121)	38% (70)	52% (38)	4.431 <i>ns</i>
Maltreated as a child	21% (64)	18% (33)	25% (18)	1.614 <i>ns</i>
Victim of domestic violence	11% (33)	12% (22)	11% (8)	0.122 <i>ns</i>

⁺ = adjusted residual > 1.96; ⁻ = adjusted residual < -1.96.

ns = nonsignificant; * $p=.05$.

^a Except for the variables (a) age: $n=299$; (b) education: $n=95$; and (c) employment: $n=270$.

^b Except for the variables (a) age: $n=179$; (b) education: $n=55$; and (c) employment: $n=165$.

^c Except for the variables (a) education: $n=30$; and (b) employment: $n=64$.

Table 4

Socio-demographic characteristics and personal problems of mothers (biological or surrogate), by family structure (percentage and number, $n = 1037$)

	Intact families $n = 301$ mothers ^a	Blended families $n = 184$ mothers ^b	Single-parent families (mother only) $n = 552$ mothers ^c	Chi-square
Young parents	7% (21)	2% ⁻ (4)	10% ⁺ (54)	11.471**
Little education	55% ⁻ (65)	78% ⁺ (56)	63% (165)	10.352**
No employment income	56% (145)	45% ⁻ (77)	66% ⁺ (333)	23.405***
Alcohol abuse	25% ⁻ (76)	35% (64)	39% ⁺ (215)	16.269***
Substance abuse	22% ⁻ (65)	33% (61)	32% ⁺ (179)	12.517**
Criminal activity	13% (40)	14% (26)	16% (89)	1.348 <i>ns</i>
Cognitive impairment	16% (48)	14% (25)	19% (103)	2.836 <i>ns</i>
Mental health issues	33% ⁻ (100)	34% (63)	41% ⁺ (227)	6.264*
Physical health issues	13% (40)	11% (20)	16% (86)	2.750 <i>ns</i>
Few social supports	49% (146)	46% (84)	54% (299)	5.071 <i>ns</i>
Maltreated as a child	32% (95)	33% (61)	36% (197)	1.556 <i>ns</i>
Victim of domestic violence	30% ⁻ (90)	48% ⁺ (88)	43% (235)	19.025***

⁺ = adjusted residual > 1.96; ⁻ = adjusted residual < -1.96.

ns = nonsignificant; * $p = .05$; ** $p = .01$; *** $p = .001$.

^a Except for the variables (a) education: $n = 119$; and (b) employment: $n = 258$.

^b Except for the variables (a) age: $n = 182$; (b) education: $n = 72$; and (c) employment: $n = 170$.

^c Except for the variables (a) age: $n = 551$; (b) education: $n = 261$; and (c) employment: $n = 507$.

that single-parent fathers have a greater likelihood of being without employment income, there are no differences for fathers by family structure (Table 3). In contrast, there are many differences among mothers, and mothers who are heads of single-parent families fare worst (Table 4). A summary of the overall results respecting the differences between men and women (Table 5) reveals that with the exception of the characteristics “few social supports” and “maltreated as a

Table 5

Comparison of chi-square values, by gender and family structure (extracted from Tables 1–4)

	Family structure			Gender
	Fathers only ($n = 558$)	Mothers only ($n = 1037$)	All parents (fathers and mothers) ($n = 1595$)	(All structures) ($n = 1595$)
Table	3	4	2	1
Young parents	1.721 <i>ns</i>	11.471**	31.102***	21.378***
Little education	4.627 <i>ns</i>	10.352**	16.497***	3.226 <i>ns</i>
No employment income	5.828*	23.405***	90.046***	113.284***
Alcohol abuse	7.044*	16.269***	18.193***	0.618 <i>ns</i>
Substance abuse	8.194*	12.517**	20.754***	0.287 <i>ns</i>
Criminal activity	4.289 <i>ns</i>	1.348 <i>ns</i>	6.420 <i>ns</i>	14.566***
Cognitive impairment	0.239 <i>ns</i>	2.836 <i>ns</i>	5.972 <i>ns</i>	3.779*
Mental health issues	1.613 <i>ns</i>	6.264*	36.015***	49.532***
Physical health issues	3.219 <i>ns</i>	2.750 <i>ns</i>	6.346 <i>ns</i>	0.567 <i>ns</i>
Few social supports	4.431 <i>ns</i>	5.071 <i>ns</i>	17.550***	14.469***
Maltreated as a child	1.614 <i>ns</i>	1.556 <i>ns</i>	16.550***	31.567***
Victim of domestic violence	0.122 <i>ns</i>	19.025***	80.621***	141.100***

ns = nonsignificant; * $p = .05$; *** $p = .001$.

Table 6

Socio-demographic characteristics and personal problems of biological and surrogate parents (percentage and number, $n=1595$)

	Fathers			Mothers		
	Biological $n=402^a$	Surrogate $n=156^a$	Chi-square	Biological $n=1009^b$	Surrogate $n=28^b$	Chi-square
Young parents	2% (7)	3% (4)	0.433 <i>ns</i>	8% (78)	4% (1)	0.609 <i>ns</i>
Little education	50% (68)	73% (32)	6.955**	63% (281)	63% (5)	0.002 <i>ns</i>
No employment income	31% (111)	28% (38)	0.492 <i>ns</i>	60% (548)	27% (7)	11.663***
Alcohol abuse	33% (132)	45% (70)	7.049**	34% (346)	32% (9)	0.056 <i>ns</i>
Substance abuse	25% (102)	35% (55)	5.429*	29% (297)	29% (8)	0.010 <i>ns</i>
Criminal activity	20% (80)	30% (46)	5.908*	15% (154)	4% (1)	2.929 <i>ns</i>
Cognitive impairment	19% (78)	23% (36)	0.933 <i>ns</i>	38% (384)	21% (6)	3.211 <i>ns</i>
Mental health issues	14% (58)	8% (13)	3.759 <i>ns</i>	14% (145)	4% (1)	2.627 <i>ns</i>
Physical health issues	42% (168)	39% (61)	0.336 <i>ns</i>	52% (523)	21% (6)	10.079**
Few social supports	21% (86)	19% (29)	0.540 <i>ns</i>	35% (351)	7% (2)	9.273**
Maltreated as a child	11% (45)	12% (18)	0.013 <i>ns</i>	41% (409)	14% (4)	7.833**
Victim of domestic violence	33% (132)	45% (70)	7.049**	34% (346)	32% (9)	0.056 <i>ns</i>

ns = nonsignificant; * $p=.05$; ** $p=.01$; *** $p=.001$.

^a Except for the variables (a) age: bio fathers $n=399$ and surrogate fathers $n=152$; (b) education: bio fathers $n=136$ and surrogate fathers $n=44$; and (c) employment: bio fathers $n=361$ and surrogate fathers $n=138$.

^b Except for the variables (a) age: bio mothers $n=1007$ and surrogate mothers $n=27$; (b) education: bio mothers $n=444$ and surrogate mothers $n=8$; and (c) employment: bio mothers $n=909$ and surrogate mothers $n=26$.

child,” the differences between families are often to be explained by the way in which personal problems affect women.

Finally, as shown in Table 6, there are not really many differences between biological and surrogate parents residing with a child, but where there are differences, it can be seen that biological mothers experience more problems than surrogate mothers whereas, in contrast, biological fathers face fewer problems than surrogate fathers (third objective).

6. Discussion

6.1. Shedding light on fathers to better understand neglectful families

The results of our study highlight some subtle differences in the general profile of families struggling with neglect that is usually found in the scientific literature. In almost half the cases, the families are single-parent families whose female heads are extremely vulnerable. Our data also indicate that men are very often present in situations of neglect, whether they reside with their children in a two-parent family (38% of neglectful families) or they maintain a link with their biological children but do not reside with them (in approximately 35% of situations when the child is separated from its biological father).

These results corroborate those of Mayer et al. (2006), who studied Quebec families that neglect their children. But the distribution of families in our study (of Canadian families outside of Quebec) is different from the Quebec sample. A higher proportion of the neglectful Quebec families were two-parent families (50% as opposed to 38% of the Canadian families in this study), a smaller proportion were single-parent (43% as compared with 49%) and a smaller proportion could be categorized as “other types” of families (6% as against 12%). Furthermore, Quebec biological fathers not residing with their children were more frequently involved in their

children's lives (68% of blended families headed by the biological mother, compared with 36%; and 56% of single-parent families headed by the biological mother, as opposed to 35%). Our study's distribution also differs from that of Canadian families with at least one minor child according to the 2001 census ([Statistique Canada, 2002a](#)), which included more two-parent families (81% compared with 38%) and fewer single-parent families (19% compared with 49%) than in our study's sample of neglectful families.

6.2. *Fathers and mothers with distinct personal experiences*

As for differences between the sexes, the results of our study suggest that the fathers and mothers of neglectful families are grappling with different personal problems and that these problems are unequally distributed by family structure. Overall, the women are wrestling with more problems than the men, and the problems faced by the women also explain many of the differences observed between family structures. Single-parent families headed by women seem to be especially vulnerable, whereas intact two-parent families are, relatively speaking, in better shape than the others. This finding qualifies that of [Ethier et al. \(2004\)](#), in which two-parent families were associated with chronic neglect, but single-parent families with temporary neglect, and suggests that the involvement of a father in such families is not necessarily harmful. Moreover, our results with respect to intragender differences show that surrogate parents have different parental experiences depending on whether they are male or female: surrogate fathers face more problems than biological fathers, whereas, in contrast, biological mothers struggle with more problems than surrogate mothers.

The differences observed in our study of families struggling with neglect are hardly reflected at all in the literature, which has only rarely compared parental problems in maltreating families by sex and family structure. Nevertheless, [Mayer et al. \(2006\)](#) have likewise drawn attention to the extreme social and economic poverty of single-parent families headed by women, from a large sample of Quebec families grappling with neglect. A study by [Pittman and Buckley \(2006, p. 481\)](#) suggests "that maltreating mothers may tend to cope more poorly with personal distress, whereas maltreating fathers tend to operate in a family climate that is both distant and rigid, while holding inappropriate expectations for children's behavior." Care should be exercised, however, when comparing our results with that study, as it examined parents who were participating in a treatment program for physical abuse, psychological abuse *or* neglect and, moreover, the majority of the participants were from two-parent families ("married"). Lastly, the results of our study suggesting that the mothers were more often the victims of maltreatment in their own childhood than the fathers were are in line with studies indicating that "women would appear to reproduce coercive parental behavior more frequently than men do (Cappell & Heiner, 1990; Rutter, 1989)" (cited in [Clément, Chamberland, Côté, Dubeau, & Beauvais, 2005](#), p. 30).

The family and individual characteristics of the general population also help put these findings into perspective. To start with, the fact that such a large proportion of neglectful parents are wrestling with the various personal problems in question, in comparison with the general population, is striking but not really surprising, considering that these problems are generally identified as major risk factors for neglect ([Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 1999](#)). For instance, whereas the annual incidence of domestic violence suffered by Canadian women living with a man is 17/1000 ([Larouche, 2003](#)), 40% of the mothers in our sample were struggling with this kind of situation (including single-parent mothers). Focusing on spousal violence against mothers in neglectful families is particularly important because the adaptation of children who are exposed to the violence is closely tied to the mother's capacity to deal with the adverse circumstances in

which she finds herself (Fortin, Trabelsi, & Dupuis, 2002; Jaffe, Wolfe, & Wilson, 1990). Thus, the more that mothers have to battle psychological problems stemming from their victimization, the more their children tend to exhibit emotional and behavioral problems. This observation lends support to the recommendations of various authors in the area of spousal and family violence regarding the importance of providing mothers with appropriate support to help them protect their children against the adverse impact of domestic violence.

Some of the intergender differences observed within neglectful families reflect the general trend noted in the Canadian population. Thus, as with the neglectful families in our study, Canadian women in general are more often victims of spousal violence (Public Security, 2004) and they are grappling with more mental health problems (Statistique Canada, 2002b) than men, whereas the men are more often charged with violent crimes and crimes against property (Statistique Canada, 2004). When it comes to differences between family structures, the heads of single-parent families with a minor child, whether men or women, are more likely to be inactive on the job market than the parents in two-parent families (Ministère de la famille, des aînés et de la condition féminine, 2005).

At the same time, neglectful families differ from other families in a number of respects.³ For instance, neglectful families do not stand out on the basis of the physical health problems of the parents, but in the overall Quebec population, single parents have a greater likelihood of having more than one health problem than do parents in other families (Institut de la statistique du Québec, 2001). Similarly, whereas Quebec men have a lower social support score than Quebec women (Institut de la statistique du Québec, 2001) and Quebec fathers are more likely than Quebec mothers to have no source of support at all (Institut de la statistique du Québec, 2002), in our study it was the mothers grappling with neglect who were the most isolated socially.

6.3. *Strengths and limitations of study*

The secondary analyses of our study, conducted on data from the CIS, provide an unpublished profile of the socio-demographic characteristics and personal problems of neglectful Canadian parents. Ours is one of the first studies to document this information on the basis of a representative sample by comparing information on fathers and mothers involved in neglect by family structure. Finally, the use of clinical categories to describe child neglect goes beyond the legal definitions currently in force, which vary from one province to another in Canada.

Our study also had to deal with a number of limitations. As the original survey focused primarily on reported children, some information regarding parents was not available. For instance, we had no information on the duration of families' single-parent or two-parent status, on male partners not residing with the mothers, or on the frequency of visits by the nonresiding parent. Information on the characteristics of the adults was limited to factors having an adverse effect on the welfare of the children (e.g., personal problems); nothing was available on protective factors. Since the CIS does not provide any information on the subject, it is impossible to say anything about the quality of the involvement of the men present in situations of neglect, or to determine whether they might contribute to protecting the children rather than represent a threat to their safety and development. Last, the study relies on the professional judgment of the social workers involved, as their assessments were not reviewed independently. This collection method does ensure ecological validity, however, since the social workers, who were trained to perform the assessments, may be regarded as experts in this area. Certain biases can slip in, nevertheless.

³ Since, to our knowledge, equivalent data do not exist for Canada as a whole, these data are for Quebec families.

For instance, social workers may have more trouble detecting the problems experienced by men than those experienced by women. Dulac (1997) suggests that professionals are not always very good at decoding requests for help from men, which sometimes take a very different form from those made by women.

6.4. Implications for practice and research

The results of our study indicate that fathers seem to have relatively fewer personal problems and that the families in which they are present also seem to be less vulnerable. In light of these results, it would appear crucial to consider fathers when intervening in cases of neglect, right from the time the situation is initially assessed and through full implementation of curative casework for the adults and children. Other studies indicate, however, that fathers are not necessarily positive influences. Greif and Zuravin (1989), for instance, suggest that biological fathers are not always appropriate alternatives for the placement of children maltreated by their mother, as these men themselves often have major personal problems, such as violence and substance abuse, which seriously compromise their parenting capacities. We saw earlier that chronic neglect was associated with certain characteristics of the men in question, such as their status as surrogate parent (Coohey & Zhang, 2006) or as part of a two-parent family (Ethier et al., 2004). In short, the nature of the ties between paternity and neglect is far from simple. Are fathers part of the problem or part of the solution? While our study cannot answer that question, it does clearly indicate that if we focus solely on mothers, we are shedding light on only one component of neglect. A true understanding of the family dynamics at work requires an accurate assessment of men's needs as well as women's, coupled with work with the men as well as the women.

It is equally clear that parents wrestling with neglect have very high personal needs, especially women heads of single-parent families. Considering the seriousness and extent of the personal problems faced by these parents, any casework that disregards these "adult" needs and focuses solely on "parenting" deficiencies would seem to be pretty well doomed in advance. How can parents who are themselves grappling with problems such as substance abuse, poverty or isolation—and in many cases, with more than one such problem simultaneously—be expected to adequately meet the basic needs of their children? Child welfare services obviously do not have exclusive responsibility for providing support to parents who are battling these kinds of problems, yet at the same time, doing nothing to help parents overcome them will seriously handicap any initiative taken with respect to the parents. It is essential to recognize that children's well-being and safety depend, on the one hand, on the parents' ability to respond to the developmental needs of their children and, on the other, on the quality of the family and social environment, which extends beyond the parenting role (Chamberland, Léveillé, & Trocmé, 2007; Ward & Rose, 2002). In this respect, strategies that take into consideration the problems encountered by parents, not only in their role as parents, but also as adults, such as therapeutic communities for drug-addicted mothers (Killeen & Brady, 2000; Porowski, Burgdorf, & Herrell, 2004), would seem to offer greater promise.

With regard to research, new studies could explore the different forms of neglect (supervision, education, etc.) within the various family structures and investigate whether they are different when the fathers reside with the children. We could also expand our understanding of the nature of men's involvement in situations of neglect. It is not the simple presence of a man in the family that increases or reduces the risks of neglect, but rather the nature of his involvement, including duration, feeling of parental effectiveness, and involvement in household duties (Dubowitz et al., 2000). Lacharité (2001) identifies four types of involvement by fathers in neglectful families.

Based on the quality and quantity of the male presence, the types are (1) coercive involvement, when the father is very present, but his conduct is abusive, violent, intrusive, dismissive, or hostile; (2) obstructive involvement, when both the quality and the quantity of the involvement is low; (3) intermittent involvement, when the father's behavior is positive, but his presence is infrequent; and (4) positive involvement, where, even if the father's behavior is appropriate and sufficient, its beneficial effects are compromised by the family's many serious problems. This dimension of involvement is well worth exploring in more depth.

7. Conclusion

Child neglect is generally associated with single-parent families headed by mothers who are grappling with major psychological and social problems of their own. Our study qualifies this finding somewhat by showing that men are present in a not insignificant proportion of neglectful families. These men face fewer personal problems than the women in these families, and although parents with partners are likewise grappling with serious problems, their situation is not as bad as that of single parents. Consideration of all parental figures and family structures would therefore appear to be a promising avenue to explore in an effort to arrive at a better understanding of neglect and, ultimately, to foster the safety and well-being of children who are the victims.

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