

Speaking volumes on child abuse 2.23.06

By Tom Long, Globe Correspondent

For the past 30 years, researchers at the University of New Hampshire's Family Research Laboratory have been pulling the covers off the American family's most damaging secrets.

The lab is headquartered in an innocuous building on the Durham campus, yet the work inside is anything but. Through interviews, questionnaires, and statistical analysis, researchers detail the effects of corporal punishment, sexual and physical abuse of children, and domestic violence in America.

"The laboratory has done pioneering work in crimes against children, and is the preeminent research facility in the field," Ernie Allen, president and CEO of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, said recently.

"They do more than just compile figures, they provide context for the crime statistics, information that is important not only to parents and kids, but policy makers, who have to deal with the problems," said Allen, who has commissioned studies by the group.

The laboratory's research, conducted by a dozen or so graduate students and doctoral fellows, has been funded by the US Department of Justice, the National Institute of Mental Health, and the National Science Foundation. It has conducted a study on the national incidence of "missing and throwaway" children, a national youth victimization prevention study, and a national alcohol and family violence survey.

The results of the work done at the lab now sound familiar to many.

Their studies have shown that abuse can be transmitted from generation to generation, that those who abuse their spouses are more likely to have witnessed or experienced abuse as children, and that victims of childhood sexual abuse are more likely to become victims of abuse as adults.

They've also determined that spousal abuse rates are highest in societies in which women are held in low esteem and that abused children are more likely to run away and become involved in drug abuse or prostitution.

The laboratory, which was founded in 1975, is directed by Murray Straus, an expert on corporal punishment, and David Finkelhor, an expert on crimes against children.

Finkelhor is also director of the Crimes Against Children Research Center at UNH, which was created in 1998 to expand upon the work of the Family Research lab.

"We're more like a federation of research," Straus said recently. "We pool resources and have a joint business manager. It gives us the flexibility of doing things on our own."

Of the lab's generic name, Straus said, "When the laboratory was founded there were those who were afraid we'd have trouble getting funding if the word 'violence' were in the title."

Straus is the author of several books, including "Beating the Devil Out of Them: Corporal Punishment in American Families," and "Behind Closed Doors: Violence in the American Family."

"When I started doing research, I didn't think of the family as a center of violence, I thought of it as a center of love," he said.

Early in his career he conducted an experiment in which a husband and wife worked together on a project -- in this case matching an array of shapes and colors. "You have to match the color, dummy," said the husband, and kicked his wife," said Straus.

About the same time, he was teaching a sociology class and the subject of corporal punishment came up. He was surprised when a majority of his students reported that they had been spanked.

"Spanking is a legal form of violence, if it is used as a form of chastisement," he said. "People who spank their children don't reason with them." He concluded that this leads to a lack of conflict resolution skills for children who are regularly spanked.

He came to believe that a reduction in spanking could lead to a less violent world.

"It's amazing the number of people who still think it's OK to strike a toddler," Straus said.

Finkelhor, a former graduate student of Straus, said the family lab was among the first research facilities to study children as the victims of crimes, rather than the perpetrators.

His latest research focuses on what he calls the "polyvictim," children who experience several forms of abuse.

"People study the separate forms of abuse -- domestic violence,

drug abuse, or sexual abuse -- but many children are abused in more than one way." He'd like to develop data that will help clinical social workers deal with these children's multiple problems.

Finkelhor and his associates have developed a juvenile victimization questionnaire to determine whether a child has experienced one or several of 34 types of victimization, including sexual abuse, bullying, gang assault, or witnessing a murder.

The questionnaire has been translated into French and Spanish and is used internationally.

"Back in the in the '70s, the notion that you could ask people questions [about abuse] and get valid, scientific information was unheard of," said Finkelhor. "We pioneered the methodology."

He said the Crimes Against Children Research Center is currently working on Internet victimization of children, a field, "where the realities change very quickly."

Research conducted by the Family lab and the Crimes Against Children center is made available to other researchers on the Internet and through bulletins published by the Justice department. But the information is not only for use by academics and law enforcement.

"The Family lab and the Crimes Against Children Research Center have conducted research and compiled data that has helped frame the way that America looks at family violence," Allen said.