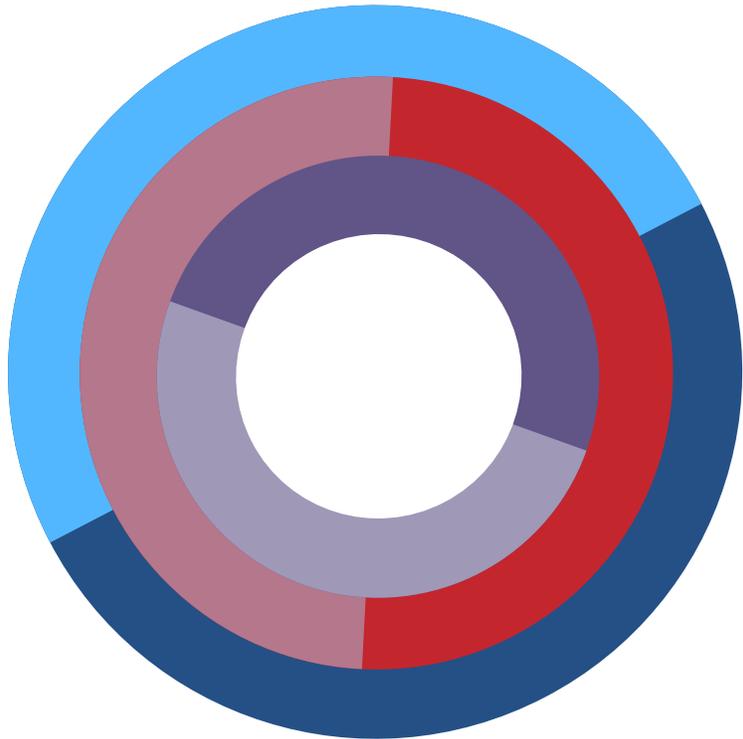


breaking the cycle:
a life course framework
for preventing
domestic violence



introduction

Domestic violence negatively impacts every community in the United States, affecting one in three women and one in four men,¹ with profound and enduring consequences. In addition, one in five children witnesses parental assault,² leading to increased risk of experiencing or perpetrating domestic violence as adults, and continuing the cycle of violence.

Since our founding in 2002, Blue Shield of California Foundation has worked with partners and grantees throughout California to help survivors, families, and communities impacted by domestic violence. The Foundation's deep and longstanding partnership with the domestic violence movement has provided inspiration for our mission to build lasting and equitable solutions that make California the healthiest state with the lowest rate of domestic violence.

The Foundation launched a new strategic plan in 2018 and deepened its commitment to ending domestic violence with a new prevention and multi-generational mindset. To further our understanding of the root causes of domestic violence and identify prevention pathways, the Foundation commissioned Forward Change, a national strategy consulting firm based in California, to embark on a research and learning process that applies a life course analysis to domestic violence prevention.

A life course analysis is based on the premise that the timing and sequence of biological, psychological, cultural, and historical events and experiences influence the health and development of both individuals and populations. In other words, a life course analysis posits that health is a consequence of multiple determinants and contexts that change as a person develops. This life course analysis focuses on the risk factors leading up to the occurrence of domestic violence rather than the impacts and responses following a domestic violence incident.

The life course approach is well established and has been applied to a variety of populations in many different fields. The recently published *Handbook of Life Course Health Development* assesses how the field of health development is advancing the understanding of wellness and disease through new insights based on a life course perspective.³ In addition, Forward Change has applied the life

course framework to a wide range of issues and population needs, including: improving outcomes for boys and men of color and transition-age foster care youth; assessing the cradle-to-career pipeline; and reducing preterm births.

This report uses a life course analysis to focus on the risk factors for domestic violence perpetration and to highlight opportunities for prevention. The Foundation commissioned this research based on our belief that an increased understanding of the root causes of domestic violence will lead to appropriate interventions to effectively prevent violence and end the cycle.

How a Life Course Approach Can Advance Understanding of Domestic Violence

The root causes of domestic violence exist at the individual, family, community, and societal levels. The Foundation hypothesized that a life course analysis could identify critical points in a person's life when specific risk factors could be targeted to effectively break the cycle of violence. Recognizing the strong evidence between exposure to violence in childhood and adolescence and the likelihood of perpetrating domestic violence, the Foundation sought a better understanding of the life course factors that contribute to violence and the inter-generational cycle of violence.



In addition to clarifying root causes of domestic violence, the Foundation commissioned this research to identify prevention solutions. These include both programmatic interventions and system-level solutions. Many of the interventions, detailed in Appendix 3, have been evaluated using rigorous research designs, such as randomized controlled trials. Others are less rigorously evaluated interventions that nonetheless offer great potential.

The life course analysis conducted for this paper by Forward Change builds on earlier findings by the Prevention Institute, which applied a health equity and multisector analysis to the community and structural determinants of domestic violence and proposed new pathways for many different sectors and systems to address domestic violence.⁴

What the Research Shows—and What's Next

The research affirms that domestic violence is a complex condition with roots starting long before the first incident of violence. A series of experiences, decisions, and interactions occur that either increase or decrease the risk of domestic violence. Using the life course framework, the research points to numerous opportunities to prevent domestic violence through interventions that target the right factors at the right time.

This research also identifies gaps where further exploration and innovation are needed to advance prevention, particularly among people and communities that face multiple forms of adversity and violence. For example, the research affirms that data about domestic violence are both dated and limited, which creates challenges to fully understanding its development across a person's life. The research also demonstrates that the data on the effectiveness of interventions are limited and of varying reliability. The Foundation is confident in the overall conclusions and recommendations in this paper, while also recognizing that additional work is needed to expand our understanding of various prevention strategies.

The challenge ahead is to apply these interventions at scale to the appropriate populations at the appropriate times. A related challenge is to try to achieve scale when more needs to be known about the effectiveness of interventions for specific populations. This work will build on the important foundational contributions of domestic violence providers across the country and will require the engagement of many new partners and sectors that have contact with children, families, and young adults. As Blue Shield of California Foundation continues the journey toward a more comprehensive vision for domestic violence prevention, we hope to create conversations that generate more and new pathways, partnerships, and innovations to advance a vision for a world free from violence.



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key findings

Forward Change synthesized a large body of research on the individual and ecological risk factors for perpetrating domestic violence that occur across the life course from in utero to young adulthood. The synthesis presented in this paper reinforces some of what is known and emergent in the fields of child trauma and brain development science, and it also uncovers new insights. The following are a few of the key themes and findings explored in the remainder of the paper:

- **The prevalence and consequences of domestic violence.**

Millions of women, men, and children experience domestic violence every year with profound short- and long-term health impacts. Many serious consequences follow in the wake of exposure to domestic violence for children and teens, including the risk that those who are exposed will continue the cycle of violence as they move into adulthood.

- **The drivers of domestic violence.**

The paper identifies three levels of factors that drive domestic violence: situational factors that provide the immediate or near-immediate spark for violence, such as arguments or the presence of alcohol; life course and developmental factors, such as child abuse, exposure to interparental violence, or having violent peer groups; and structural and cultural factors that drive violence in relationships, such as unemployment and poverty.

- **Pathways to domestic violence perpetration.**

The paper shows the consequences of exposure to violence at different ages, from early childhood (ages 0 to 5) to middle childhood (ages 6 to 11) to adolescence (ages 12 to 19). The paper also demonstrates how this exposure can result in an increased likelihood of perpetrating domestic violence.

- **The limitations of punitive approaches.**

The paper assesses the impact of the "punitive paradigm," which undergirds the current domestic violence safety net. While it is vitally important to hold harm doers accountable, the paper finds that focusing primarily on the arrest and prosecution of perpetrators may actually create more harm than good for some victims, and that truly reducing domestic violence requires an earlier and more comprehensive approach to prevention.

- **Insights and actions to strengthen prevention.**

The paper lifts up key insights from the research and translates them into actions that can form the basis of a forward-looking agenda to prevent and end domestic violence. Among the key actions recommended: focusing on "two-generation" interventions that serve both the parents and the children; re-evaluating punitive approaches and systems; addressing data gaps; viewing prevention through an equity lens; and more.

insights to action: moving to solutions

The life course meta-analysis presented in this paper provides new insight into the cycle of violence and the many influences and risk factors that contribute to domestic violence perpetration. The paper also raises critical questions about the timing, type, and scale of effective interventions. Based on these insights, Blue Shield of California Foundation is taking the following early actions to continue to achieve real, lasting progress in the effort to end domestic violence.

practice insights	actions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Domestic violence is a complex condition whose roots start long before the first incident of violence occurs. Risk factors in early childhood are largely the same for both young boys and girls. • The life course framework points to experiences of childhood abuse and witnessing domestic violence as critical predictors of future perpetration of domestic violence. It also signals how the cycle of violence can emerge—i.e., when domestic violence occurs in early parenthood, the impact is both to parent and child. For the Foundation, this broadens the definition of domestic violence survivors to include children and encourage a more inclusive mindset. • The paper lifts up important evidence-based practice research; however, the information about the effectiveness of interventions is limited and heterogeneous. The research base does not match the epidemic levels of domestic violence. The diversity of California's population merits more inquiry into effective practices that can help marginalized families. An equity analysis is needed for many of the practice interventions that the Forward Change team surfaced to test their effectiveness for California's diverse communities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We must mitigate and reduce childhood exposure to domestic violence by investing in prevention approaches aimed at improving outcomes for both parents and their children. A range of prevention interventions have been found to be effective. One challenge is to apply these interventions at scale to the appropriate populations at the appropriate time. This will require engagement of multiple sectors, a willingness to test current assumptions, and the adoption of a prevention mindset across sectors. For example, the research points to home visitation for very young children as a promising practice. (See Appendix 3 for proven and promising programs identified from the research scan.) We also encourage expanding practices that adopt a two-generation framing. One emergent approach is the Close-to-Home model, a community organizing model to address teen dating violence that is being tested in California. • It is critical to step up implementation of evidence-based and promising programs—and test new models—to mitigate the effects of exposure to family violence. There is a strong case for intervening at critical periods for high impact, as well as promoting healing and trauma-informed practice to interrupt cycles of violence already in motion. Prevention approaches must consider the dynamics and complexity of family violence. More testing is needed to ensure programs are effective for at-risk families in marginalized communities. For example, home visitation is a promising prevention practice, but more work needs to be done to make it effective in addressing domestic violence. It is time to explore new prevention investments in community-based solutions, including innovations that go beyond direct services to individuals. • Intervention should focus on healing as much as behavioral change for harm doers. This inquiry found that the bulk of existing batterer intervention programs focus on behavioral change without significant evidence that they reduce recurrence. There is also a need for intervention services for those who don't conform to the heteronormative gender binary (e.g., gay, lesbian, transgender, bisexual, queer, and intersex).

policy and systems change insights	actions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The punitive paradigm that undergirds the current domestic violence system has the potential to do more harm than good for some survivors. • The research literature points to risk factors early in a person's life, yet systemic solutions primarily target the crisis intervention stage. With the life course framework clarifying the individual risk factors of domestic violence in the context of structural and community factors, it is clear that comprehensive solutions are needed to address causes at multiple levels. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accountability for causing harm is essential; however, it is time to re-evaluate punitive approaches within systems as the primary response to domestic violence and expand community-level responses that match the complexity of the issue. Accountability for causing harm is essential in all solutions to domestic violence, yet there is an urgent need for systemic solutions that effectively reduce exposure to violence within families to break the cycle of violence. • Alternative models to domestic violence prevention and intervention are needed to create more effective options for families. One promising area to explore is restorative justice that ensures harm-doer accountability without long-term and potential harmful impacts of incarceration on children, families, and survivors. • Solutions are more impactful when we view domestic violence through an equity lens. While domestic violence can and does happen to anyone regardless of race, class, or gender, new approaches must focus on those families and communities that are experiencing multiple risk factors, including structural and community determinants. Addressing the disproportionate concentration of domestic violence among populations that experience the intersecting disadvantages of poverty and unemployment, racial isolation and marginalization, and neighborhood disadvantage must be a priority.

data and evidence insights	actions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data about domestic violence are both dated and limited, which creates challenges when it comes to fully understanding its development across a person's life. • The information about the effectiveness of interventions is limited and heterogeneous. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A priority for researchers and policy makers should be to improve the timeliness, relevance of, and access to quality data on multiple dimensions of domestic violence. Data drives attention, validates concern, and mobilizes resources. • We must also address the data gaps that render certain groups invisible. Better data will deepen understanding about how to target effective interventions to the right segments of the population at the right times. For example, there are pronounced gaps in data on domestic violence for California's Asian Pacific Islander, Native American, LGBTQI, and immigrant populations. • Research on protective factors against domestic violence is a promising and hopeful area for more study. Better data on protective factors can help guide program and community-based innovations with specific outcomes for the prevention of domestic violence. For example, through this inquiry we learned that risk factors are largely the same for young boys and girls. We also know that gender differences emerge in later life stages which means that at earlier stages, we need to focus on protective factors and understand mitigating factors and experiences. This will be an emerging area of work.