

## Prevalence of parental alienation drawn from a representative poll



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### ABSTRACT

The current work is the first known representative poll of adults ( $N = 610$ ) aimed at determining the prevalence of parental alienation. Parental alienation describes actions that a parent takes to intentionally, or unintentionally, distance a child (or children) from the other parent (Darnell, 1998). Results revealed that 13.4% of parents (or 9.03% of the entire sample) have been alienated from one or more of their children. Our findings suggest that tens of millions of adults and their children may be impacted by parental alienation, which is much higher than previous estimates. Furthermore, findings show evidence of parental alienation across all socio-economic and demographic indicators. However, when compared to Census estimates of different demographic groups in the U.S. population, targeted parents were over-represented among Blacks/African Americans and Native Americans, and those with only a high school diploma level education. The sheer magnitude of parental alienation uncovered in this study indicates the need for more attention to be paid to this important and pervasive problem.

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### 1. Introduction

Parental alienating behaviors describe actions that a parent takes to intentionally, or unintentionally, distance a child (or children) from the other parent, regardless of the impact that these behaviors have on a child (Darnell, 1998). Many have argued that the impact these behaviors have on children, termed parental alienation, is a form of child abuse because the Diagnostic and Statistics Manual (APA, 2013) defines child abuse as “non-accidental verbal or symbolic acts by a child’s parent or caregiver that result, or have a reasonable potential to result, in significant psychological harm to the child.” (p. 719). Clinicians have long reported the existence and traumatic impact of parental alienation on children, with outcomes ranging from the development of mental health disorders (e.g., depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and conduct disorders), to declines in academic performance and even suicide (Baker, 2007; Harman & Biringen, 2016). The impact of parental alienation and alienating behaviors on targeted parents has received relatively less attention. However, the consequences for targeted parents can be severe (e.g., suicide, Sher, 2015) and could be considered a form of ongoing domestic violence perpetrated on them by the offending parent.

Although parental alienation and alienating behaviors in separated or divorced families have been well documented in over 500 references drawn from professional literatures across 30 countries (Bernet & Baker, 2013), estimates of prevalence vary greatly depending on whether the study focuses on parental alienation or alienating behaviors themselves. Estimates have also varied due to methodological differences in sampling, as prevalence estimates to date have predominantly been based on legal case reviews, clinical caseloads, and convenience samples. The former two sources represent serious cases of parental alienation in children that have required legal or psychosocial intervention, respectively. Legal case reviews have provided estimates that around 12% of cases involving parental alienation can be characterized as severe (Lavadera, Ferracuti, & Togliatti, 2012). Using a different estimation approach, William Bernet (2010) deduced that approximately 20% of children and adolescents live in separated or divorced households, and about ¼ of their parental separations involved high-conflict situations. Based on these statistics, he estimated that 25% of children and adolescents in high-conflict break-ups become alienated, which is approximately 1% of children and adolescents (similar to the incidence of autism spectrum disorders in children and adolescents in the U.S.). With this approach, Bernet estimated that approximately 740,000 children and adolescents in the U.S. are victims of parental alienation. It is possible that the prevalence of parental alienation may be even higher if intact families are considered, because parental alienation also occurs in families that have not been affected by divorce or separation (Moné & Biringen, 2006).

The prevalence of parental alienating behaviors is often estimated as higher than parental alienation because not all children become

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alienated from the targeted parent (despite the alienator's efforts). In one study using a convenience sample, employees of child welfare agencies reported that about 25% of their adult caseloads were exposed to parental alienating behaviors as children (Baker, 2010). Prevalence estimates in convenience samples have varied between 2% and 80% (Clawar & Rivlin, 1991), suggesting that community samples of separated or divorced families take note of and/or experience a wide array of types or frequency of relationship distancing behaviors, or that there may not be consensus in what people believe parental alienating behaviors are.

There are many individuals (including professionals) who deny that parental alienation exists at all (see Rand, 2011 for a discussion of this issue). Without knowing how many people and families this problem affects, greater research attention, funding for basic science and interventions, as well as legal policy changes are not likely to be devoted to understand how this problem impacts children, parents, and social institutions. Judicial systems rely on evidence that has been accepted by experts in the field to make decisions that are in the "best interest of the child." Obtaining an accurate picture of the number of families parental alienation affects can encourage more research in this area. Not understanding the scope of the problem has also inhibited social analyses of why this problem persists, despite there having been a few recent clinical, legislative, and judicial interventions attempting to address it. Therefore, the purpose of the current study was to conduct the first known representative poll of adults to determine prevalence of parental alienation in a U.S. sample of North Carolina adults.

## 2. Method

A poll of 610 North Carolina (U.S.) adults (18 years of age or older) was conducted by the High Point University Survey Research Center between November 7th and 12th, 2015. The probability sample was contacted using random digit dialing of landline and cellular numbers generated by Survey Sampling International. If there was more than one adult in a household that was called, the individual with the most recent birthday was selected. Data were weighted based on the Center for Disease Control's estimates for phone use (cell phone only, landline only, or both) and census data (described in Section 3).

Student interviewers contacted respondents using computer assisted telephone interviewing systems. For each number dialed, interviewers read the following script:

*Hello, this is [INTERVIEWER NAME] with High Point University Survey Research Center. We are not selling anything or asking for contributions. We are speaking with people in your community today about some important issues facing our country and the state of North Carolina. This is for research purposes only, so your responses will not be shared with anyone else.*

After verifying that potential participants were residents of the state of North Carolina and over the age of 18, interviewers stated:

*We have selected you to participate in this survey because you are an adult who lives here in North Carolina. We will ask you some questions about your background and views on public affairs issues. Would you like to continue?*

Participants who agreed to complete the omnibus survey were asked a battery of questions on a variety of topics. For the parental alienation items, participants were asked between three and six questions, depending on whether they were a parent or guardian to a child. The first three questions were asked of all adults and began with the following question:

*When two people have children together, there are sometimes cases when one parent intentionally or unintentionally tries to damage or end the relationship between their child and the other parent. They*

*can do this by badmouthing the parent of the child, having the child spy on the other parent, among many other things. Mental health professionals call these types of behaviors parental alienation. Were you aware of this term before?*

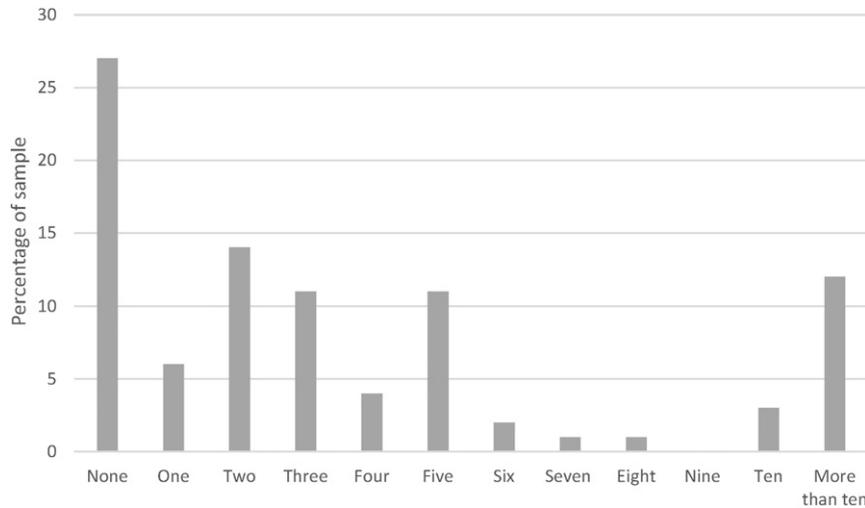
Respondents were offered "yes," "no" and "don't know/refused" as options. They were then asked whether they had heard of parental alienating behaviors occurring to someone they know (with the same response options), and how many people they knew who had it happen to them. Interviewers then asked whether the respondent was a parent or guardian to a child (yes or no), and for those who responded "yes," they were asked whether they feel they have been alienated from one or more of their children by the other parent (yes, no, or don't know/refuse). Finally, these parents rated the subjective severity of the alienation they were experiencing on a three-point scale (1 = mild, 2 = moderate, and 3 = severe). Basic demographic information was also gathered about gender, race/ethnicity, education level, income, age, and marital status.

## 3. Results

Six hundred and ten participants completed the entire questionnaire, and of those nearly all (approximately 99%) answered the first four parental alienation questions. Of the 609 adults who responded to the first question about whether they were aware of the parental alienation term before, 58.6% reported yes (1.7% did not know or refused to respond). Although 39.7% of adults had never heard of the term before, over 2/3 of the sample reported knowing someone who was being alienated from their children (68.7% of 607 responses, 2 were missing). A large number of respondents reported knowing many parents who had experienced parental alienating behaviors, and these are reported in Fig. 1. While 26.8% of 609 adults reported not knowing anyone, 15.1% reported knowing ten or more people. Characteristics of this sample are reported in Table 1.

Sixty-eight percent of the sample indicated that they were a parent or guardian to a child (412 out of 609 respondents), and of the 410 answering the question, 13.4% (55 parents) reported that they feel they have been alienated from one or more of their children by the other parent. It is important to note that these parents may have seen or been the target of many parental alienating behaviors expressed by the other parent, but we only asked about whether such behaviors led to the perceived alienation of the child(ren). Nearly half of these 13.4% of parents reported the subjective severity of this alienation as being severe (48%). We present percentages of different reported severity levels in Fig. 2. For those parents who reported being alienated from their children, 21.2% reported not having known the term parental alienation before it had been defined for them.

We next examined whether there were demographic differences among participants in terms of whether the parent has been the target of parental alienation. Because the objective of this poll was to obtain a formal estimation of the prevalence of parental alienation, data were weighted for age, race, and gender based on the U.S. Census (2014 American Community Survey and Population Estimate Program) in order to correct for any possible distortions in representation of the population of the sample (Statistical Services Centre, 2001). The sample for this analysis was restricted to those who were parents or guardians of a child and who provided answers to the questions that were analyzed. We first examined whether there were gender differences in who reported being alienated (versus not). Fathers (30 of 178, 1 reported "don't know") were only slightly more likely to report being targeted than mothers (25 of 226, 5 reported "don't know/refuse"), but this difference was only marginally significant,  $\chi^2(1) = 2.84, p = 0.09$ . There were not any statistically significant gender differences on the severity of subjectively experienced parental alienation that was reported,  $\chi^2(2) = 2.63, p > 0.05$ . We also found there were not statistically



Note.  $N = 609$ . Nine percent of the sample failed to answer this question.

Fig. 1. Reported number of parents who have experienced parental alienating behaviors known by the sample. Note.  $N = 609$ . Nine percent of the sample failed to answer this question.

significant differences across age or race in the sample in terms of who is a self-identified target of parental alienation ( $p > 0.05$ ).

We did find statistically significant differences across marital status groups ( $p < 0.001$ ), however, it is unclear whether the parents who reported being married and alienated from one or more of their children ( $n = 18$ ) are encountering this during a second or third marriage, or whether they were still married to the alienating parent. Important to note is that although parental alienation was reported by parents across all educational levels, there were statistically significant differences on this factor,  $\chi^2(4) = 24.10, p < 0.001$ . Of those parents who reported being alienated, 8.9% had less than a high school diploma and 36.3% graduated from high school, while 28.4% had some college, 16.9% had a college degree, and 7.5% had a graduate degree (2.1% refused). Despite these educational differences, there was only a marginally statistically significant difference in prevalence across income categories,  $p = 0.07$ . Of the parents who reported being alienated from their children,

18.7% reported an annual income of  $\leq \$25$  a year, 28.2% reported  $\$25$ – $50$  K, 15.1% reported  $\$50$ – $75$  K, 14.9% reported  $\$75$ – $100$  K, 7.8% reported  $\$100$ – $150$  K, and 3.4% reported  $\$150$ – $200$  K (0% for those over  $\$200$  K, 11.9% did not know or refused to answer).

### 3.1. Comparing findings to U. S. census data

We next examined how the proportions of those reporting being the target of parental alienation across different demographic factors compared to their proportional representation in the general U.S. adult population. For example, individuals with less education in our sample were more likely to report being the target of parental alienation than those with higher degrees, but there are also more Americans with high school diplomas than graduate degrees. Data were compared to U.S. Census Bureau statistics reported on the American Fact Finder website (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014a; 2014b) and these data appear in Table 2.

**Table 1**  
Demographic characteristics of the sample ( $N = 610$ ).

		Percentage			Percentage	
Race/ethnicity	African-American or Black	22.0%	Gender	Male	49%	
	White or Caucasian	71.3%		Female	51%	
	Native American	2.6%		Household income	$\leq \$25$ K or less	10.3%
	Asian	0.5%			$\$25$ – $50$ K	21.7%
	Multiple/other	2.1%			$\$50$ – $75$ K	19.4%
	Hispanic <sup>a</sup>	3.1%			$\$75$ – $100$ K	11.6%
		$\$100$ – $150$ K	14.3%			
		$\$150$ – $250$ K	4.5%			
		$> \$250$ K	2.7%			
Age	Mean 44.5 (SD = 17.85)		Parental status	Parent or guardian	67.6%	
	18–24	12.7%		Not a parent or guardian	32.0%	
	25–34	17.6%	Marital status	Single, never married	19.0%	
	35–44	19.6%		Separated	3.3%	
	45–54	18.8%		Divorced	8.6%	
	55–64	15.1%		Engaged	3.6%	
65 or older	16.3%	Living with significant other		7.3%		
		Married		50.2%		
Education	11th grade or less	3.7%	Widowed	4.6%		
	High school graduate	19.5%				
	Some college	28.3%				
	College graduate	31.9%				
	Graduate school	14.6%				

Note. When percentages do not add up to 100%, the remainder were respondents who reporting “Don’t know” or “Refused.”

<sup>a</sup> Hispanic ethnicity represents % of overall sample and includes anyone from any racial category.

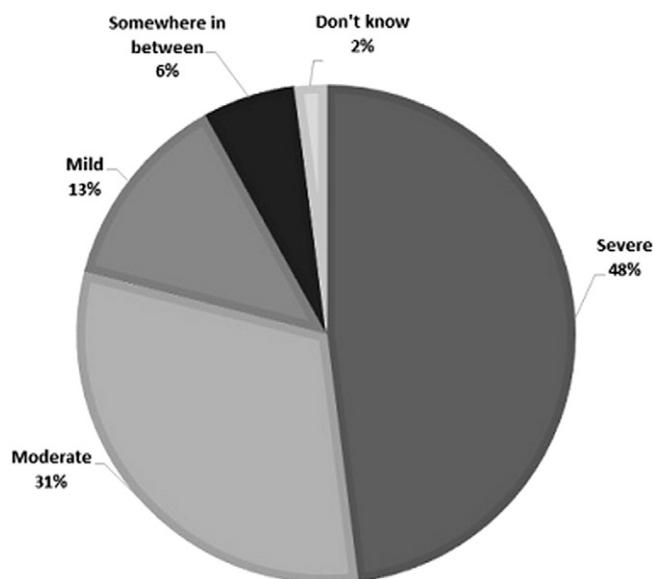


Fig. 2. Severity of reported (perceived) parental alienation (N = 55).

The only racial groups that appeared to be disproportionately affected were Black/African-Americans and Native Americans. Blacks represent 12.6% of the U.S. population, yet they were 19.0% of the sample of alienated parents. Similarly, Native Americans represent 0.8% of the population, but were 5.7% of the sample of alienated parents. The percentage of parents from other racial groups who are targets of alienation were comparable or lower than their representation in U.S. society (e.g., Asian-Americans). For example, among those who identified as Hispanic, only 8.8% of the sample reported being alienated, while Hispanics make up approximately 22.5% of the U.S. population.

**Table 2**  
Comparison of alienated parents to representation in the U.S. population.

	Percentage of U.S. population <sup>a</sup>	Percentage of alienated parents in sample <sup>b</sup>
<b>Race</b>		
White	73.8%	71.8%
Black/African-American	12.6%	19.0%
Asian	5.0%	0%
Native American	0.8%	5.7%
Multiple/other	7.8%	2.0%
<b>Ethnicity</b>		
Hispanic	22.5%	8.8%
<b>Annual household income</b>		
\$25K or less	23.2%	18.7%
\$25–50K	23.7%	28.2%
\$50–75K	17.8%	15.1%
\$75–100K	12.2%	14.9%
\$100–150K	13.0%	7.8%
\$150–200K	5.0%	3.4%
>\$250K	5.0%	0%
<b>Education</b>		
<High school diploma	13.8%	8.9%
High school diploma (or equivalent)	28.1%	36.3%
Some college	31.3%	28.4%
Bachelor's degree	17.2%	16.9%
Graduate degree	9.6%	7.5%

<sup>a</sup> Data deduced from U.S. Census data based on 2014 estimates (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014a and 2014b).

<sup>b</sup> “Don't know” and “Refused” responses make up the remaining percentage in each category.

The percentage of parents who reported being targeted across income groupings was similar to their representation at the national level. There were also not any substantial differences using this comparison strategy across educational levels except for those with a high school diploma (or equivalent), such that those with a diploma or GED constitute 28.1% of the U.S. population, and yet they represented 36.3% of the sample of parents reporting being the targets of parental alienation.

#### 4. Discussion

Prevalence of parental alienation determined by this representative poll of adults in North Carolina, U.S. was 13.4% of all parents. We unfortunately could not determine whether parental alienating behaviors or outcomes were occurring in intact families, as we only measured current marital status. Many individuals who divorce later remarry (Bramlett & Mosher, 2001), and so the 32.3% of the sample who were married and reported being alienated could be from intact families or new marriages. When all individuals in the sample were included in the estimate of prevalence (parents and non-parents), the overall percentage of the sample who reported being alienated from their children was 9.03%. We used this estimate to calculate national prevalence of parental alienation.

In 2015, the U.S. population of adults over the age of 18 years old was approximately 245,201,000 adults (derived from the U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Of these adults, we estimate that 22,141,650 adults (9.03% of the total U.S. adult population) are currently being alienated from their children by the other parent. Estimated another way, 67.6% of our sample were parents, which is approximately 165,755,876 adults in the U.S. Using the percentage of parents who reported being alienated from their children in our poll (13.4%), this means approximately 22,211,287 adults are currently targets of parental alienation. Given that many parents have more than one child, our estimate also implies that there could be 22 million, 44 million, or even more children affected by this problem, although it is uncertain whether all children in each family unit would become alienated as a result of the parent's alienating behaviors. Therefore, a formal estimate of prevalence for both parental alienating behaviors and parental alienation among children still needs to be determined. Interestingly, over 20% of the alienated parents on our sample reported not knowing what the parental alienation term was before it had been defined for them. This finding indicates that there were many adults who had been feeling alienated

from their child or children, but did not know what the clinical term was for their experience.

Nearly half (48%) of the parents in the sample who reported being alienated from their children indicated that they were experiencing severe alienation (versus mild and moderate). While this rating is subjective and not based on rating scales utilized by researchers in this area (for examples, see Lorandos, Bernet, & Sauber, 2013) this percentage represents approximately 10.5 million parents in the U.S. alone who are facing what they *perceive* to be severe disruptions in their parent-child bonds due to the behaviors of the other parent. The impact of parental alienating behaviors on the targeted parent-alienated child bond can result in disenfranchised grief given the denial of this phenomenon by many mental health and legal professionals (see Rand, 2011 for discussion). Many survey respondents also reported knowing a large number of people who are being alienated from their children. Over 61% of the sample reported knowing at least one other parent, and over 15% of these individuals reported knowing ten or more. Our results highlight the pervasive nature of this epidemic and demonstrates the need for greater investigation of this serious problem.

For quite some time, separation and divorce have been characterized as low points in relationship processes, and many have assumed that once relationships end, parents and families are able to begin the road to recovery (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1985). Unfortunately, this belief may be more optimistic than our data suggest. Even after separation, psychological conflict and manipulation within the family dynamic continues and may even escalate at different milestones (e.g., remarriage or birth of a half-sibling to the children; Harman & Biringen, 2016). Our prevalence data reported here indicate that the severity of parental alienation on mothers and fathers do not differ significantly—nearly half of mothers and fathers who believed they were targets of parental alienation report their experience as being severe.

There was evidence of parental alienation across all socio-economic and demographic indicators; it does not discriminate. When compared to proportions of different demographic groups in the U.S. population, however, targeted parents were over-represented among Blacks/African Americans and Native Americans, and under-represented among Hispanics and Asians, suggesting the importance of understanding possible ethnic disparities with respect to this topic. The reasons for these differences are not clear, so more research needs to be conducted to examine this disparity.

One limitation of the current study, which has been an issue for many researchers studying parental alienation, is in how this phenomenon is defined. Although we provided descriptions of parental alienating behaviors to respondents and asked them whether they knew of other parents who were experiencing these behaviors, we also told respondents that the behaviors were known as parental alienation, which is a potential outcome of these behaviors. It is possible that the parents in our sample may have reported they were experiencing parental alienating behaviors rather than the actual alienation of their child(ren). We believe this possibility is unlikely given that the wording of the question was whether they felt they had been alienated from one or more of your children by the other parent, not whether the other parent was engaging in alienating behaviors. Due to the phrasing of the question, it is perhaps more likely that the prevalence of parental alienating behaviors is greater than what is estimated, as not all children become alienated. We realize that the distinction between the two characterizations (behavior versus outcome) is important, and it was not our intention in the survey design to confuse the two. Future polls will need to more clearly distinguish between the two and estimate the prevalence of both. In addition, there are many parents who are alienators and blame the targeted parents for their own behaviors (Harman & Biringen, 2016), so it is also possible that our estimates are an overestimation and need to be verified clinically. Regardless, there are many parents who are feeling distanced from their children because of the other parent's behaviors, and this has important clinical and legal implications.

The sheer magnitude of parental alienation uncovered in this study indicates that much greater attention needs to be paid to this problem that is affecting millions of families. While our findings should be replicated with other samples in the U.S. and internationally, this poll—the first representative, state-wide poll of its kind—is a step towards providing an accurate estimate of how prevalent and severe this problem is. Future polling efforts would be wise to include questions about whether parental alienation and parental alienating behaviors have led to difficulties in access to children, the extent of justice system involvement, and how many targeted parents are from intact, divorced, or new, blended families. We hope that other social scientists start to view this problem as a public issue, rather than a private one, and that we work towards finding more effective solutions for addressing it.

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