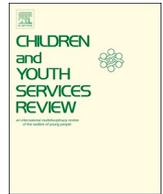




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## Prevalence of adults who are the targets of parental alienating behaviors and their impact

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### ABSTRACT

Estimating the prevalence of parental alienation is challenging because not all children who are exposed to parental alienating behaviors become alienated (Harman, Bernet, & Harman, 2019). The purpose of the current study was to determine whether the proportion of adults who indicate being alienated from a child will be similar to results from a previous poll of North Carolina adults (Harman, Leder-Elder, & Biringen, 2016) using three nationally representative on-line survey panels from United States and Canada, and to determine the mental health impact of parental alienating behaviors. Results from the first two polls indicate that the prevalence of parents who feel they are being alienated from their children is higher than originally estimated: 35.5% (of 273) in the U.S. and 32% (of 397) in Canada. Using another means of assessment for the third poll, 39.1% (of 594) of parents in the US are the non-reciprocating targets of parental alienating behaviors, which is over 22 million parents and confirms previous estimates that did not differentiate between reciprocating and non-reciprocating parents (Harman et al., 2016). Of these, 6.7% of the parents had children who were moderately to severely alienated, which is at least 1.3% of the US population. Alienated parents also had high levels of depression, trauma symptoms, and risk for suicide. Ramifications of these findings for researchers and practitioners are discussed.

### 1. Introduction

*Parental alienating behaviors* (PABs) are strategies used to harm or destroy the relationship between a child and a parental figure (the alienated parent, aka the targeted parent; Baker & Darnall, 2006). These behaviors are typically enacted by one parental figure (the alienating parent) against another, but alienators can also be extended family members or other third parties (e.g., guardians ad litem). The outcome of PABs is called *parental alienation* (PA), which is a psychological condition in which a child allies themselves strongly with the alienating (or preferred) parent and rejects a relationship with the alienated parent without legitimate justification (Lorandos, Bernet, & Sauber, 2013). Researchers have documented thousands of behaviors that alienating parents use to cause PA (e.g., Harman & Matthewson, 2020; Baker & Darnall, 2006), and these behaviors are considered a serious form of family violence because they are abusive for both children and the targeted parent (Harman, Bernet, & Harman, 2019; Harman, Kruk, & Hines, 2018). Indeed, alienating behaviors result in short- and long-term outcomes for children and targeted parents that are similar to other forms of violence, such as negative mental health symptoms (e.g., anxiety, depression, trauma), adjustment disorders, and even suicidal ideation (see Harman et al., 2018 for a review).

Estimating the prevalence of PA is challenging because not all children who are exposed to PABs become alienated (Harman, Bernet,

& Harman, 2019). In order to determine whether a child has been alienated from a parent, a full assessment of the family history is necessary (Baker, Bone, & Ludmer, 2014), making the assessment of prevalence using representative samples of children nearly impossible. Consequently, researchers have had to rely on probability estimates based on factors such as the number of divorced families there are in a given population and the number of these families that are considered “high conflict.” Using such estimation procedures, an estimated 1% of all children are alienated from a parental figure to some degree (see Bernet, 2010; Warshak, 2015).

In contrast to estimates about the number of children who are ultimately alienated, the prevalence of parents who feel they are the targets of these behaviors is much higher. In 2016, Harman, Leder-Elder, & Biringen published the first prevalence study of parents who are the targets of PABs using a representative sample of adults. The poll sampled adults (18 years of age and older) in North Carolina, U.S. who were selected using random digit dialing of home and cell phone numbers. Results indicated that 13.4% of parents reported being the targets of PABs which, based on the U.S. population at the time of the survey, generalizes to an estimated 22,141,650 adults in the U.S. Notably, about half of the sample rated their experience as “severe” (Harman, Leder-Elder, & Biringen, 2016).

The original poll (Harman et al., 2016), while the first of its kind on this topic to use a representative sample, had some limitations. Whether

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a parent feels they are being alienated from a child can be very different than if they actually are. Parents who engage in PABs sometimes believe they are the targets of PA themselves, and some parents who are the targets of PABs do not label their experience as such. Unless there are also measures of impact on the relationship with the parent and the child, and measures of specific PABs, it can be difficult to determine whether the self-report of the respondent is accurate. Second, the poll was limited to North Carolina residents. The current studies used on-line survey panel method comprised of adults who were selected to be representative of the entire US and Canadian national populations.

Another limitation of the original poll was that there were at most five questions asked of participants (only three were asked if the participant was not a parent). Therefore, another purpose of the current study was to use an on-line survey method so that additional questions could be administered. We were primarily interested in whether targeted parents have more negative mental health consequences than parents who are not the targets of PABs. Targeted parents often report high levels of depression, anxiety, and are reported to be at high risk for suicide (Harman et al., 2018; Sher, 2015). We sought to determine whether these outcomes were higher for targeted parents compared to other divorced parents and the general adult population. Telephone surveys are generally short due to time limitations of the respondents, and the original study used simple response options for ease of phone survey administration. Therefore, another advantage of using an on-line survey method was that it allowed us to ask many more questions using reliable rating scales with a wider range of response options (e.g., 5-point scales versus only two or three options).

The current study expands on the findings of the original poll of adults (Harman et al., 2016) to assess prevalence of PABs and outcomes using three nationwide representative samples of adults (two polls in the U.S., one in Canada). We first examined those questions used in the original poll with two nationally representative polls in order to compare findings, and then assessed whether perceptions of PA and behaviors coincided with other self-reports of specific PABs and child outcomes in the family system. Finally, we also looked at mental health outcomes for targeted parents: depression, posttraumatic stress symptoms, and for the last poll, suicidal thoughts, and compared alienated parents to those who admitted to engaging in similar (reciprocated) or proportionately more PABs than the other parent.

## 2. Polls 1 & 2 method

### 2.1. Procedure

Qualtrics panel management service was used to recruit, administer surveys, and reward participants for their participation. Qualtrics is a software and research management company that maintains a large pool of individuals obtained from a large number of certified market research panels (Grand Mean Project certification) to ensure high quality and representative samples that are verified using their own confirmation procedures (e.g., Verity, SmartSample, digital fingerprinting). The panel base for this study was proportioned to reflect the general population, and then randomized before the survey was deployed. Selected respondents were sent an email inviting them to participate in a survey for research purposes only, along with details about survey length and incentives. Members are allowed to unsubscribe at any time, and to avoid selection bias, this email invitation did not include details about the content of the survey.

Qualtrics panelists are rewarded for their time and thoroughness with which they complete the surveys. The rewards administered by Qualtrics vary depending on their arrangements with companies sourcing the participants (e.g., frequent flyer miles, gift cards, cash, redeemable points), so this incentive process was not controlled by the researchers themselves. We asked Qualtrics to build a panel of adults (18 years or older) who were residents of the U.S. (poll #1) and Canada (poll #2) and who reflected the demographic characteristics of each

country (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, income, education, region) in order to maximize the generalizability of the sample.

The IRB-approved on-line surveys were sent as a link to panel members, and they first read a cover letter explaining that the purpose of the survey was to examine people's experiences with several public health problems such as those associated with children and child custody, quality of life, and depression. If they agreed to participate after reading the details of the cover letter, they began the survey. Surveys took between 5 and 20 min to complete because there were skip patterns in the survey depending on parental status.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Demographic information

Respondents were asked to provide their age (in years), gender, sexual orientation, marital status, income, their current or most recent occupation, level of education, and racial group(s) they most identified with. The racial group categories provided were different for the American and Canadian polls due to variations in how race and ethnicity are commonly recorded in the two countries. For the American sample, respondents were provided with White, Black or African American, American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, or other (asked to specify), while Canadians were provided with White, Black, First Nations/Aboriginal/Indigenous, Asian, or other (asked to specify). All respondents were also asked to indicate whether they were Hispanic/Latino or Latina.

#### 2.2.2. Knowledge and perceived prevalence questions

In order to replicate the results of the original telephone poll that was conducted with a representative sample of adults in North Carolina, U.S. (Harman et al., 2016), we asked respondents the same five questions used in that poll with only a small adjustment described below. The first question assessed whether respondents had heard of PABs, and it read:

*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 alienating behaviors and they can happen to parents, step-parents, grandparents, and other loving adults in a child's life. Were you aware of this term before?*

This first question was adjusted slightly from the original poll to be more accurate in how the behaviors and outcomes are labeled: PABs referring to the behaviors of the parent, while PA refers to the outcomes in the child that result from these behaviors. Due to this adjustment, we added another question regarding outcomes (see below).

The second question asked respondents whether they knew someone who has acted in a way to alienate a child from a parent (or step-parent, grandparent, etc.). If the respondent answered "yes" to the second question, they were asked to indicate how many people they knew who acted in ways to alienate a child from their parent (or step-parent, grandparent, etc.), and could select a number between 1 and 9, 10 or more, or Don't know/Refuse. We next asked whether they know someone who is the target of PABs themselves, and how many people they know who have had it happen to them (same response options as the previous question).

#### 2.2.3. Parental status

All respondents were asked whether they were the parent or guardian to a child. If the respondent answered "yes," they were presented with a block of questions that assessed personal experience with PABs and their outcomes.

We next provided a reminder description of PABs:

Again, parental alienating behaviors can include a wide range of behaviors designed to damage, hurt, or destroy the relationship between a child and the other parent or guardian. These behaviors are typically exhibited over extended periods of time and are not just one time occurrences. They can include limiting or interfering with time or communication with a child, throwing away gifts from the parent or guardian, telling the child lies, undermining a parent's authority with the child, and many other types of behaviors.

Parents were then asked "Do you feel that the other parent has engaged in parental alienating behaviors towards you to harm or damage your relationship with your child(ren)?" If the answer was Yes, the parent was asked to subjectively rate how severe the alienating behaviors have been, with 1 indicating mild, 2 indicating moderate, and 3 indicating severe (same response options as the 2016 poll).

Next, for those respondents who felt the other parental figure was engaging in PABs, we assessed whether these behaviors have resulted in PA. Participants were asked specifically:

*Do you feel that you have been alienated from one or more of your children by the other parent? In other words, have the alienating behaviors of the other parent been successful in harming your relationship with your child(ren)?* (Yes or No as response options).

These parents were also asked how frequently they were the target of these behaviors (rarely, several times a year, several times a month, several times a week, or nearly or about every day), and how long they have been the target (< 6 months, 6–12 months, 1–2 years, 3–4 years, 5–6 years, 7–9 years, or 10 or more years). They were also asked whether they have ever sought court or legal intervention to address PABs, and whether they have sought mental health counseling or assistance to cope with the impact of the behaviors on them.

#### 2.2.4. Parental alienating behaviors

Regardless of whether a parent indicated feeling alienated or not, all parents were presented with four common PABs and asked to indicate how frequently they have engaged in the behavior themselves using a slider bar (0 not at all, 6 all the time). The four behaviors were: *said something bad to your child about the other parent, restricted time between the child and the other parent, scheduled activities for the child (e.g., sleepovers) that interfered with their parenting time with the other parent, and shared negative information about the other parent to others (e.g., friends, teachers)*. These four items were averaged together to be one measure of parental alienating behavior perpetration ( $\alpha_{US} = 0.94$ ;  $\alpha_{Canada} = 0.90$ ). If the parent indicated that they have ever restricted time with the other parent (any number other than 0), they were asked to provide a text response as to why they did this (and to skip if they felt uncomfortable answering).

#### 2.2.5. Perceived impact of parental alienating behaviors on parent-child relationship

Targeted parents were then asked seven questions regarding the perceived impact of the PABs on their relationship with their child(ren) using a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). The

items and their means/standard deviations appear in Table 1, and their reliability was acceptable ( $\alpha_{US} = 0.89$ ;  $\alpha_{Canada} = 0.86$ ). Items were averaged together to create a perceived impact score.

#### 2.2.6. Accusations of child abuse and domestic violence

False allegations of abuse are more commonly used by parents disputing child custody than other populations (Makay, 2014; Trocmé & Bala, 2005), so we asked all parents whether they have been falsely accused by the other parent/guardian of abusing their child(ren). If the parent responded "Yes," then they were asked whether their custody or visitation with their children was restricted or blocked due to false or exaggerated accusations of abuse by the other parent/guardian, and then how it was restricted or blocked: with the Court, Child Protection Services, or the other parent (without any legal or organizational help) and/or other (asked to specify how). Parents were also asked whether they were currently being restricted or blocked from seeing their child (ren) and whether they had ever been falsely accused of committing domestic violence or emotional abuse by the parent/guardian of their child(ren). Finally, they were asked whether there was ever a protective order, restraining order, or no-contact order imposed by the parent/guardian of their child(ren), and if they were currently under such an order.

#### 2.2.7. Mental health

All respondents were asked questions regarding their mental health. We assessed *posttraumatic stress symptoms* using a shortened version of the PTSD Checklist (Weathers, Litz, Herman, Huska, & Keane, 1993). Seven problems were selected from the original item list of 17 due to concerns about survey fatigue, and respondents were asked to indicate how much each of the seven problems had bothered them in the last month (using a 5-point scale with *not at all* and *extremely* serving as anchors; exact items can be obtained from the first author). The items also formed a reliable scale ( $\alpha_{US} = 0.94$ ;  $\alpha_{Canada} = 0.93$ ) and they were averaged together. For parents who indicated they felt they were being alienated from their child(ren), we asked a follow-up question: *To what extent do you think the problems that have bothered you are due to parental alienation*. This single question was answered using a 5-point scale ranging from *not at all* to *very much so*.

We also administered a 20-item depression screening tool published by the Center for Epidemiological Studies (Radloff, 1977) to assess depressive symptoms. Respondents rated how often in the last week they have felt certain ways (e.g., *I was bothered by things that usually don't bother me*), and respondents answered with rarely or none of the time (less than a day), some or a little of the time (1–2 days), occasionally or a moderate amount of time (3–4 days), and most or all of the time (5–7 days). The reliability of this scale was high ( $\alpha = 0.94$  both samples). The scoring of the measure is a summed score across the 20 items (4 of which are reverse scored) so that the range of scores is between 0 and 60, with higher scores indicating greater levels of depression.

**Table 1**

Means (SD) for the perceived impact of parental alienating behaviors on parent-child relationship scale.

	U.S. sample (n = 219)	Canadian sample (n = 60)
1. The alienating behaviors have not affected my relationship with my child(ren) at all (R).	2.76 (1.47)	2.88 (1.35)
2. I have a hard time communicating with my child(ren).	3.46 (1.41)	3.14 (1.27)
3. My child(ren) prefers the other parent over me.	3.28 (1.30)	3.09 (1.15)
4. My child(ren) believes exaggerated or false things about me told by the other parent/guardian.	3.40 (1.32)	3.42 (1.23)
5. My child(ren) has very negative feelings towards me.	3.18 (1.34)	3.05 (1.26)
6. My child(ren) has indicated not wanting to spend time with me due to what the other parent/guardian has said or done.	3.34 (1.37)	2.97 (1.36)
7. I feel distant or emotionally disconnected from my child(ren) due to the other parent/guardian's alienating behaviors.	3.40 (1.39)	3.19 (1.34)
Total	3.23 (1.09)	3.07 (0.95)

**Table 2**  
Descriptive statistics for the U.S. and Canadian polls.

	Poll 1: US (N = 600)	Poll 2: Canada (N = 600)
Age <i>M(SD)</i> years	43.49(16.88)	40.81(19.10)
Gender	50.1% Female (300/599)	50.8% Female (303/596)
Race		
White	62.7% (368/587)	69.2% (407/588)
Black	19.3% (113/587)	6.6% (39/588)
Asian	10.6% (62/587)	15.3% (90/588)
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0.5% (3/587)	–
Native American/First Nations/Alaskan Native	2.6% (15/587)	5.3% (31/588)
Mixed Race/other	4.4% (26/587)	3.6% (21/588)
Hispanic/Latinx ethnicity	21.2% (127/598)	4.5% (27/598)
Sexual Orientation		
Heterosexual	88.3% (528/598)	85.4% (510/597)
Lesbian/gay	4.3% (26/598)	3.0% (18/597)
Bisexual	5.5% (33/598)	8.7% (52/597)
Other	1.8% (11/598)	2.8% (17/597)
Marital Status		
Married/domestic partnership	46.8% (280/598)	39.3% (234/596)
Single/never married	36.6% (219/598)	48.3% (288/596)
Divorced	11.9% (71/598)	6.5% (39/596)
Widowed	2.8% (17/598)	3.4% (20/596)
Legally separated	1.8% (11/598)	2.5% (15/596)
Income <sup>a</sup>		
< \$40 K	46.8% (292/596)	50.1% (298/594)
\$40,001–\$60 K	17.1% (102/596)	20.2% (120/594)
\$60,001–\$80 K	12.9% (77/596)	12.6% (75/594)
\$80,001–\$100 K	7.9% (47/596)	7.9% (47/594)
> \$100 K	13.1% (78/596)	9.1% (54/594)
Education		
< High school diploma	3.5% (21/599)	14.6% (87/595)
High school diploma/GED	21.4% (128/599)	20.5% (122/595)
Some post-secondary school	24.1% (264/599)	48.2% (287/595)
Bachelor's degree or higher	31.0% (186/599)	16.6% (99/595)
Parent or guardian to a child	48.5% (284/585)	35.2% (209/594)

Note. Respondents could skip questions they did not want to answer; the actual numbers and valid percent excluding missing data are presented in the table.

<sup>a</sup> Income measured in U.S. dollars for the US sample, and Canadian Dollars for the Canadian sample.

### 3. Results: polls 1 and 2

#### 3.1. Characteristics of the samples

##### 3.1.1. Poll 1

Six hundred U.S. citizens over the age of 18 years old completed the poll, and all descriptive data for the sample are presented in Table 2. The average age was 43.49 years (range 18–89 years, *SD* = 16.88, 5 missing) and the proportion of women and men in the sample was nearly equal (299 males, 300 females, 1 missing). The majority of the sample was heterosexual (88.3%), and the sample varied considerably in their level of education and income, and race/ethnicity, reflecting the distribution of these variables across the U.S. population. Nearly half of the sample was currently married or in a domestic partnership (46.8%), 36.6% were never married/single, 11.9% were divorced, 1.8% were legally separated, and 2.8% were widowed (2 missing). Approximately half of the sample (48.5%) reported being the parent or guardian to a child.

##### 3.1.2. Poll 2

Six hundred Canadian citizens over the age of 18 years old completed the second poll, and their descriptive data are also presented in Table 2. The average age was 40.81 years (range 18–94 years, *SD* = 19.09, 12 missing) and the proportion of women and men in the sample was nearly equal (296 males, 303 females, 1 missing). The majority of the sample was heterosexual (85.4%), and the sample was selected to reflect the Canadian population in terms of their level of race, ethnicity, education and income. Nearly half of the sample was single or never married (48.3%), 39.3% were married or in a domestic partnership, 6.5% were divorced, 2.5% were legally separated, and 3.4% were widowed (4 missing). A smaller percentage of the sample reported being the parent or guardian to a child than in the U.S. sample (35.2% of 594).

#### 3.2. Knowledge and perceived prevalence

About half of both samples (U.S.: 49.8%, 9 didn't know/refused, 2 were missing; Canada: 43.1%, 14 didn't know/refused, 4 missing) reported being aware of the term “parental alienating behaviors” before the survey. A large proportion of respondents reported knowing someone who was engaging in PABs (U.S.: 52.2%, 22 did not know/refused, 2 missing; Canada: 49.8%, 29 did not know/refused). Of those who indicated knowing someone who was alienating a child ( $n_{U.S.} = 432$ ,  $n_{Canada} = 299$ ), the majority of the sample reported knowing one or two people (U.S.: 63.4%, 16 did not know/refused to answer; Canada 68.9%, 19 did not know/refused to answer) who were doing this. It is notable that around 30% of both samples reported knowing three or more parents who were engaging in PABs.

When asked about whether they know someone who has been the target of PABs, a large proportion reported yes (U.S.: 48.9%, 32 did not know/refused to answer, 13 were missing; Canada: 41.9%, 40 did not know/refused to answer, 8 were missing). Of those respondents who know someone who is a targeted parent ( $n_{U.S.} = 290$ ;  $n_{Canada} = 248$ ), the majority also indicated knowing only one or two parents (U.S.: 65.9%; 2.8% refused to answer; Canada: 71.8%, 6% refused to answer). However, a significant proportion of respondents (U.S.: 34.1%; Canada: 22.1%) reported knowing three or more parents who were the targets of PABs and of these, 3.4% of the Americans and 2.4% of the Canadians knew ten or more people.

#### 3.3. Prevalence and frequency of parental alienating behaviors

A large proportion of the parents/guardians of children in both samples indicated that the other parent has engaged in PABs towards them to damage their relationship with their child(ren) (U.S.: 35.5% of 284 respondents; Canada: 32.0% of 203 respondents). The perceived severity of these behaviors varied fairly evenly across the parents who

felt they were being alienated ( $n_{US} = 97$ ;  $n_{Canada} = 65$ ), with about a quarter to a third of parents reporting this experience as mild (U.S.: 35.3%; Canada: 26.2%), around half reporting it as moderate (U.S.: 42.4%; Canada: 50.8%), and nearly a quarter of the samples reporting it as being severe (U.S.: 22.4%, Canada: 23.1%).

Logistic regression analyses were used to determine whether particular demographic groups were more likely to report being the targets of PABs. The regression model fit the data well for the American sample,  $\chi^2(11) = 23.90$ ,  $p = .01$ . We did not find any statistically significant differences between parents in the American sample on any demographic factor except age,  $\beta = 1.03$ ,  $p = .01$ , CIs = 1.01 to 1.05, with older parents being more likely to report being the target of PABs than younger parents. The model fit for the Canadian sample was also good,  $\chi^2(11) = 25.01$ ,  $p = .01$ . Similar to the American sample, there were not statistically significant differences on any demographic variables except age ( $\beta = 1.03$ ,  $p = .03$ , CIs = 1.02 to 1.05) and Hispanic ethnicity ( $\beta = 5.78$ ,  $p = .03$ , CIs = 1.15 to 29.07) in the Canadian sample. Older parents were more likely to report being the targets of PABs, as were those parents who identified as being Hispanic.

Respondents who were the targets of PABs answered questions regarding frequency and the length of time they have been the target of PABs. A significant proportion of respondents (U.S.: 65.0% of 97; Canada: 71.4% of 63) reported the frequency as being rarely or only several times a year, and a smaller percentage reported frequency as several times a month (U.S.: 16.5%; Canada: 15.9%). An even smaller percentage reported it occurring several times a week (U.S.: 6.2%; Canada: 1.6%), and a striking number reported the behaviors as occurring every day (U.S.: 12.4%; Canada: 11.1%). There was great variability in the length of time these same parents reported being targets of PABs, with less than a quarter reporting the behaviors as starting within the last 6 months (U.S.: 22.7%; Canada: 12.7%), and similar proportions reporting this time as being within the last 6–12 months (U.S.: 14.4%; Canada: 15.9%), the last 1 to 2 years (U.S.: 18.6%; Canada: 20.6%), the last 3–4 years (U.S.: 11.3%; Canada: 15.9%), the last 5–6 years (U.S.: 9.3%; Canada: 4.8%) and 7–9 years (U.S.: 6.2%; Canada: 3.2%), and around a fifth to over a quarter of the sample for 10 years or more (U.S.: 17.5%; Canada: 27.0%).

### 3.4. Prevalence and perceived impact of parental alienation

For respondents who stated that they believed the other parental figure of their child was engaging in PABs, over 60% indicated that they believed it has resulted in one or more of their children being alienated from them (U.S.: 66.4% of 107, three did not know/refused; Canada: 61.4% of 70, 4 did not know/refused). A logistic regression analysis testing whether there were differences across the measured demographic variables provided a good fit for the data for the American sample,  $\chi^2(11) = 23.13$ ,  $p = .02$ . The only statistically significant variables were age ( $\beta = 1.05$ ,  $p = .05$ , CIs = 1.00 to 1.10) and being married/in a domestic partnership ( $\beta = 0.14$ ,  $p = .03$ , CIs = 0.04 to 0.56), with the odds of feeling alienated from a child being higher for older parents, and lower for married parents compared to parents with other marital statuses. The model fit was not as good for the Canadian data,  $\chi^2(11) = 14.89$ ,  $p = .19$ . The model still indicated that there were not statistically significant differences across any of the demographic variables in their odds of feeling they have been alienated from a child by the other parent.

The average perceived impact score of the PABs was 3.24 ( $SD = 1.11$ ) for the U.S. sample, and 3.07 ( $SD = 0.94$ ) for the Canada sample, indicating slight agreement overall that the PABs the respondents experienced were resulting in negative outcomes, supporting the belief that PA had occurred to some degree. The correlation between the reported severity of the behaviors they had experienced and the impact on their parent-child relationship was statistically significant for the U.S. sample ( $r = 0.29$ ,  $p < .01$ ), but only approached significance for the Canadian sample ( $r = 0.22$ ,  $p = .09$ ). This trend

indicates that the more severe the alienating parent's behavior was, the more negative impact it was reported as having on the targeted parent-child relationship.

### 3.5. Accusations of abuse

#### 3.5.1. Child abuse

Among parents/guardians of children ( $n_{U.S.} = 283$ ;  $n_{Canada} = 208$ ), 20.8% of Americans and 16.7% of Canadians reported that they have been falsely accused by the other parent of abusing their child (U.S.: 3 did not know/refused to answer, 1 was missing; Canada: 5 did not know/refused to answer). Of the respondents who indicated this as having happened to them, 61.0% of Americans and 71.4% of Canadians stated that their custody was blocked or restricted due to false or exaggerated claims of abuse. A Chi-square difference test indicated that there were no gender differences across the two samples among parents who reported either of these events as having happened to them,  $p > .05$ . Seven American and seven Canadian parents indicated that the other parent restricted their time with their child(ren) without any court order or outside intervention (e.g., child protection services), meaning that the other parent simply refused to allow them access to their child (e.g., blocked their visitation). A significant proportion of parents (U.S.: 13.7%; Canada: 12.5%) reported being currently restricted from seeing one or more of their children.

A Chi-Square difference test indicated that targets of PA were significantly more likely to be falsely accused of abusing their children than those who were not targets, U.S.:  $\chi^2(1) = 48.27$ ,  $p < .001$ ; Canada:  $\chi^2(1) = 70.18$ ,  $p < .001$ . Similarly, parents who were the targets of alienating behaviors were more likely to report having their parenting time restricted or blocked by the other parent for false or exaggerated reasons than non-targeted parents, U.S.:  $\chi^2(1) = 6.01$ ,  $p = .01$ ; Canada:  $\chi^2(1) = 9.93$ ,  $p < .01$ . Targeted parents were also more likely to currently have their parenting time blocked or restricted than parents who were not targeted, U.S.:  $\chi^2(1) = 62.97$ ,  $p < .001$ ; Canada:  $\chi^2(1) = 47.93$ ,  $p < .001$ .

#### 3.5.2. Domestic violence

Among parents in the sample ( $n_{U.S.} = 274$ ;  $n_{Canada} = 208$ ), 17.5% of Americans and 13.0% of Canadians claimed they had been falsely accused of committing domestic violence or emotional abuse by the parent of their child(ren) (9 Canadians did not know/refused to answer). A smaller percentage of respondents (U.S.: 13.7%; Canada: 9.6%) reported that they have had a restraining/protective/no-contact order imposed on them by the other parent (6 Americans and 3 Canadian did not know/refused to answer). Out of 38 Americans and 20 Canadians who answered the question, 60.5% and 80% respectively stated they were currently under a restraining/protective/no contact order. A Chi-Square difference test indicated that there were not gender differences on any of these variables across either sample,  $ps > 0.05$ .

Parents who were the targets of PABs were more likely than those who were not targeted to have been falsely accused of domestic violence/emotional abuse of the other parent (U.S.:  $\chi^2(1) = 59.30$ ,  $p < .001$ ; Canada:  $\chi^2(1) = 58.83$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and to have ever gotten a restraining/protective/no contact order (U.S.:  $\chi^2(1) = 62.28$ ,  $p < .001$ ; Canada:  $\chi^2(1) = 38.91$ ,  $p < .001$ ). There were no statistically significant differences between targets of PABs and other parents as to whether they were currently under a restraining/protective/no contact order,  $ps > 0.05$ .

### 3.6. Parental alienating behaviors

Nearly 40% (of 226) of American parents and over half the Canadian sample of parents indicated doing at least one parental alienating behavior at some point (59.9% of 161). The mean frequency of the behaviors among these subsamples was 1.57 ( $SD = 1.85$ ) for Americans and 1.89 ( $SD = 1.55$ ) for Canadians. Although not all

parents provided reasons as to why they restricted the parenting time of the other parent if they indicated ever having done so, four Americans and three Canadians stated it was due to the other parent using drugs, being mentally unstable, or being physically abusive, and eleven Americans and five Canadians stated they did not know or were unsure why they did it or had no reason. Twenty-eight Americans and eight Canadian parents said they restricted the parenting time of the other parent because the other parent was just “bad”, they didn't like them, they were a “horrible person,” or for money reasons.

### 3.7. Mental health outcomes

All analyses testing mental health outcomes of the sample were conducted using ANOVAs comparing three groups: Respondents without children, respondents with children but did not feel they were the targets of PABs, and respondents with children who felt they were targeted. Demographic variables (age, gender, sexual orientation, education level, income level, marital status, race, and ethnicity) were all entered as covariates in the model.<sup>1</sup>

#### 3.7.1. PTSD symptoms

Age, sexual orientation (U.S.), marital status and ethnicity (Canada) were the only statistically significant covariates in the ANOVA models (see Table 3). For both samples, there were statistically significant differences in traumatic symptoms between respondents with no children and those with children who were and were not targets of PABs, U.S.:  $F(2,525) = 47.32, p < .001, d = 1.00$ ; Canada:  $F(2,554) = 6.33, p = .002, d = 0.90$ . Parents who were the targets of PABs had significantly higher levels of trauma symptoms ( $M_{U.S.} = 3.29, SD_{U.S.} = 1.24$ ;  $M_{Canada} = 2.53, SD_{US} = 0.96$ ) than non-targeted parents ( $M_{U.S.} = 1.98, SD_{U.S.} = 0.96$ ;  $M_{Canada} = 1.91, SD_{Canada} = 0.90$ ) and respondents without children ( $M_{U.S.} = 2.27, SD_{U.S.} = 1.08$ ;  $M_{Canada} = 2.43, SD_{Canada} = 1.10$ ). A linear regression using perceived impact severity as a predictor found that the more severe the perceived impact there was, the more trauma symptoms the parents reported, U.S.:  $\beta = 0.54$  (CIs 0.42 to 0.82),  $p < .001$ ; Canada:  $\beta = 0.47$  (CIs 0.25 to 0.71),  $p < .001$ . Targeted parents ( $n_{U.S.} = 165$ ;  $n_{Canada} = 43$ ) were asked to what extent they felt their traumatic symptoms were the result of PA; the Americans indicated slight agreement with this item,  $M = 3.45$  ( $SD = 1.37$ ) but the Canadians neither agreed nor disagreed with it,  $M = 2.93$  ( $SD = 1.20$ ).

#### 3.7.2. Depression

Age and sexual orientation were the only statistically significant covariates in the ANOVA model for the US sample, while age, gender, sexual orientation, income, and ethnicity were statistically significant for the Canadian sample (See Table 4). Depression levels were found to differ significantly across comparison groups of respondents with no children, targeted, and non-targeted parents for both samples, US:  $F(2,535) = 31.67, p < .001, d = 1.00$ ; Canada:  $F(2,552) = 7.43, p = .001, d = 0.94$ . Parents who were the targets of PABs reported significantly higher levels of depressive symptoms ( $M_{U.S.} = 28.95, SD_{U.S.} = 14.30$ ;  $M_{Canada} = 23.73, SD_{Canada} = 13.90$ ) than those who were not targeted parents ( $M_{U.S.} = 16.38, SD_{U.S.} = 12.68$ ;  $M_{Canada} = 14.47, SD_{Canada} = 11.42$ ) or those without children ( $M_{U.S.} = 17.76, SD_{U.S.} = 12.97$ ;  $M_{Canada} = 20.71, SD_{Canada} = 13.43$ ). A regression analysis using perceived impact on the parent-child relationship on depressive symptoms was statistically significant, US:  $\beta = 0.38$  (CIs 2.59 to 7.69),  $p < .001$ ; Canada:  $\beta = 0.31$  (CIs 0.96 to 8.03),  $p = .01$ . The more the parent perceived that alienating behaviors have

<sup>1</sup> We also ran additional models (not reported here) using time since separation and perceived severity as co-variables in the models but they did not impact the results; targeted parents still had more PTSD symptoms, depression, and greater suicidality than alienating and reciprocating parents.

**Table 3**  
ANOVA table for PTSD symptoms.

	US (n = 551)			Canada (n = 565)		
	F	Sig	d	F	Sig	d
Age	44.79	< 0.001	1.00	65.70	< 0.001	1.00
Gender	0.66	0.42	0.13	1.97	0.16	0.29
Sexual orientation	18.27	< 0.001	0.99	1.79	0.18	0.27
Marital status	0.94	0.33	0.16	6.90	0.01	0.75
Income	0.42	0.52	0.10	0.93	0.33	0.16
Education	0.05	0.82	0.06	1.40	0.24	0.22
Race	0.26	0.61	0.08	1.37	0.25	0.21
Ethnicity	0.52	0.47	0.11	6.61	0.01	0.74
Parental status	47.32	< 0.001	1.00	6.33	0.002	0.90

**Table 4**  
ANOVA table for depression.

	US (n = 546)			Canada (n = 527)		
	F	Sig	d	F	Sig	d
Age	31.06	< 0.001	1.00	52.56	< 0.001	1.00
Gender	0.00	0.97	0.05	4.50	0.03	0.56
Sexual orientation	8.96	< 0.01	0.85	6.56	0.01	0.72
Marital status	0.08	0.78	0.06	0.05	0.83	0.06
Income	4.32	0.04	0.54	6.62	0.01	0.73
Education	0.23	0.64	0.08	2.02	0.16	0.29
Race	0.67	0.42	0.13	0.02	0.90	0.05
Ethnicity	0.56	0.45	0.12	7.29	0.01	0.76
Parental status	31.67	< 0.001	1.00	7.43	0.001	0.94

negatively impacted their relationship with their child(ren), the more depressive symptoms they reported.

#### 3.7.3. Assistance seeking

Among the parents who felt they were being alienated from a child by the other parent, about half of the American sample sought legal (50.0% of 68) and mental health assistance for the problem (55.9% of 68). Similarly, 40.5% of the Canadian sample (out of 42) sought legal assistance, and 46.3% (out of 41) had sought mental health assistance.

## 4. Polls 1 & 2 discussion

A main goal of the current project was to replicate the prevalence estimates for PA from our previous research. In 2016, our poll revealed that 13.4% of parents (or 9.03% of the entire sample) had been alienated from one or more of their children (Harman et al., 2016). Across both polls, we found that a higher percentage of parents believed they were the targets of PABs by the other parent than the original poll, and that these behaviors impacted their relationship with their child(ren). The panel of survey respondents were selected to be representative of the US (poll 1) and Canadian (poll 2) adult populations, so we were able to generate an estimate of prevalence across the two countries. According to the U.S. Census, 76% of the U.S. population were over the age of 18 in 2010 (United States Census Bureau, 2010). The estimated U.S. population in 2018 (the year data were collected) was 327,167,434 (United States Census Bureau, 2018a, 2018b), so approximately 248,647,250 of these were adults over the age of 18. Using the percentages of the samples from the first representative poll, there are approximately 40,206,260 American parents who feel as if they are the targets of PABs (16.17% of total sample), and 29,414,970 parents who feel that the alienating behaviors of the other parent have damaged their relationship with their child and has resulted in PA (11.83% of the total sample). Census data from Canada was only available from 2016 (Statistics Canada, 2017), which estimates approximately 28,367,445 are adults over the age of 18 at that time. The percentages we obtained from the second poll indicate that over 3,072,194 Canadian parents

(10.83% of the total sample) feel they are the targets of PABs, and 2,042,456 parents (7.2% of the total sample) feel these behaviors have led to the PA of their children. Our results indicate that PA is an international epidemic that is higher than our original estimation.

Among parents who believed they were the targets of PABs, the only demographic groups that varied significantly were age (both samples) and Hispanic ethnicity (Canada only), such that older parents and Canadian Hispanic parents were at greater odds of believing they were targets. Likewise, the only groups who had higher odds of feeling like they have been alienated from a child were parents of older age and for those parents who were not married or in a domestic partnership (for the American sample only). In other words, there were not differences in these beliefs across gender, marital status, sexual orientation, education level, income, or racial group membership. Building from our previous findings (Harman, Leder-Elder, & Biringen, 2016), the current polls confirm that PA impacts individuals across all socio-economic and demographic indicators.

In examining the frequency and length of time individuals had been the targets of PABs, we found that a significant portion of respondents reported the occurrence of alienating behaviors as being “rarely or only several times a year” and the duration of alienating behaviors varying significantly from starting in the past six months to extending over a decade. Given that a substantial proportion of targeted parents report suffering PABs only a handful of times throughout the year, one might question the impact of victimization. Accordingly, another important goal of this research was to determine the mental health consequences of PABs.

Our research revealed that being the victim of PABs has negative effects on psychological and emotional wellbeing. Targets of PABs evidenced significantly higher levels of trauma and depression symptoms than non-targeted parents or individuals without children. Specifically, more severe alienation was linked to more reported trauma symptoms. Similarly, the more parents perceived alienating behaviors to have negatively impacted their relationship with their child(ren), the more symptoms of depression they reported. The mental health outcomes of PA and alienating behaviors underscore the importance of studying this phenomenon. Alienation is not a problem that exists solely within the bounds of a family unit. Its impact is diverse and diffuse. Given what is known about the consequences of trauma and depression, it is likely that the mental health ramifications of PA have lingering consequences that impugn targets' personal, social, and occupational wellbeing, as well as potentially their emotional capacity to parent their children.

Other negative correlates found to accompany PABs and PA include accusations of child abuse and accusations of domestic violence/emotional abuse. Specifically, the current work revealed that targets of PA were significantly more likely to report being falsely accused of abusing their children than those who are not targets. Targets were also more likely to report having their parenting time blocked or restricted due to these accusations as compared to those who were not targets of PA. In addition, results of the current study reveal that parents who are the target of PABs are more likely to have been falsely accused of domestic violence/emotional abuse than non-targeted parents. We used an online survey for these two studies, so we were unable to determine whether these perceptions are accurate; it is possible that some of the parents in the sample had actually perpetrated domestic violence and/or child abuse and reported that they were falsely accused. False allegations of abuse are commonly used as a strategy to alienate children (Harman & Matthewson, 2020); indeed, in child welfare cases where contact or residence disputes had occurred, the rate of false allegations that were shown to be fabricated has been reported as high as 12% (Trocmé & Bala, 2005). Our data indicate a significant positive relationship between feeling alienated and reports of being a target of false accusations of abuse. Parents seeking help from domestic violence services are also highly likely to report that their abusive partners have used their children as weapons to stay in the relationship (e.g., Beeble,

Bybee, & Sullivan, 2007), such as by making threats of false accusations of abuse if they were to leave (e.g., 73.3% of fathers, Hines, Douglas, & Berger, 2015). Future research will need to employ alternate methods to examine the veracity of these beliefs and their relation to other PABs.

Many parents believe they are targets of parental alienation but may not fully understand what the term means. For example, if a parent is unable to communicate with their child for a few days while in the care of the other parent, they may believe they are being alienated. In order to be considered a parental alienating behavior, the behavior needs to be enacted as part of a larger cluster of behaviors over time, with the intent to harm the relationship between the parent and the child (Harman et al., 2018). Therefore, it is possible that the respondents in the first two polls perceived PABs were occurring when in fact they were not. Likewise, we also found that a large proportion of parents believed that the behaviors of the other parent have harmed their relationship with their child (who is now alienated from them). We attempted to verify this belief using a brief measure of how alienation has affected the parent-child relationship, but it would have been better to utilize a longer and more empirically valid measure of PA.

## 5. Poll 3 introduction

The purpose of the third poll was to measure more PABs than what was measured in the first two polls, and to ask about personal and other parent engagement in those behaviors. This approach allowed us to verify whether the single-item measure utilized in the first two polls about PABs corresponds to behaviors that the parent actually experienced or perpetrated themselves. We also examined what percentage of parents admit to reciprocating PABs, and whether such parents are similar to or different from other parents who are primarily the targets of such behaviors. We also used a validated measure of PA in the third poll to determine how many parents who have children with someone they are no longer in a relationship with have had their relationship harmed due to the PABs of the child's other parent. Therefore, rather than look at perceptions of whether the parent feels they have experienced PABs, we wanted to see what proportions of divorced parents in a representative sample are actually alienated from their child(ren).

In addition, we examined how many parents in the sample reported engaging in particular examples of PABs, and whether the other parent also engaged in these behaviors. Clinicians and researchers have noted that parents who alienate their children often have personality disorders or traits such as narcissism and psychopathy (Baker, 2007; Gith, 2013; Harman & Biringen, 2016), so we also examined whether parents who admitted to perpetrating PABs were more likely to have dark tetrad indicators (Machiavellianism, narcissism, psychopathy, and sadism) that have been associated with aggressive behaviors (e.g., Dinić & Wertag, 2018) than those who did not report engaging in such behaviors. Finally, in addition to the mental health indicators that were measured in the first two polls, we also examined whether parents who are alienated from their child(ren) are more likely to be suicidal within the last year than other parents who are not alienated.

## 6. Poll 3 method

### 6.1. Procedure

The third, online representative poll utilized the same method as the first two, except that we added one additional inclusion criterion: the adults had to have at least one child with a person that they are no longer in a relationship with (e.g., divorce, break-up).

### 6.2. Measures

#### 6.2.1. Relationship history

Participants were asked how long ago their relationship with the other parent ended (< 1 year to 11 or more years ago).

### 6.2.2. Attitude towards the other parent

We asked five questions about the participant's attitudes towards the other parent using a 5-point semantic differential scale (1 = *strongly agree*, 5 = *strongly disagree*). The items were: *My ex is someone I can cooperate with in regards to our children*, *My ex is crazy*, *My ex is a good parent to our children*, *Although we are not together anymore, my ex is a decent person*, and *My ex has done some things I can never forgive him/her for*. These five items made a reliable scale ( $\alpha = 0.84$ ) and were averaged together. The average sentiment towards the other parent was neutral (2.99), but the standard deviation was fairly large ( $SD = 1.05$ ) indicating that there was variability in attitudes towards the other parent of their child(ren).

### 6.2.3. Dark tetrad

Because alienating parents often have personality disorders such as narcissism and psychopathy (e.g., (Harman & Biringen, 2016), we assessed the dark triad of personality (Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy) using the Short Dark Triad (SD3; Jones & Paulhus, 2014) which has nine items assessing each dimension (27 total) using a 5-point Likert scale with *Strongly Disagree* and *Strongly Agree* serving as anchors. The scale was reliable ( $\alpha = 0.86$ ), and the items within each dimension were averaged together. We additionally measured sadism, as this personality dimension characterizes people who show a long standing pattern of cruel and demeaning behavior towards others for personal enjoyment as a way to show dominance and control over the victim (O'Meara, Davies, & Hammond, 2011). Sadism is considered a 4th dark personality dimension to add to the dark triad (hence, making this the dark tetrad; O'Meara et al., 2011). The measure used to assess sadism was the Short Sadistic Impulse Scale which contains 10 items recorded in dichotomous form using "Like me" and "Unlike me" on polar opposite sides of a 10-point scale (minimum score 0, maximum score 10). The reliability of this measure was acceptable ( $\alpha = 0.67$ ), but the data was positively skewed, so it was transformed using a log10 transformation for the analyses. Machiavellianism scores were slightly below the mid-point of the scale ( $M = 2.79$ ,  $SD = 0.70$ ) for the sample, as were the narcissism score ( $M = 2.77$ ,  $SD = 0.68$ ). Scores on psychopathy ( $M = 2.03$ ,  $SD = 0.67$ ) and sadism ( $M = 1.35$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ) were also on the lower end of the scales.

### 6.2.4. Parental alienating behaviors

Although there are hundreds of PABs that have been identified in the scientific literature (Harman & Matthewson, 2020), we provided participants with a list of 18 commonly employed PABs (from Baker & Darnall, 2006) and asked people to indicate whether they have done any of them (Yes or No) and whether the other parent of their child has done them (Yes and No/Don't know). We tallied the total number of behaviors for self and other parent to create an index of numbers of PABs were reported to be enacted by both parties. Respondents admitted to perpetrating an average of 2.19 PABs ( $SD = 2.12$ , range 0–13), and reported that their partners on average engaged in 4.28 behaviors ( $SD = 4.41$ , range 0–18).

### 6.2.5. Parental alienation of the child

To measure PA, we administered the Rowland's Parental Alienation Scale (RPAS, 2018) which consists of 42 items of child behavior rated on a 5-point scale (0 = *never* to 4 = *almost always*) intended to reflect the eight manifestations of PA as originally conceptualized by Richard Gardner (2003). For example, an item measuring campaign of denigration was "how often does your child call you names?" Rowlands (2018) determined that the scale captured 5 of the 8 domains after psychometric testing (campaign of denigration towards the targeted parent, unconditional reflexive support for the other parent, presence of borrowed scenarios, spread of animosity towards extended family, and independent thinker phenomenon). If the parent had more than one child with an ex-partner, they were asked to rate the child that they have the most problems co-parenting with the other parent. The

reliability of the scale was high ( $\alpha = 0.92$ ) and the items on the scale were averaged together.

The RPAS was normed using a sample of 589 parents who had been alienated from their children whose mean on the scale was 3.55 ( $SD = 0.82$ ). However, these data were positively skewed and subsequently transformed. Because our sample was selected to be representative of the general U.S. population, the overall mean for the sample was lower than Rowlands' (2018), 0.96 ( $SD = 0.49$ ), and the range was 0.29 to 3.19. Our data were also skewed positively (1.59,  $SE = 0.10$ ) and so we transformed the measure using a log10 transformation.

After completing questions regarding both PABs and outcomes, we then asked participants directly whether they felt the other parent has engaged in PABs towards them to harm or damage their relationship with their child(ren) (Yes, No, I don't know/Refuse). If the parent answered "yes" to this question, we asked how severe they thought behaviors were (mild, moderate or severe). We also asked whether the parent felt the behaviors of the other parent have been successful in harming their relationship with their children (Yes, No, Don't know/Refuse). We asked these questions after the other measures because we did not want to prime respondents to answer the previous questions in line with what they may believe about PA, and we wanted to see whether people who experience alienating behaviors and outcomes accurately identify it as such.

### 6.2.6. Mental health indicators

We used the same measures for PTSD symptoms and depression that were used in the first two polls. The reliability of the two scales was high (both  $\alpha = 0.93$ ). The mean for the sample on PTSD symptoms was 1.99 ( $SD = 1.03$ ) and the mean depression score was 15.60 ( $SD = 12.63$ ). In addition, we assessed suicidality by asking respondents whether and how often they have thought about suicide in the last year (*never*, *rarely*[1 time], *sometimes*[2 times], *often*[3–4 times] and *very often*[5 or more times]). For those participants who did not answer "never" for whether they have thought about suicide in the last year, we then asked whether their thinking about suicide in the last year was related to conflict around their child custody situation with their ex (using a 5-point scale with *strongly disagree* and *strongly agree* as endpoints).

Finally, we asked participants who had contemplated suicide in the last year whether they knew anyone who committed suicide due to child custody issues with their ex-partners (Yes, No, I don't know/Don't care to say). At the end of the survey, all respondents were provided contact information for a national suicide hotline, and were encouraged to contact 911 or their mental health provider if they were currently considering harming themselves.

## 7. Poll 3 results

Six hundred and sixty-nine people completed the survey, but they could skip questions if they wanted to. The mean age of the sample was 44.65 years (range 20–82,  $SD = 11.39$ ), and 51.4% (of 666) were female. The majority of the sample reported being heterosexual (94.6% of 664; 0.8% gay/lesbian, 4.4% bisexual/pansexual). About a half of the sample reported being legally married (49.0% of 666, while 17.6% were remarried or in another domestic partnership, 23.0% were divorced, 11.9% were never married, 10.2% were in a committed relationship but not married; 5.0% were separated, and 1.1% were widowed. These and other demographic characteristics of the sample (e.g., race) are presented in Table 5.

Of the 668 respondents who provided information about how long ago their relationship with the other parent ended, the largest proportion of relationships were reported to have ended over 11 years ago (38.3%), and <5% ended within the last year (4.5%). Fairly similar proportions of respondents reported their relationship ending 1–3 years ago (12.4%), 3–5 years ago (11.1%), 5–7 years ago (12.4%), 7–9 years

**Table 5**  
Descriptive statistics for poll #3 of parents who are no longer in a relationship with the other parent of one or more of their children.

		Poll 3: parents (N = 669)
Age M(SD) years		44.65 (11.39)
Gender		51.4% Female (342/666)
Race	White	75.2% (498/662)
	Black	13.1% (87/662)
	Asian	4.4% (29/662)
	Native American/First Nations/ Alaskan Native	3.2% (21/662)
	Mixed race/other	4.1% (27/662)
Hispanic/Latinx ethnicity		17.6% (116/658)
Sexual Orientation	Heterosexual	94.6% (628/664)
	Lesbian/gay	0.8% (5/664)
	Bisexual	4.7% (31/664)
Marital Status	Married/domestic partnership	49.0% (326/666)
	Single/never married	22.1% (147/666)
	Divorced	23.0% (153/666)
	Widowed	1.1% (7/666)
	Legally separated	5.0% (33/666)
Income	< \$40 K	30.5% (203/664)
	\$40,001-\$60 K	9.9% (66/664)
	\$60,001-\$80 K	18.8% (125/664)
	\$80,001-\$100 K	13.2% (88/664)
	> \$100 K	18.7% (184/664)
Education	< High school diploma	2.7% (18/664)
	High school diploma/GED	19.9% (132/664)
	Some post-secondary school	37.9% (252/664)
	Bachelor's degree or higher	39.5% (262/664)

Note: When only percentages are reported in the table, this means the entire sample provided an answered the question.

ago (8.8%), and 9–11 years ago (12.4%).

### 7.1. Prevalence and accuracy of perception

Of the 569 respondents who answered the question, 38.7% stated that they felt the other parent was engaging in PABs towards them to harm their relationship with their child(ren). Similar to the other two polls reported earlier, nearly a third of these parents (27.9% of 219) described these behaviors as mild, a half (46.6%) described them as being moderate, and 25.6% described them as being severe. Out of 627 respondents, 22.2% reported that they felt the other parent has been successful in alienating a child from them.

It is possible that parents who are the targets of PABs do not label their experience as such, and vice versa. Therefore, we next examined whether perceptions of being the target of PABs (which was asked at the end of the survey) was related to actual reports of alienating behavior perpetration by the other parent (which was asked about at the beginning of the survey). We created dummy codes for the sum of the other parent's reported alienating behaviors such that 1 was for reports of 7 or more behaviors (75th or greater percentile), and 0 was for 0–1 behavior (25th or less percentile). Nearly half (52.19%) of parents in the sample reported that the other parent had engaged in over seven PABs. A Chi-square analysis indicated that there were statistically significant differences between those who had high/low reported behaviors and those who reported being the target of such behaviors,  $\chi^2(1) = 172.34, p < .001$ . Of the people who reported that they were not the target of PABs ( $n = 220$ ), 86.8% reported that the other parent engaged in seven or more such behaviors towards them, meaning only 13.2% labeled their experience accurately. In contrast, most people who stated that they were the targets of PABs (69.6% of 349) reported that the other parent engaged in at most only one parental alienating behavior towards them. These discrepancies indicate that many people may not have a clear understanding of what PABs are because their perceptions did not often match the actual behaviors they reported

happening to them. This finding may also mean that only one clear behavioral indicator is needed for many people to believe they are being targeted.

We found a similar but not as discrepant result for PA as an outcome. As before, we dummy coded the RPAS scores along the 25th and lower (0) and the 75th and higher (1) marks, and then conducted a Chi-square analysis to find that there were statically significant differences between those who scored high and low on the measure and whether they believed they have been alienated from their child,  $\chi^2(1) = 83.29, p < .001$ . Among parents who believed they have been alienated from a child ( $n = 96$ ), 88.5% did score high on the RPAS scale; so only 11.5% of participants seemed to believe they were alienated but the RPAS measure demonstrated that they were not. For parents who reported that they were not alienated from a child ( $n = 203$ ), 32.0% actually scored very high on the RPAS scale, while the majority were accurate in their report (68.0%). These findings indicate that people were generally more accurate in their perception as to whether they have been alienated or not than whether they are the target of PABs.

Because there was more missing data for the single items assessing the two constructs than for the RPAS and the tallied score for behaviors, we used the latter two measures of these outcomes for the remainder of our analyses. The RPAS was normed on a sample of parents who have been alienated from their children ( $M = 3.55; SD = 0.82$ ; Rowlands, 2018) and the highest RPAS score in our sample was 3.11, indicating that the general population's level of PA was lower in comparison. Using the lower end of the standard deviation as our cut off (2.73), we found that 6 participants (1.0% of 668) were comparable to the alienated parent's sample reported by Rowlands in the validation of the measure.

It is important to also consider the fact that PA varies in severity among children for a variety of reasons (e.g., severity and frequency of the PABs, length of time the alienating has been occurring, amount of quality time with the targeted parent), and Rowlands appears to have selected parents who were generally more severely alienated than most given her sampling of parents who were members of social media groups for alienated parents. Any score above zero indicates some damage to the parent-child relationship, so the mean score for each parent is just an indication of how severe it is. Using a very stringent cut-off based on a more severely alienated sample may not capture the numbers of parents who have mild to moderate PA in the general population. Therefore, we created another cut-point two standard deviations from the mean (1.91) and found that 44 of 666 parents (6.7%) reported moderate to high amount of PA with a child.

### 7.2. Reciprocation

PA is not often an outcome of two parents who are both arguing and fighting, as there are serious power imbalances in families in which PA is occurring which makes reciprocated interparental conflict highly unlikely (Harman et al., 2019; Warshak, 2015). Unfortunately, there are still many professionals who believe that both parents must be contributing to the problem if a child has been alienated from a parent (Warshak, 2015). Therefore, we tested whether parents who were reciprocating PABs were as likely to be alienated from their children as those parents who were not reciprocating the behaviors. We created dummy codes for participants based on how many alienating behaviors they reported the other parent as having done and on how many they admitted to doing themselves. If the parent stated that neither they nor the other parent did any of them, they did not receive a code. If they reported doing twice as many or more than the other parent, they were given a "1" and were labeled "alienating parent." If the parent reported being the target of PABs more than twice the number that they admitted to doing, they were coded "2" and labeled "targeted parent." If the parent reported that both they and the other parent did alienating behaviors to a similar degree (less than twice as much as the other), they were coded "3" and labeled "reciprocating parent." Nearly half the

sample was categorized as a reciprocating parent (47.8% of 594), 39.1% were targeted parents, and 13.1% were alienating parents.

A univariate analysis of variance indicated that there were statistically significant differences between these groups on the RPAS,  $F(2, 590) = 29.29, p < .001, d = 1.00$ . A Bonferroni post-hoc test found that that alienating parents had the lowest scores on the RPAS ( $M = -0.14, SD = 0.21$ ) while targeted parents had the highest scores, ( $M = 0.02, SD = 0.01$ ),  $p < .001$ . Interestingly, reciprocating parents had RPAS scores that were lower than targeted parents ( $M = -0.08, SD = 0.11$ ),  $p < .001$ , and were slightly higher than those parents who were primarily the perpetrators,  $p = .05$ . These findings indicate that PA is most evident for targeted parents who are not reciprocating the alienating behaviors towards the other parent. We next conducted a *t*-test to determine whether those parents who are alienated differed in their attitudes towards the other parent of their child from those parents who were reciprocating PABs. We found that parents who were alienated had significantly less negative attitudes towards the other parent of their child ( $M = 2.54, SD = 0.89$ ) than reciprocating parents ( $M = 3.30, SD = 1.00$ ),  $t(514) = -8.99, p < .001$ . In other words, those parents who were reciprocating alienating behaviors to a similar degree as the other parent had more negative attitudes towards them and were less likely to be alienated from their children than targeted parents. Curiously, targeted parents were less negative towards the other parent who was enacting PABs against them than reciprocating parents and were more likely to be alienated from their child(ren).

We next examined whether there were any demographic differences among these targeted parents using a linear regression model, with the number of alienating behaviors as the outcome variable. The only statistically significant demographic predictor of these behaviors was gender,  $\beta = -0.21, p < .01$ , CIs  $-3.01$  to  $-0.47$ , with fathers being the target of more PABs than mothers. We did not find statistically significant differences for any of the demographic factors as predictors of RPAS scores. In other words, parents did not differ from each other by age, gender, education, income, marital status, sexual orientation, race, or ethnicity for how alienated they were from a child.

### 7.3. The dark tetrad

We did not find statistically significant differences in this general population sample of parents on any of the dark tetrad indicators based on whether they were categorized as an alienating, targeted, or reciprocating parent,  $ps > 0.05$ .

### 7.4. Mental health outcomes

We ran three separate linear regression models with the RPAS measure as the predictor, and the three mental health indicators as outcomes. The more alienated the parents were from a child, the more depressed they were,  $\beta = 0.28, p < .001$ , CIs  $13.42$  to  $23.02$ , and the more traumatic stress symptoms they reported,  $\beta = 0.31, p < .001$ , CIs  $1.28$  to  $2.05$ . Alienation from a child was also related to the frequency of suicidal thoughts within the last year,  $\beta = 0.19, p < .001$ , CIs  $0.50$  to  $1.17$ . The more severely alienated a child was reported as being, the more likely the parent was to have considered suicide within the last year.

We next ran a one-way ANOVA to determine whether alienating, targeted, and reciprocating parents differed on their beliefs that their thoughts about suicide in the last year were related to conflict around their child custody situation with their ex. The results of this analysis were statistically significant,  $F(2,142) = 4.77, p = .01, d = 0.79$ . A Bonferroni post-hoc test indicated that targeted parents had greater agreement with this belief ( $M = 2.50, SD = 1.51$ ) than reciprocating parents ( $M = 1.91, SD = 1.32; p = .05$ ) and alienating parents ( $M = 1.53, SD = 0.96; p = .02$ ). Nearly half of parents who were considered moderately to severely alienated reported having been suicidal within the last year (47.72%,  $n = 44$ ). Among all parents who had

suicidal thoughts within the last year ( $n = 151$ ), 19.9% indicated knowing someone who had killed themselves due to a child custody issue or conflict with their ex regarding their children.

## 8. Poll three discussion

The third poll was a representative sample of adults from the US, but was restricted only to parents who had a child with someone that they were no longer in a relationship with. Similar to the first two polls, the proportion of parents who felt they were the targets of PABs was over 30% (38.7% of 569 in this current sample). Estimating how many Americans this percentage represents was challenging because census estimates are available for the number of individuals who are divorced and married, and not individuals with children from a relationship with someone they are no longer with. We first attempted to estimate this figure using the data from the first poll by narrowing the sample to only those individuals with children and calculating the percentages of them who were divorced, legally separated, or never married (32.5%). However, the first poll did not differentiate between parents who are currently married and in an intact family, versus those who are remarried. Therefore, because approximately 4 in 10 divorced adults remarry (Livingston, 2014), we estimated that about 16.25% of the married adults in the sample were remarried from the first poll, making the total estimated percentage of adults with children who were not in a relationship with the other parent at 49% (139 parents of 600). This means about 23.16% of the total U.S. sample of adults likely had a child with someone that they are no longer in a relationship with.<sup>2</sup>

We therefore estimated 57,586,703 Americans have children with someone that they are no longer in a relationship with. Similar to estimates from the original representative poll conducted in 2016 (Harman et al., 2016), approximately 22,286,054 (38.7%) of the parents in the sample from the third representative poll reported that the other parent of their child was engaging in PABs. A number of parents claimed they were the targets of PABs and yet did not indicate more than one behavior that the other parent had done to them (42.7% of 569), suggesting again that one alienating behavior may be enough for some individuals to believe they are being alienated. There were also a large proportion of parents who did not feel they were the targets of these behaviors, and yet reported the other parent as having engaged in seven or more alienating behaviors (33.5%). It is likely that both of these discrepancies may be due to a lack of understanding of what PABs are. That said, the proportions of parents who were accurate/inaccurate were close, and so prior estimates of prevalence using a single-item self-report on this factor are fairly accurate because they account for this variability. If the prevalence of PA is based simply on the numbers of parents who report being the target of seven or more (of 18) PABs, then an estimated 30,060,259 parents in the US believe they are the targets of moderate to high levels of these behaviors.

The third poll also measured PA using a self-report single item measure and the RPAS (Rowlands, 2018). Our results show that parents were generally accurate in their perception as to whether they had been alienated or not from their child(ren). Nearly a quarter of the sample (22.2%) self-reported they had been alienated from one child by the other parent, which is approximately 12,784,248 parents, or 3.9% of the total US population. In contrast, 6.7% of the sample were moderately to highly alienated from a child as measured by the RPAS, which is approximately 3,858,309 parents, or 1.3% of the total US population. This figure is likely an underestimation, as many parents have more than one child with a previous partner and those children may also be

<sup>2</sup> An alternate way to estimate this percentage is to use Census data of family composition, however this data only indicates the percentage of children who live primarily with one biological parent (26.7%; United States Census Bureau, 2018a, 2018b). As this percentage is slightly higher than our estimate reported, we opted to use the more conservative figure for our estimations.

alienated. Our estimate of number of alienated children in the U.S. is only slightly higher than prior estimates (1%) made by other researchers using solely deductive methods (Bernet, 2010). Therefore, > 1% of adults in the U.S. appear to have been successfully alienated to some extent from one or more of their children by the other parent.

There has been a myth that parents who are alienated from their children also engage in PABs; in other words, that both parents are reciprocating PABs (Warshak, 2015). When both parents engage in PABs, this situation is characteristic of loyalty conflicts (Bernet, Wamboldt, & Narrow, 2015), which is a situation involving two parents of similar levels of power who put their children in the middle of their interparental conflict. In contrast, PA involves unequal power between parents, such that the PABs are not easily reciprocated (Harman et al., 2019; Warshak, 2015). In other words, a portion of the parents who reported being the targets of moderate to high levels of PABs may be reciprocating these behaviors, which would be a loyalty conflict situation rather than a PA dynamic. Our calculations indicate about 39.1% of 594 parents from the third poll were the targets of at least twice as many PABs than they self-reported doing, while almost half (47.8%) reciprocated such behaviors. By eliminating those parents who admitted to reciprocating PABs (loyalty conflict families), an estimated 22,516,400 Americans are parents who are the non-reciprocating targets of PABs. Findings of this poll also reveal that PA is most likely for targeted parents who are not reciprocating alienating behaviors as compared to alienating parents or those who reciprocate such behaviors. Interestingly, parents who were alienated had less negative attitudes towards the other parent than reciprocating parents. It appears that targeted parents may truly be the victim in this unfortunate situation, as they are showing less negative affect and refraining from reciprocating alienating behaviors. Nevertheless, they are the ones incurring the most harm to their relationship with their child(ren) and their own mental health. It is important for practitioners to identify the patterns of behaviors and perpetrators in order to better differentiate between families where there is PA or loyalty conflicts, as they involve very different power dynamics and outcomes for the parents and children.

Our findings regarding reciprocity also make it important to clarify the distinction between PA and parental estrangement (Kelly & Johnston, 2001). Estrangement refers to issues with the parent-child relationship that are due to issues within the relationship itself (e.g., a parent's abusive behaviors or poor parenting skills; Harman et al., 2019) rather than caused primarily by the behaviors of the alienating parent. In the first two polls, it is possible that some of the parents who felt they were the targets of false allegations of abuse were actually perpetrators of this abuse and therefore were estranged rather than alienated from their child. While there was not a way to differentiate these parents from alienated parents in the first two polls, we were able to examine this issue more closely in the third poll. Estranged children are not as likely as alienated children to display symptoms like psychological splitting (Bernet, Wamboldt, & Narrow, 2016), which is a symptom that was captured using the RPAS measure we used in the third poll. Targeted parents were also not as likely to reciprocate alienating behaviors, and they were the most alienated from their children than those parents who reciprocated the abusive behaviors or were the primary perpetrators of them. A careful examination of abusive behavior perpetration and reciprocity of all types, including PABs, may be a useful method of differentiating estrangement from loyalty conflicts and PA.

Similar to our findings from our first two polls, this third poll revealed that being the target of PABs is linked to negative mental health outcomes. The more alienated targeted parents felt from their child(ren), the more symptoms of depression and traumatic stress we found. In the current study, we also assessed whether participants had contemplated suicide in the previous year. Alienation from a child was

related to a greater frequency of suicidal thoughts within the last year than among parents who were not alienated from a child, and almost half of the moderately to severely alienated parents contemplated acting on these suicidal thoughts in the last year. Alienated parents are a population at high risk for suicide and are in drastic need of intervention.

In examining demographic characteristics of targeted parents, we found that the only predictor of PABs was gender, such that fathers report being the target of more PABs than mothers, but that mothers and fathers were equally likely to be targets of behaviors in general. Few studies have been published examining gender differences in the use of different parental alienating behaviors (see López, Iglesias, & García, 2014 for an exception), particularly in their frequency of use. Additional research is needed to examine whether fathers are subject to greater numbers of parental alienating behaviors over time than mothers. We attempted to examine personality disorder traits of the sample using a measure of the dark tetrad (narcissism, Machiavellianism, sociopathy, and sadism) because these traits have been noted by clinicians as being common among parents who alienate their children (Harman & Biringen, 2016). Indeed, therapists have reported that nearly every client who has been court ordered to attend a structured aftercare program for alienating parents (called Family Bridges) has severe forms of personality disorders (Parnall & Rand, 2018). We did not find statistically significant differences in the dark tetrad traits between parents who are the primary perpetrators of alienating behaviors from those who are engaging in reciprocated and the targets of non-reciprocated conflict. Population-based samples have fewer frequencies of personality disorders than clinical samples (Zimmerman, Chelminski, & Young, 2008), and our measure of the dark tetrad has primarily been used for research purposes rather than in forensic settings among clinicians working with families. Therefore, future research examining personality disorders of perpetrators would benefit from focused targeting of this sample using measures commonly used by clinicians in such settings.

## 9. General discussion

Taken as a whole, these three polls confirm that PABs and PA are widespread and prevalent phenomena that have a significant impact on victims. In line with our previous research, we found that a significant number of people are knowledgeable of the term "parental alienating behaviors" (U.S.: 49.8%; Canada: 43.1%). Moreover, respondents reported personally knowing individuals who were perpetrators (U.S.: 52.2%; Canada: 49.8%), as well as victims (U.S.: 48.9%; Canada: 41.9%) of this form of abuse, which we conceptualize and term as "abusive strategies to harm parent-child relationships", rather than an abuse of an individual. Using different measurement approaches, we also found that the proportion of parents who felt they were the targets of PABs was over 30%. Importantly, our research is the first to empirically document that PABs and PA are an indiscriminate plague that spans international borders and traverses demographic characteristics.

Our results also revealed that being the target of PA behaviors is related to negative mental health outcomes such as depression and traumatic stress symptoms, and that targeted parents were highly likely to have had suicidal thoughts in the past year. Although nearly half of the targeted parents we surveyed reported seeking mental health or legal assistance for the PABs they and their children were experiencing, the vast majority of legal and mental health providers deny or do not acknowledge the existence and severity of this problem (Harman et al., 2018). To give our estimate of prevalence of PA some perspective, approximately 1 in 40, or 1.5 million children in the U.S. are self-reported by parents to have autism (Kogan et al., 2018), which is less than half of a percent of the population (0.4%). Autism research and treatment has been heavily funded in the U.S. across numerous

governmental agencies and foundations, including over 281 million dollars funded by the National Institute of Health alone in 2018 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2019). Comparatively, there are over three times as many alienated children in the U.S. than autistic children and yet the problem has not been widely recognized or deemed a priority for any research or treatment funding at all (Harman et al., 2018). Our findings serve as a call to action to devote more funding and resources to the study, prevention, and treatment of this widespread problem that is affecting millions of families. We must continue to investigate both the short-term and long-term impact that PABs and PA have on the targeted parents, and perhaps more importantly on the children who are being distanced from a care-giver.

Psychologists have consistently demonstrated that people have a fundamental need for belongingness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Maslow, 1943), esteem (Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Rosenberg, 1965), and positive relationships with their primary care-givers (Bowlby, 1969; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). PABs attack and undermine each of these essentials. Parents trapped in an abusive situation where they are the target of behaviors that harm or destroy their relationship with their child(ren) is a textbook example of the type of ongoing rejection that challenges the parent and child's ability to meet their needs for belongingness and esteem. Moreover, children who are kept from having healthy relationships with both of their parents are at risk for a large number of negative life outcomes. In this collection of work, we have shown that choosing to take the "high road" and refrain from reciprocating alienating behaviors does not stop the alienator from continuing their abusive behaviors, as alienating parents are much like intimate terrorists who are motivated by power and control (Harman & Matthewson, 2020). We must continue to examine these phenomena with the hope of someday being able to minimize the negative impact that they have on their targets and victims.

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## Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

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