

Rich Gelles, SP2

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Richard J. (Rich) Gelles, the Joanne and Raymond Welsh Chair of Child Welfare and Family Violence at the University of Pennsylvania's School of Social Policy and Practice and the School's former dean, died June 26 after a battle with brain cancer. He was 73.

"He never shied away from changing how things have always been done in order that we may all do them better," said Penn President Amy Gutmann. "In and of itself, such fearlessness is an excellent quality to have for any scholar, teacher, advocate and leader.

"But, in Rich, that quality empowered the greatest of purposes: that of safeguarding the most vulnerable members of society."

Dr. Gelles was born in Newton, Massachusetts, and graduated from Newton South High School. He earned his AB in sociology from Bates College in 1968, his master's in sociology from University of Rochester in 1971, and his PhD in sociology from University of New Hampshire in 1973.

After graduating, he taught at the University of Rhode Island. He was director of the Family Violence Research Program and also served as department chair from 1978 to 1982, and dean of the College of Arts and Sciences from 1984 to 1990. He was also a lecturer of pediatrics at Harvard Medical School from 1979 to 1988.

Dr. Gelles came to Penn in 1998. For the next several years, he served as the director of the doctoral program in the School of Social Work. After first serving as interim dean of Penn's School of Social Work in 2001 (*Almanac* September 11, 2001 (<https://almanac.upenn.edu/archive/v48/n03/Gelles.html>)), Dr. Gelles was appointed dean in 2003 (*Almanac* February 18, 2003 (<https://almanac.upenn.edu/archive/v49/n22/gelles.html>)), leading to a 13-year tenure that included implementing the School's innovative master of science in Nonprofit Leadership (NPL) program, the master of science in Social Policy (MSSP) program, and doctorate in Clinical Social Work (DSW) program. Under his deanship, the name of the school was changed from the School of Social Work to the School of Social Policy & Practice.

Dr. Gelles then became the Joanne and Raymond Welsh Chair of Child Welfare and Family Violence. He was also the founding co-faculty director of the Field Center for Children's Policy, Practice & Research and the founding director of the Evelyn Jacobs Ortner Center on Family Violence. With alumni of the Wharton School, Dr. Gelles created Penn's Center for High Impact Philanthropy in 2006 to provide donors with decision-making tools to ensure funds have the greatest possible social impact. After Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005, he noticed there were areas of Mississippi that had been far more devastated than New Orleans but were not receiving the same attention and resources. He made five trips to Hancock County, Mississippi with representatives of the School of Social Policy, Engineering, Dental, Medicine and Nursing.

In 1996, Dr. Gelles earned a Congressional Fellowship from the American Sociological Association, and the next year he helped draft the federal Adoption and Safe Families Act. He testified before Congress on many occasions. He was appointed to the Kinship Care Advisory Panel of the Administration on Children, Youth and Families in 1998.

Dr. Gelles trained and consulted federal, state and local child welfare and child protective agencies and served as an expert witness on child welfare issues in state and federal courts across the country. He also consulted the NFL and US Army on issues of domestic violence.

In 1984, *Esquire* named Dr. Gelles one of the men and women under 40 who are changing America. Dr. Gelles was the 1999 recipient of the Mark Chaffin Outstanding Research Career Achievement Award from the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children. He was a recipient of the SSW Teaching Award in 2000 (*Almanac* May 16, 2000 (<https://almanac.upenn.edu/archive/v46/n33/051600.html#ssw>)). Earlier this year, he received the prestigious Social Policy Researcher Award from the Society for Social Work and Research (*Almanac* February 18, 2020 (<https://almanac.upenn.edu/volume-66-number-23#richard-gelles-sswr-social-policy-researcher-award>)).

According to Cassie Statuto Bevan, lecturer in SP2's MSSP program who spent 20 years working in the US House of Representatives and 30 years working with Dr. Gelles, Dr. Gelles "worked throughout his career to redesign the child welfare system, refocusing foster care on the needs of the developing child for safe and permanent families. He elevated the needs of abused and neglected children by advocating for time limits on the length of time children would spend in the foster care system.

"His work had a direct influence on foster care policy in the United States by helping to more than double the number of foster children finding permanent, loving, adoptive parents over the last 20 years. He changed the lives of individual children who had been abused by the foster care system by bringing this abuse to the attention of both the media and the legal system."

He was published widely on the topics of child maltreatment, child abuse and neglect, domestic violence, violence toward woman, child welfare social policy and child protective services. He wrote 26 books, including *The Book of David*, which helped raise awareness of the tragic and unintended consequences of then-prevailing family-first model of child welfare; *The Violent Home*, the first systematic empirical investigation of family violence; and *The Third Lie: Why Government Programs Don't Work and a Blueprint for Change*.

His wife, Judy Gelles, an accomplished artist, photographer and filmmaker, died March 14 of a ruptured brain aneurysm. He is survived by his sons, David and Jason; and grandchildren, Max, Lia and Gemma.