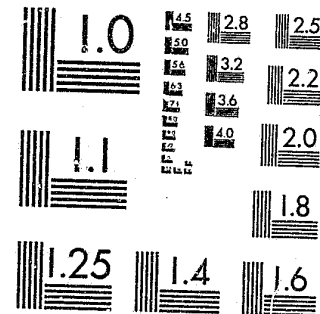


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10/2/85

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REPORT ON  
THE INCIDENCE OF CHILD ABUSE  
AND CHILD ABUSERS  
AMONG INMATES

March, 1983

Department of Corrections  
Research & Reporting Unit

U.S. Department of Justice  
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## INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW OF CURRENT LITERATURE.

Over the past several years there has been growing international concern over the incidence of child abuse and neglect. In 1982, the Governor's Council on Child Abuse and Neglect asked the Virginia Department of Corrections and the Virginia Department of Social Services to conduct a study to determine the incidence of child abuse and child abusers among inmates incarcerated in Virginia's prisons. This report is the result of that study; implications for further research are also discussed.

In Fiscal Year 1982, there were 39,685 reported incidents of suspected child abuse in Virginia. Of those, 8,230 were founded, that is, investigated and determined to be cases where abuse could be proven; an additional 4,433 cases were determined to be at risk, that is, while the investigation could not determine beyond a reasonable doubt that abuse was involved, the investigator strongly suspected that abuse had occurred or would occur. Of the 12,663 founded and at risk cases, 12.9% were complaints involving the same child or children.

It has been speculated in popular periodicals that child abusers were generally abused as children, and also that abused children grow up to become delinquents and in turn adult criminals. After an extensive review of research literature, this author found no evidence to support or deny this popular view of child abuse. The review of literature, however, did give evidence of there

being some similarity in psychological traits between abused children and adjudicated delinquents.

In 1980, E.M. Kinard conducted a quasi-experimental study that involved two groups of children: 30 physically abused children and a control group of 30 non-abused children that were matched to the abused group according to the following variables: age, race, sex, birth order, number of children in the family, parent structure, socioeconomic status, type of residence, and neighborhood. Kinard administered the Piers-Harris Children's Self Concept Scale in order to measure personality traits, and two tests to measure the tendency towards aggressive behavior: the Task of Emotional Development test, and Rosenzweig Picture Frustration Test. He found that the abused group were more likely to be extrapunitive aggressive, particularly toward children their own age, and were more likely than the control group to view themselves as "being sad, unpopular, unhappy, disobedient at home, wanting their own way, doing many bad things, and believing their parents expected too much of them" (p.691).

In a similar study, Straker and Jacobson matched 19 abused subjects with a same-size control groups in terms of age, race, sex, socioeconomic status, IQ, and language development. Using the Feshbach & Roe Affective Situations Test to measure empathy, the Children's Apperception Test to measure emotional maladjustment, and the Rosenzweig Picture Frustration Test to measure aggression, they found that the two groups were significantly different on the

empathy and emotional maladjustment measures, but were not significantly different on the aggression measure. Straker and Jacobson suggest that the lack of significant difference between the two groups on the aggression measure should be treated cautiously, since the Rosenzweig test measures fantasy aggression rather than behavioral aggression, and that the abused group would likely score significantly different from the control group on a test that measures behavioral aggression since that is what they are exposed to in their life situations (1981).

Cyriaque and Fowler studied the case histories of over 1,000 juvenile delinquents committed to state care in Illinois, and found, among other characteristics, family relationships characterized by a "lack of...affection,...physical and sexual abuse" (p.26), and mental health indicators that included "low self esteem, poor cognitive functioning, and inability to deal with rage or empathize with others" (p. 30, 1982). Cyriaque and Fowler did not report on child abuse per se as an indicator of violent behavior, although they did find similar characteristics among violent juvenile offenders as did Kinard and Straker and Jacobson did among abused children.

Regarding the popular theory that abused children become delinquents and in turn become adult criminals, Rojek and Erickson (1980) and Cyriaque and Fowler (1982) indicate that there is no basis for the belief that the "disease" of delinquency gets worse without intervention by the courts and/or social agencies. In both articles it was clearly stated that there is no discernable "career pattern"

among delinquent offenders. Rojek and Erickson in particular, in their study of 1,200 delinquent offenders give convincing evidence that adjudication as a delinquent, indeed as a repeat delinquent offender, is more attributable to a randomized series of events than it is attributable to any demographic or criminal history variable.

In summary, the literature suggests that while there appear to be similar characteristics among adjudicated delinquents and abused children in terms of psychological and familial traits, there is no evidence to suggest that a linear model of causality for adult criminal behavior exists, e.g. that abused children become delinquents who in turn become adult criminals. In fact, this author found no study which had as its primary objective the use of a history of child abuse within a criminal history as a predictive variable for present or future criminal behavior. Since no such study exists, it appears that determining the incidence of adult criminals who were abused as children is a beginning step in establishing the merit of using child abuse history as a predictive variable. The second question asked in this study, that is, how many inmates are also child abusers, not only adds to the scope of knowledge regarding the larger issue of child abuse, but also has concrete implications regarding the treatment and rehabilitation of adult inmates who are identified as child abusers.

#### STATEMENT OF RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODOLOGY.

As mentioned previously, the Governor's Council on Child Abuse and Neglect requested that the Virginia Department of Corrections and the Virginia Department of Social Services investigate the incidence of child abuse and child abusers among the population incarcerated within Virginia's state prisons. In research terms, there were two questions to answer:

1. How many inmates in Virginia's prisons were abused as children?, and
2. How many inmates in Virginia's prisons were known or suspected child abusers?

An exploratory research design was chosen to answer the two research questions, and a separate methodology was devised to carry out the investigation.

In order to answer the question regarding the number of inmates who were abused as children, a questionnaire was designed to administer to a random sample of inmates which included the following questions to be asked by the inmates' counselors:

1. Inmate's date of birth
2. Inmate's race and sex
3. Whether the inmate was abused as a child (the legal definition of abuse and neglect in Virginia was included for purposes of clarification)
4. If the inmate had been abused as a child, the relationship of the abuser to the inmate.

In addition to the four questions listed above, and in order

to answer the question regarding how many inmates were also child abusers, the questionnaire administered to the sample included two additional questions:

1. Had the inmate abused his/her own children?
2. Were the inmate's children, if he/she was a child abuser, referred to the police, Department of Social Services, or other agency, and were the children removed from the inmate's custody?

Space was provided on the questionnaire to give additional information which might be relevant to the issue of child abuse.

A random sample of active inmates was chosen using an SPSS program, and 400 names were generated from that process. Questionnaires were sent to the institutions which were indicated by the location codes on the printout generated by the SPSS program.

In addition to the two questions above, a tape listing of active inmates was sent to the Virginia Department of Social Services to cross-reference with their automated records to determine the incidence of known or suspected child abusers within the inmate population. Thus, the question regarding inmates who are child abusers was approached in two different ways, e.g. self-report and official record.

#### QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS.

Of the 400 questionnaires sent to the random sample of inmates, 202 were returned completed. Those returned uncompleted, were not completed primarily because the inmate had been transferred

to some other institution within the correctional system, had been paroled, or refused to answer the questions on the instrument.

With a total population 9,131 inmates, the sample of 202 inmates gives the data in this study an error rate of .06 at the 95% confidence level.

Of the 202 respondents, 51 (25.2%) indicated that they had been abused as children, under the legal definition of child abuse and neglect in the Code of Virginia.

The mean age of those responding was 29.5 years (computed to nearest birthday). The range for the total sample was 17 to 73 years, with the mode at 22 years. Of those inmates indicating that they had been abused as children, the mean age was 26.9 years, with the range 19 to 62 years, and the mode 26 years.

Table 1 shows the racial breakdown of both the total sample and those indicating that they had been abused as children. Using the chi square test of significance, it was determined that significantly more whites than expected were in the group reporting abuse ( $\chi^2=6.617$ ;  $df=2$ ). This statistic is significant at the .05 level.

Table 2 shows the breakdown of the total sample and of those reporting abuse as children according to sex. Significantly fewer females than expected reported a history of abuse ( $\chi^2=5.287$ ;



df=2). This statistic was significant at the .05 level. It should be noted that the sample was not sex biased, based on the number of females in the total population of 9,132 inmates; therefore, the fact that there were significantly fewer females than expected reporting a history of abuse takes on greater import. The implications of this statistic will be discussed later.

Table 3 shows the relationship of the abuser(s) to the inmate reporting the abuse. More than twice as many respondents reported abuse by the father only as did mother only, and exactly twice as many reported abuse by the father only as reported abuse by both the mother and father.

Only one case of child abuse perpetrated by an inmate on his/her own child was reported in the questionnaires. The author acknowledges that self report on this question is unreliable, since the inmates who responded may believe that anonymity would not be protected, and chose not to answer this question truthfully.

#### RESULTS OF AUTOMATED DATA CROSS-MATCH

As mentioned previously, the Department of Social Services and the Department of Corrections cross-matched names and other demographic data contained within their automated data systems to determine the incidence of child abusers among inmates. A potential list of abusers/inmates was developed from the name matching, and this list was verified against additional

data contained in the files at the Department of Corrections. The results showed that 240 of the 9,131 inmates could be positively identified as having been charged with or suspected of child abuse. The 240 who were positively identified as having records of abusing a child or children represent 2.7% of the confined population. While this percentage may seem small, the literature suggests that child abuse is an underreported crime; additionally, 23.2% of those in the sample indicated that they had no children, and therefore would not have had the same opportunity as an inmate with children. Finally, given the mean age of the inmate population, it is conceivable that those who do have children have been separated from them due to incarceration, and therefore would not have had the opportunity to abuse them that a person living at home would have.

#### DISCUSSION OF RESULTS.

From the data reported on the questionnaires, it appears that inmates who were abused as children are somewhat younger than the inmate population at large (26.9 years vs. 29.5 years), are more likely to be white, and are more likely to be male. They were more likely to have been abused only by their natural father, with reported abuse by both parents being the next most likely relationship.

It is curious that no females in the sample reported a history of being abused as children. This may be due to the fact that

none were actually abused as children, it may be due to residual shame and guilt on the part of the female inmates, or it may be due to a belief on the inmates' part that they deserved whatever punishment was meted out to them by their parents and/or guardians. Child abuse is a major topic in the MILK program (Mothers Inside Loving Kids, a support group for female inmates sponsored in part by Parents Anonymous), and additional research needs to be accomplished to determine the magnitude of the problem of child abuse by female inmates. The fact that no female inmates in this study reported being abused as children needs to be treated with caution.

Finally, it would appear from the data generated from the cross-matching process that the incidence of child abusers among inmates is no greater than it is among the population at large. Only 2.7% of the confined population in Virginia's prisons were positively identified as actual or suspected child abusers.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH.

Establishing the number of inmates who were abused as children is not the end of the quest for knowledge regarding this tragic phenomenon; actually it represents only the beginning of a process which could establish the predictive value of child abuse history as it relates to present and future criminal behavior. Based on previous research, it is not likely that child abuse history in and of itself will be the cause of any criminal act, whether that act is committed when the abused child is still a juvenile, or whether that act is committed when that abused child becomes an adult. Searches for the root causes of

crime inevitably come up short, either methodologically or in the proof. However, if criminal behavior is viewed as the result of several variables coming together at a point in time where the motive and opportunity to commit a crime are present, then certainly determining whether one of those variables is a history of child abuse bears considerable merit. This author proposes that a study of the predictive value of child abuse history in relation to other established variables be accomplished.

Finally, determining the incidence of child abusers among the adult inmate population gives impetus to the development of rehabilitative treatment programming for those inmates who are identified as child abusers.



TABLE 1

RACIAL BREAKDOWN OF SAMPLE POPULATION

	<u>Black</u>	<u>White</u>	<u>Other</u>	<u>Total</u>
Total Sample	120 (59.4%)	82 (40.6%)	0 (0.0%)	202
Abused Only	22 (43.1%)	29 (56.9%)	0 (0.0%)	51

TABLE 2

SEXUAL BREAKDOWN OF SAMPLE POPULATION

	<u>Male</u>	<u>Female</u>	<u>Total</u>
Total Sample	184 (91.1%)	18 (8.9%)	202
Abused Only	51 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)	51

TABLE 3

RELATIONSHIP TO INMATE REPORTING ABUSE

<u>Relationship</u>	<u>Number</u>
Father Only	20 (39.2%)
Mother Only	9 (17.6%)
Both Mother and Father	10 (19.6%)
Step-father Only	4 ( 7.8%)
Other Only	3 ( 5.9%)
Mother and Step-father	1 ( 2.0%)
Mother and Foster Father	1 ( 2.0%)
Foster Mother Only	1 ( 2.0%)
Mother, Father, and Foster Father	1 ( 2.0%)
Mother, Foster Father, and Other	1 ( 2.0%)
	<u>51 (100.1%)</u>

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