

Another Look at the Effects of Child Abuse

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Violence against children and violent crime are two serious social problems that were linked in early research on the “cycle of violence” by Cathy Spatz Widom and others. (See “Child Abuse and Later Effects,” *NIJ Journal*, January 2000.) Diana J. English, Carol Brandford, and Widom used the earlier research as a jumping-off point to conduct a second study on the relationship between child abuse and neglect and delinquency, criminality, and violent behavior. The second study confirmed and expanded on the concept of a cycle of violence.

Other Times and Places

This study built on the earlier research by examining a different time period (the 1980’s rather than the late 1960’s and early 1970’s) and a different part of the country (the Northwest instead of the Midwest). This study also included an additional ethnic population (Native American youth). In addition, the researchers focused more on gender and ethnic differences. Finally, this study explored the potential effect on children when social service agencies place them outside the care of their immediate families. The researchers defined abuse or neglect in

the study as the injury, sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, negligent treatment, or maltreatment of a child by any caregiver under circumstances that indicated the child’s health, welfare, or safety was harmed.

Effects of Childhood Maltreatment Confirmed

The report replicates earlier findings that the effects of childhood victimization last into adulthood. Children who are physically abused and neglected have an increased risk of arrest for violence. The second study added a new finding regarding emotional maltreatment. The researchers found that victims of emotional abuse also manifest an increased risk for violent crime.

As a whole, the abused and neglected children were 11 times more likely to be arrested for a violent crime as a juvenile, 2.7 times more likely to be arrested for a violent crime as an adult, and 3.1 times more likely to be arrested for any violent crime (juvenile or adult) compared to the matched control group. Victims of sexual abuse were the least likely to be arrested for a violent crime—a finding similar to earlier published results.

Differences by Race/Ethnicity

The current study extended the existing knowledge base by adding Native American children to a population sample of abused and neglected Caucasian and African American youth. As found earlier, both

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the Caucasian and the African American youths showed a significant increase in the likelihood of an arrest for violent crimes as juveniles if they were abused or neglected. The Caucasian youth in this study were 20 times more likely to have a juvenile arrest for a violent crime than the Caucasian youth in the matched control group. In contrast, a juvenile in the Native American abused and neglected group was not significantly more likely to be arrested for violent crime than a Native American juvenile in the control group. The same pattern emerged with regard to the risk for being arrested as an adult and for any violent arrests. However, it should be noted that there was a high percentage of arrests for Native Americans in both groups. Also, the number of Native American youths added to the study was small, making it difficult to detect the effects of childhood abuse or neglect.

Differences by Gender

The researchers found an increased risk associated with child maltreatment for both males and females, echoing the earlier work. Abused and neglected males were five times more likely than the control group males to be arrested as juveniles and almost twice as likely to be arrested as adults.

Even though girls and women typically have low rates of engaging in officially recorded criminal behavior, experiencing child abuse or neglect was still found to have a substantial impact on the criminal behavior of females. Abused and neglected females were nearly four times more likely to be arrested as a juvenile and twice as likely to be arrested as an adult. These findings suggest that female victims of child abuse and neglect, long thought to direct their pain and suffering inward, may also release it externally through negative behavior, just like their male counterparts.

Placement Decisions

The study found a relationship between removing a child from parental care and later delinquent and criminal behavior. It also showed that children who were removed from the custody of a parent or

primary caregiver and placed in foster care with nonrelatives were significantly more likely to be arrested—as juveniles, as adults, for a violent crime, and for any crime. Moreover, children who were initially left with a primary caregiver when the abuse or neglect was identified, and who were subsequently moved to foster care, showed even greater levels of arrest in all forms than victimized children who were moved right away or who remained with their primary caregiver until the age of 18. This finding suggests that further research is needed to understand the characteristics of families and children removed from parental custody; to determine what types of behavior lead to the removal of a child; and to discover which factors influence whether a child is placed in foster care, placed with relatives, or left with the primary caregiver.

Practical Implications

From a prevention perspective, these findings argue for improved assessments and early intervention for children who are victims of abuse and neglect. Resources applied to properly assessing and responding to abuse and neglect situations can prevent later negative consequences for these children and for others. This finding applies to children who remain with their primary caregivers as well as to those who are moved to the care of others.

The researchers suggest a need to pay more attention to the different types of child maltreatment, to the effects of abuse and neglect on children's growth and development, to the services provided to these children, and to the consequences to children and society if these issues are not addressed.

For more information

- Contact Diana J. English at Washington State Department of Social & Health Services, Office of Children's Administration Research, 4045 Delridge Way S.W., Suite 400, Seattle, WA 98106-1274, 206-933-3535, endi300@dshs.wa.gov.