

Effects of Childhood Maltreatment on Adult Arrests in a General Population Sample¹

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Several studies have found that children and adults with a history of childhood maltreatment are at increased risk of engaging in illegal behavior and being arrested (Geller and Ford-Somma, 1984; Maxfield and Widom, 1996; Smith and Thornberry, 1995; Widom, 1989; Zingraff et al., 1993). These studies used a variety of methods to measure the maltreatment history and illegal and aggressive behavior, each method with certain advantages and limitations. For example, some studies employed self-reports of maltreatment from clinical, justice, high-risk, and general population samples. The difficulties of using such self-reports are well known and include potential self-interest or bias in reports; a failure to report actual maltreatment due to forgetting, embarrassment, or interpretive variation; and potential self-reports of abuse so minor as to be barely distinguishable from normal discipline. On average, self-reported maltreatment is likely to be less severe and long lasting than system-detected and verified maltreatment, so that lesser consequences may be attributable to these factors.

An alternative is to follow up with those who have an official record of childhood victimization. In such cases, the existence of maltreatment is confirmed, although it is clear that not all such maltreatment is detected and recorded. Officially identified cases are generally compared either to population rates of illegal or aggressive behavior or to rates in samples selected for comparability on other relevant risks. In these studies, the attribution of excess delinquent or criminal behavior to maltreatment as such may be in error. It is extremely difficult to match control samples on other relevant risks, especially parental criminal history, family disorganization and conflict, more general maladaptive parenting, child misbehavior prior to the maltreatment, and even associated demographic factors such as parent age, marital status, income stability and adequacy, family health, and family support network. Therefore, one cannot be sure that elimination of childhood victimization would necessarily have an impact on crime.

Studies also vary in their measurement of juvenile and adult delinquent, criminal, and aggressive behavior. Reports of such behavior may come from parents, agency files, youth or adult self-reports, or arrest or detention data. Each of these methods also includes certain measurement risks. For example, such behavior may be unknown to parents, unrecorded by agencies, and unrecalled or otherwise unreported by individuals. There are also serious problems inherent in the use of arrest records as a proxy measure of criminal behavior (Geerkin, 1994). Attention to the widespread practice of racial profiling has directed public attention to the ways in which members of an ethnic or social group may be at excess risk of arrest solely because they are more likely to be subjected to closer police scrutiny. Most officially identified victims of child maltreatment have come to the attention of the police either because of the maltreatment itself or because of parental failure to supervise and control the child. Thus, it is possible that such children may be at risk of becoming a “usual suspect” by the simple fact that they are known to the police.

The current study used longitudinal data on childhood risks and adult outcomes from a sample of randomly selected young people from a mixed urban and rural, demographically diverse population when they were an average of 6 years old. When participants were over 18 years old they were asked to report their history of maltreatment. Thus, it is possible to include comparisons and controls for family risks that may lead to both maltreatment and adult criminal behavior. In addition, it is possible to compare cases officially identified with cases in which the maltreatment is identified only by a

retrospective report from the young adult. However, the low rates of identified childhood victimization and adult arrests for particular charges mean that there is a deficiency of statistical power to detect elevated rates with conventional Type 1 error rates (e.g., $\alpha < .05$). Subsequent reports will compare the findings reported here to those based on self-reported illegal and aggressive behavior.

The study goals were to—

- , Identify higher adult arrest rates in those with a history of maltreatment.
- , Determine the extent to which higher arrest rates may be attributable to common risks for maltreatment and arrest.
- , Estimate the fraction of young adult arrests that may be attributable to child maltreatment and compare that fraction to the fraction attributable to punishment that is more widely employed and considered acceptable in the general population.

Study Sample and Measures

The data were drawn from the Children in the Community (CIC) cohort originally sampled on the basis of residence in two upstate New York counties in 1975 (Kogan, Smith, and Jenkins, 1977). The members of this cohort were born between 1965 and 1974, and data were collected by maternal interview on a range of health, behavioral, and environmental factors. Parents and children were interviewed separately in three followups in 1983, 1985–1986, and 1991–1994. The sample as constituted in 1983 was demographically representative of the sampled areas, and family followup rates have been 95 percent since that time. Full details on the sample characteristics, protocols, and followup are available in earlier publications (Cohen and Cohen, 1996).

Data on abuse history were obtained from the New York State Child Protection Agency, self-reports of abuse from study respondents who were 18 years old or older, and selected maternal responses to questions that researchers judged to be extreme and that might indicate emotional neglect. Of the 35 officially identified cases, 4 were cases of sexual abuse with or without other abuse or neglect, 16 were cases of physical abuse with or without neglect, and 15 were cases of neglect. About one-fourth of the sample had lived a portion of their childhoods in one or more other States, from which no information on officially detected abuse or neglect was obtained. For these and other reasons, the records constitute a minimum estimate of cases with official identification. The overlap between self-reported and official determinations of abuse or neglect history was only nine cases (Brown et al., 1998). The neglect self-report asked only about lack of overnight supervision before the age of 10 and yielded too few positive responses to be analyzed separately. Self-reports of two or more sexual abuse incidents were coded as sexual abuse in order to increase the specificity of this inquiry. Because of sparse data, self-reported sexual abuse cases were combined with officially identified cases. Maternal self-reports of emotional neglect were coded based on extreme responses to parenting items in the early interviews.

The members of the six groups analyzed for this report were assigned hierarchically as follows:

- , Official physical abuse record ($n = 16$).
- , Official or self-reported sexual abuse ($n = 20$).
- , Official neglect record ($n = 15$).
- , Maternal report of emotional neglect ($n = 16$).
- , Self-reported physical abuse ($n = 22$).
- , No detected abuse or neglect ($n = 579$).

Numbers in analyses vary slightly depending on available data.

These groups differ on basic demographic variables. Women predominated in the self-reported abuse groups, especially in the sexually abused group. More than one-fourth of the official cases of abuse or neglect involved black children, while self-reported cases were proportional to the total sample with regard to race. Official cases were more likely to be from a nonintact family, below the official U.S. poverty line, and of very low socioeconomic status (SES) on a standardized measure. Self-reported physical abuse cases were not significantly distinguishable from the noncases with regard to demographics. Self-reported sexual abuse cases were more likely to involve children from a somewhat lower SES, those living in poverty, and those with nonintact families.

Arrest data were combined from New York State and FBI records. Because this was a general population sample, in order to keep numbers sufficiently large for reasonable statistical power, arrests were grouped into the following charge groups, regardless of severity: offenses against people, property offenses, drug offenses, DWI and DUI offenses, weapons possession, offenses against a minor, and other miscellaneous minor offenses.

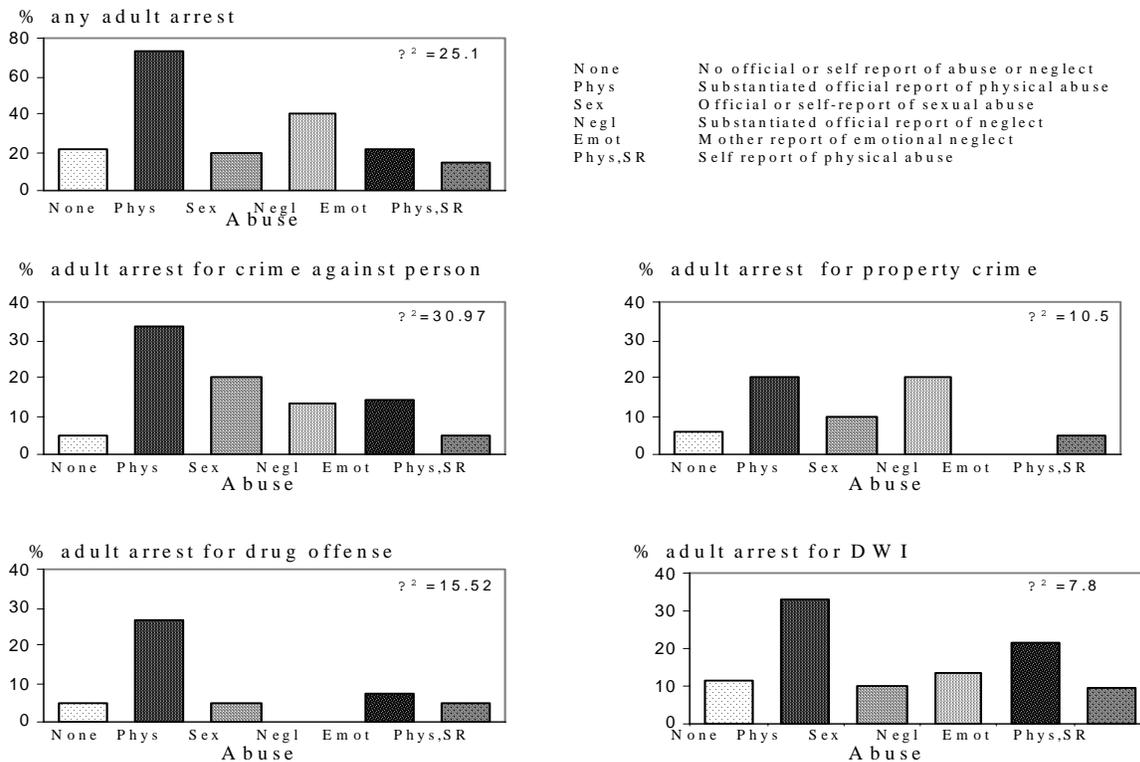
Findings

This study found that victims of officially identified physical abuse were more likely to be arrested as adults and more likely to have been arrested for a variety of crimes, including crimes against persons (“violence”). When combined with other official cases of child maltreatment, they were also more likely to have been arrested for property crimes. The most distinctive findings was that victims of sexual abuse were also more likely to have been arrested for crimes against persons, despite the fact that this group was mostly self-reported. These findings were not erased by controls for demographics risks, or by inclusion of early childhood punishment history. The fact that other self-reported maltreatment was not related to arrests in these data may have been due to low statistical power, or it may raise questions about the influence of official abuse detection on police scrutiny of families and the consequent probability of arrest.

A comparison of the attributable risk of arrest associated with maltreatment history with that of simple above-average use of punishment in early childhood showed the latter to have much greater influence, especially on arrests for crimes against persons.

Arrests for each of the abuse and neglect groups are shown in exhibit 1. Although the proportion of each group ever arrested as an adult varied significantly, the effect is overwhelmingly attributable to high rates among those with an official record of physical abuse, with a lesser elevation among those with an official history of neglect. Among those arrested for a crime against a person (assault, robbery, threats), high rates are seen for the officially identified physical abuse victims and for those with either self-reported or official histories of sexual abuse. The overall differences by maltreatment history in proportion to those arrested for a property offense, a drug offense, or drunk driving were not statistically significant, although significantly more of those with official maltreatment records had been arrested for a property offense than any other group. The most substantial differences were seen in the crimes against people.

Exhibit 1. Childhood maltreatment and adult crime



Exhibits 2 and 3 present the findings from the logistic regression analyses of the odds of being arrested for any offense or for a crime against a person, respectively. Each odds ratio (OR) is a comparison with the reference (no identified maltreatment) group. ORs empirically less than the expected 1.0 are indicated by dashes. The first columns of ORs estimate the effects of maltreatment, controlling only for the known difference in likelihood of arrest of males compared with females. Only those with officially identified physical abuse were more often arrested as an adult, while both that group and sexual abuse victims were more at risk for arrest for a crime against a person. Some other maltreated groups also

had ORs noticeably greater than the expected 1.0 but, given the low statistical power of these small samples, differences were not significant.

Exhibit 2. Odds ratios for any adult arrest from simultaneous logistic regression (*n* = 662)

Predictor	OR controlling only gender	OR controlling demographic and family risks	OR controlling demographic and punishment
Physical abuse record	10.74*	7.57*	7.46*
Sexual abuse	1.27	1.27	1.01
Neglect abuse	2.73	1.65	1.58
Emotional neglect (MR)	–	–	1.13
Physical abuse (MR)	–	–	–
Gender (male)	3.34*	3.52*	3.64*
Demographic risk index		1.26*	1.17*
Childhood punishment			1.25*

* *p* < .05

Exhibit 3. Odds ratios for adult arrest for crime against person from simultaneous logistic regression (*n* = 662)

Predictor	OR controlling only gender	OR controlling demographic and family risks	OR controlling demographic and punishment
Physical abuse record	9.91*	4.14*	9.53*
Sexual abuse	7.12*	7.27*	9.45*
Neglect record	3.33	–	2.10
Emotional neglect (MR)	3.24	3.79	5.03
Physical abuse (SR)	1.16	1.11	1.54
Gender (male)	2.95*	3.05*	3.45*
Demographic risk index		1.93*	1.77*
Childhood punishment			1.74*

* *p* < .05

The next columns of ORs in exhibits 2 and 3 add a demographic risk index to the prediction equation to determine whether it may account for the excess arrests in these groups. The demographic risk measure developed in this study was designed to determine whether abuse could be detected by measures generated in the early childhood data (Brown et al., 1998). It includes poverty, young maternal age at first childbearing, welfare support, nonwhite race, large family size, and low maternal education. Additional risks reflecting parental characteristics, parenting patterns, and child characteristics that

predicted one or another kind of maltreatment were not employed in these analyses, as they did not influence the findings.

Adding the demographic risk index to the equations lowered the estimated effects of officially detected physical abuse but did not change the significant predictors. On the other hand, for each additional demographic risk, the odds of ever being arrested increased by 26 percent (OR = 1.26), and the odds of ever being arrested for a crime against a person nearly doubled (OR = 1.93).

The final OR column includes a measure of punishment techniques reported by mothers in interviews when the children were an average of 6 years old. Forty sample members were missing some data, so these estimates are not quite comparable to those in the other two columns. The estimated significant effects of childhood maltreatment were not negatively influenced by inclusion of this variable, and each increase of one standard deviation in this measure was independently associated with a 25-percent increase in the odds of arrest and a 74-percent increase in the odds of arrest for a crime against a person.

Exhibits 4 and 5 combine the maltreatment groups and compare rates of arrest both by maltreatment status and by whether punishment in early childhood was above or below the sample mean. The likelihood of having been arrested was about 50 percent higher for those with an abuse history, regardless of the punishment history. Among those without a maltreatment history, those who experienced more punishment than average had arrest histories 38 percent more often than those who experienced less punishment. The impact of these two variables on the total likelihood of arrest, however, gives a very different picture. If the whole sample had been equivalent to the nonabused sample, the arrest history would have been 6 percent lower. On the other hand, if the rate of the below-average punishment had characterized the whole sample (in the absence of abuse, although this does not affect the answer), the proportion arrested would have been 21.6 percent lower. Thus, the attributable risk or effect on the total population rate is influenced more by the more prevalent risk of higher-than-average punishment than by the groups of children who were frankly maltreated.²

Exhibit 4. Percent arrested as an adult by maltreatment and punishment history

	Childhood punishment	
	Below average	Above average
Any abuse or neglect		
None known	16%	22%
Present	24%	34%

Attributable risk: Maltreatment = 6%, Childhood punishment (among nonabused) = 21.6%

Exhibit 5. Percent arrested for offense against person by maltreatment and punishment history

	Childhood punishment	
	Below average	Above average
Any abuse or neglect		
None known	1.6%	14.3%
Present	5.4%	19.1%

Attributable risk: Any abuse or neglect = 24.5%, Childhood punishment (among nonabused) = 56%

These estimates are even more startling when the rates of having been arrested for a crime against a person are examined. The likelihood of such an arrest history was more than three times as high among the abused whose mothers reported below-average punishment and also elevated in the higher punishment group. On the whole, the risk of having been arrested for a crime against a person that is attributable to a history of maltreatment is estimated at 24.5 percent. On the other hand, the rates of such arrest were also strongly related to maternal reports of punishment in early childhood. If the entire nonabused population had experienced punishment below the sample average, the risk of arrest for a violent offense (a crime against a person) might decline 56 percent. This estimate is not made with a presumption that such punishment would entirely disappear, but only that it is equivalent to the lower half of this general population sample.

Implications for Future Researchers

Data on maltreatment, both by self-report and by official record, are critical to understanding the underpinnings of adult antisocial behavior, particularly adult interpersonal aggression. Inclusion of such data in future research, however, does not eliminate the need to consider other demographic and childhood risks.

Implications for Practitioners

Histories of physical and sexual abuse are common among those who exhibit violent behavior as adults, but such a history does not account for all of the relationship between demographics and crime or between parenting and crime. These findings suggest that it may be useful for prevention efforts to focus on the negative effects of punishment, which may be largely replaced by parental preventive interventions, clear standards for behavior, and positive reinforcement of prosocial behavior. Although frank maltreatment clearly deserves ongoing attention, punishment is such a prevalent, although less potent, risk that improvements in this area could potentially have an even larger positive impact on the violent behavior of offspring.

Notes

1. This report is a summary of a presentation at the NIJ conference, Violence Against Women and Family Violence, October 1–3, 2000.
2. This estimate is not materially affected by restricting the abuse group to the more extreme groups (e.g., officially identified) because while the differences increase, the size of the group declines.

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