



Pathways Between Child Maltreatment and Adult Criminal Involvement

Child abuse and neglect have been shown to increase the risk of later forms of antisocial behavior, including violence perpetration and crime in adulthood.

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The processes through which child abuse leads to subsequent antisocial and criminal behavior are not well understood. New findings from NIJ-funded research conducted by Dr. Herrenkohl and colleagues help to address this gap in knowledge by identifying factors that explain the link between child maltreatment and adulthood criminal behavior. Participants were drawn from the Lehigh Longitudinal Study, one of the longest running national studies examining the long-term effects of child abuse and neglect. Beginning in the 1970s, the study has tracked approximately 450 children from preschool to adulthood. Reports of child abuse from Child Protective Services records and parental reports of abusive parenting were collected when the children were 18 months to 6 years of age and linked to self-reported criminal involvement three decades later. Antisocial behavior also was measured in the intervening years during middle childhood and adolescence.

Results showed that childhood abuse increased the risk of adulthood crime by promoting antisocial behavior during childhood and adolescence, followed by the formation of relationships with antisocial romantic partners and peers in adulthood.

The researchers also found gender differences in the pathways linking child abuse and adult crime. Although affiliations with antisocial peers in adulthood increased criminal involvement for both men and women with histories of childhood physical and emotional abuse, the role of adult romantic partners in the link between child abuse and adult crime varied between men and women.

Among men, a warm and caring romantic relationship in adulthood decreased criminal behavior by reducing men's affiliations with antisocial peers. This protective pathway was not, however, observed among women – a warm relationship in adulthood did not decrease their criminal behavior or affiliation with antisocial peers.

Among women, having an antisocial romantic partner was linked to affiliations with antisocial peers, which in turn increased criminal involvement. For men, having an antisocial partner was associated with less partner warmth, which in turn predicted an affiliation with antisocial peers, itself a proximal predictor of adult crime. Relationships with antisocial peers and romantic partners in adulthood may increase criminal involvement by normalizing crime and reinforcing coping skills that promote criminal behavior among both men and women.

Additional findings from a subset of participants with histories of childhood physical and emotional abuse further showed that female participants were more likely to exhibit internalizing problems such as depression, social withdrawal, and anxiety during middle childhood, which in turn increased the risk of adult crime. In contrast, male participants were more likely to exhibit externalizing behavioral problems, such as aggression, hostility, and delinquency during middle childhood, which subsequently led to adult criminal behavior.

The researchers also found evidence of a “cycle of violence” among individuals with child maltreatment histories. This pattern of behavior occurs when victims of childhood violence perpetrate violence toward their peers or partners later in the life cycle. In Herrenkohl and colleagues’ research, individuals with substantiated child maltreatment histories were more likely to perpetrate sexual and physical intimate partner violence in adulthood compared to their non-maltreated peers. The research did not examine the processes through which child maltreatment leads to violence perpetration in adulthood.

Overall Herrenkohl and colleagues’ findings suggest that interventions aimed at reducing the negative consequences of child abuse on adult criminal behavior should be tailored to the developmental timing of the antisocial behavior. In particular, antisocial behavior that begins during childhood and adolescence should be targeted directly to disrupt the persistence of antisocial behavior into adulthood, with an emphasis on reducing internalizing problems for female adolescents. In contrast, interventions with adults should focus on relationships with antisocial peers and romantic partners to reduce the normalization of criminal behavior. Tailoring intervention efforts to address different factors in the pathways linking child abuse and adult crime may more effectively promote desistance from antisocial behavior associated with childhood abuse.

About This Article

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This article is based on the NIJ grant final report “[Effects of Child Maltreatment, Cumulative Victimization Experiences, and Proximal Life Stress on Adult Crime and Antisocial Behavior](#)” (pdf, 21 pages).

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