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Adolescent maltreatment and its impact on young adult antisocial behavior[☆]

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Abstract

Statement of problem: *Childhood* maltreatment is known to be a risk factor for a range of later problems, but much less is known about *adolescent* maltreatment. The present study aims to investigate the impact of adolescent maltreatment on antisocial behavior, while controlling for prior levels of problem behavior as well as sociodemographic characteristics.

Methods: Data are from the Rochester Youth Development Study, a cohort study of the development of problem behaviors in a sample of 1,000 urban youth followed from age 13 into adulthood. Subjects include 68% African American, 17% Hispanic, and 15% White youth. This analysis includes a maximum of 884 subjects, of whom 9.3% had substantiated maltreatment reports in adolescence. Among the maltreated adolescents, 14 experienced sex abuse, 36 experienced physical abuse, and 32 were neglected or emotionally abused. Outcomes explored in late adolescence (ages 16–18) and young adulthood (ages 20–22) include arrest, self-reported general and violent offending, and illicit drug use. Control variables include prior levels of these outcomes as well as sociodemographic characteristics like poverty, parent education, and caregiver changes.

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Results: Logistic regression analysis determined that experiencing any substantiated maltreatment during adolescence increases the odds of arrest, general and violent offending, and illicit drug use in young adulthood, even controlling for sociodemographic characteristics and prior levels of problem behavior. Different types of adolescent maltreatment, including neglect, appear to produce similar adverse behavioral consequences.

Conclusions: Adolescent maltreatment necessitates increased attention in view of its enduring and potentially wide-ranging impact on the life span.

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Introduction

Many disciplines, including social work, developmental and clinical psychology, criminology, sociology, medicine, and psychiatry recognize adolescence as a critical developmental stage within the life course. A recent review of research on adolescent development acknowledges the expansion of research on adolescence in the last decade (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Several adolescent experiences, for example, family conflict and disruption (Dornbusch et al., 1985; Harold, Fincham, Osborne, & Conger, 1997; Thornberry, Smith, Rivera, Huizinga, & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1999), criminal victimization (Lauritsen, Sampson, & Laub, 1991), or gang involvement (Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, Smith, & Tobin, 2003) have been linked to negative consequences, including increased risk of criminal involvement, substance use, and problems in life-course transitions. However, research on an important and related topic—adolescent abuse and neglect and their consequences—has not garnered much attention in the research literature. A search of major journals from several different disciplines over the past decade reveals very little research that deals specifically with this topic.

Recent studies have begun to illuminate the relationship between adolescent maltreatment and negative behavioral and psychological development in adolescence (e.g., see Ireland, Smith, & Thornberry, 2002; Thornberry, Ireland, & Smith, 2001). Taken together, these studies suggest that any substantiated maltreatment experience during adolescence increases the risk of general delinquency, violence, drug use, alcohol-related problems, internalizing problems, externalizing problems, and depressive symptoms, as well as arrest during adolescence compared to those never maltreated.

The present analysis moves beyond previous research on the consequences of adolescent maltreatment in two respects. First, prospective, longitudinal studies have not investigated the consequences of adolescent maltreatment on adult outcomes. Second, prior studies have not examined the relationship between adolescent maltreatment and either contemporaneous or longitudinal outcomes while controlling for *previous* involvement in offending. In this study, we respond to these gaps in the literature by focusing specifically on adolescent maltreatment and its consequences in early adulthood while controlling for earlier involvement in offending.

The nature and consequences of adolescent maltreatment

There are several reasons for the lack of a developed literature on adolescent maltreatment. First, the law typically defines maltreated children as those up to age 18 who are subjected to acts or failures to act

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