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Gender differences in the risk for delinquency among youth exposed to family violence^{☆,☆☆}

Veronica M. Herrera^{a,*}, Laura Ann McCloskey^b

^a*Department of Psychology, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ 85721, USA*

^b*Department of Maternal and Child Health, School of Public Health, Harvard University, Boston, MA, USA*

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Abstract

Objective: The purpose of this research was to illuminate gender differences in adolescent delinquency against a backdrop of childhood exposure to both marital violence and physical child abuse. Specifically, analyses were performed to trace the unique effects of exposure to either form of family violence (marital or child) on the violent and nonviolent delinquency of boys and girls.

Method: This is a prospective study of 299 children who were interviewed with their mothers in 1991 about forms of abuse in the family. Approximately 5 years later a search of juvenile court records was performed for these same children. Details on the nature of the crimes were collected. Outcome variables included: (1) whether there was ever an arrest; and (2) whether there was ever an arrest for a violent crime.

Results: Preliminary analyses indicated no gender differences in overall referral rates to juvenile court, although boys were more likely than girls to be referred for property, felony, and violent offenses. Exposure to marital violence in childhood predicted referral to juvenile court. Girls with a history of physical child abuse were arrested for violent offenses more than boys with similar histories, but the context of violent offenses differed dramatically by gender: Nearly all referrals for a violent offense for girls were for domestic violence.

Conclusions: Although boys and girls share similar family risk factors for delinquency, girls are more

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* Corresponding author.

likely than boys to be arrested for violent offenses in the aftermath of child physical abuse. These findings suggest that it takes more severe abuse to prompt violence in girls than is necessary to explain boys' violent offending. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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Introduction

Family violence, and especially child abuse, is viewed as a major risk factor for delinquency, and especially for violent crime (Farrington, 1991; Rivera & Widom, 1990; Smith & Thornberry, 1995). Violent delinquency in particular has been associated with documented child maltreatment in light of a "cycle of violence" theory, although different studies present contrasting evidence as to the strength of this association (c.f., Smith & Thornberry, 1995; Widom & Maxfield, 1996).

Much of the research linking child abuse to crime suffers from limitations in methodology, including over-reliance on cross-sectional or retrospective designs, uncontrolled confounding variables, and lack of control groups (Widom, 1989a). Another limitation in some of the recent research is the classification of abuse derives from past government records (cf., Smith & Thornberry, 1995; Widom, 1989b; Zingraff, Leiter, Johnsen, & Myers, 1994). This sampling choice means that other risk factors, including those within the family that are known to co-occur with child abuse, remain unmeasured. In addition, undetected abuse practices in the control group are missed, rendering some between-group differences weaker than they might otherwise have been. The present research offers some strengths in that it is prospective, collects interview-based data on abuse in the families, and partials out the unique effects of marital violence and child abuse on children's arrest records.

Linking exposure to child abuse and marital violence to crime

Abused children are more likely to express problems in a wide array of developmental domains, including social development and peer relations (Salzinger, Feldman, Hammer, & Rosario, 1993), mental health (Cicchetti, Rogosch, & Toth, 1994), school achievement (Eckenrode, Laird, & Doris 1993) and later, crime and antisocial behavior (Smith & Thornberry, 1995).

Although there are fewer research findings isolating the effects on children of witnessing marital violence, many of these youngsters show symptoms of distress congruent with those who are abused (Jaffe, Wolfe, Wilson, & Zak, 1986). These childhood symptoms range from generally elevated overall symptoms (Fantuzzo, DePaola, Lambert, Martino, Anderson, & Sutton, 1991; McCloskey, Figueredo, & Koss, 1995) to specific problems, as in the case of posttraumatic stress (Graham-Bermann & Levendovsky, 1998; McCloskey & Walker, 2000) or difficulties with peers (McCloskey & Stuewig, 2001). Marital violence and physical child abuse are known to overlap (Appel & Holden, 1998); but whether either differentially predicts the development of antisocial behavior is unknown. Until now, there has been no longitudinal research examining whether exposure to marital violence in childhood uniquely contributes to later behavior problems in adolescence, especially delinquency.

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