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Child maltreatment and juvenile delinquency: Investigating the role of placement and placement instability

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Abstract

Children who experience maltreatment are at increased risk of engaging in delinquent behavior. Although little is known about the mechanisms responsible for this increased risk, the use of substitute care placement and placement instability are often identified as correlates. It is not clear from prior studies, however, whether delinquency precedes or follows placement instability. The current study adds significantly to the literature by identifying selected factors related to child maltreatment and delinquency and disentangling the timing of delinquency petitions relative to movements within the child welfare system. The results indicate that substantiated victims of maltreatment average 47% higher delinquency rates relative to children not indicated for abuse or neglect. In addition, approximately 16% of children placed into substitute care experience at least one delinquency petition compared to 7% of all maltreatment victims who are not removed from their family. Placement instability further increases the risk of delinquency for male foster children, but not for female foster children. Other characteristics related to delinquency include race, age, and recurrence of maltreatment.

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1. Introduction

Children who experience maltreatment are at increased risk of delinquency. Prior research indicates that anywhere from 9% to 29% of maltreated children engage in delinquent behavior (Kelly, Thornberry, & Smith, 1997; Smith & Thornberry, 1995; Stewert, Dennison, & Waterson, 2002; Widom, 1989, 2003; Zingraff, Leiter, Myers, & Johnsen, 1993). Despite the consensus that maltreatment increases the risk of delinquency, there is little agreement about the mechanisms responsible for this increase. This is problematic for delinquency theorists, child welfare practitioners, and policy makers interested in the development of effective social interventions. In the current study, we (1) compare delinquency rates for maltreated and non-maltreated children in the city of Chicago and surrounding Cook County suburbs, (2) identify which victims of abuse and neglect are more likely to engage in delinquency, and (3) determine whether or not substitute care placement and placement instability mediates the experience of maltreatment and delinquency.

1.1. *Child maltreatment*

In 1999, approximately 2.9 million children in the United States were the focus of a child protection investigation (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). Of these 2.9 million children, 826,162 (28%) were associated with a substantiated report of maltreatment. Specifically, 58.4% were indicated as victims of neglect, 21.3% victims of physical abuse, and 11.3% victims of sexual abuse. Children aged 3 and under had the highest rate of substantiated maltreatment of any age group (13.9 children per thousand). African Americans had the highest rate of substantiated maltreatment of any racial group (25.2 children per thousand). Approximately 7.5% of indicated victims experienced a subsequent incident of abuse and/or neglect within 6 months of their initial substantiated report.

1.2. *Social ecology of maltreatment*

Although child maltreatment, by definition, is an event occurring within the family or substitute care setting such as a foster home, day care center, or group home, the physical abuse and neglect of children is best understood as the manifestation of an unfolding sequence of underlying problems that often are initiated prior to the family's formation and could be located as well in community and cultural conditions (Pecora, Whittaker, Maluccio, & Barth, 2000). This broader ecological perspective shifts attention away from a narrow focus on parental psychopathology and family dysfunction and highlights the way that community and cultural conditions insinuate themselves in the development of the child, both inside the family and later on as the child moves into school, forms peer relationships, and matures into young adulthood (Testa & Furstenberg, 2002).

Belsky's (1980) framework for understanding child maltreatment is one such perspective. Belsky's model is an adaptation of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory of human development and considers the psychological and sociological factors associated with parenting practices. Such parenting practices are believed to be multiply determined by

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