



From delinquency to the perpetration of child maltreatment: Examining the early adult criminal justice and child welfare involvement of youth released from juvenile justice facilities

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 7 April 2010

Received in revised form 9 June 2010

Accepted 16 June 2010

Available online 23 June 2010

Keywords:

Perpetration

Child maltreatment

Crime

Early adulthood

ABSTRACT

The present study prospectively tracks 999 juvenile delinquents (499 females) released from New York State correctional facilities in the early 1990s and describes their engagement in two socially problematic behaviors in early adulthood: child maltreatment and crime. By age 28, nearly two-thirds of sample girls were investigated by child protective services for alleged acts of child maltreatment and over half became clients of both the child welfare and adult criminal justice systems. Prevalence of maltreatment perpetration and dual-system contact were lower for boys but still worrisome. Findings add to a growing body of research documenting the overlap between criminal justice and child welfare populations and highlight the need for greater integration between these systems, particularly when dealing with female clients.

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1. Introduction

Acquiring a comprehensive picture of how juvenile delinquents fare once they leave the auspices of the juvenile justice system is crucial to the development and implementation of effective rehabilitation services. Unfortunately, while it is clear that many youth who offend as adolescents will continue to engage in criminal activity as adults (Colman, Kim, Mitchell-Herzfeld, & Shady, 2009; Eggleston & Laub, 2002; Ezell & Cohen, 2005), far less is known about how these high-risk youth behave in other areas relevant to healthy adult functioning. Intent on documenting adult criminal involvement, researchers have largely ignored the extent to which youth with histories of delinquency engage in other less publicly visible, but equally problematic types of adult antisocial behavior, such as child maltreatment.

Yet, both developmental theory and delinquency research suggest that youth served by the juvenile justice system may be at risk for the perpetration of abuse and neglect. While it has been well documented that crime often begets crime, longitudinal studies of human development indicate that how antisocial tendencies are expressed may also vary over time and across contexts (e.g., Broidy et al., 2003; Huesmann, Eron, Lefkowitz, & Walder, 1984; Pajer, 1998; Sampson &

Laub, 1990). Known as “heterotypic continuity”, this concept refers to the notion that a single, underlying trait may give rise to different types of behaviors as individuals mature, encounter new social contexts, and take on new social roles. Thus, individuals who commit street-based crimes as teens may go on to engage in more family-centered forms of antisocial behavior (e.g., intimate partner violence and child maltreatment) as they enter young adulthood, establish romantic partnerships, and begin to form families of their own.

Consistent with this hypothesis, findings from two longitudinal studies indicate that individuals with histories of juvenile delinquency are more likely than their less antisocial peers to engage in family violence in adulthood. In the Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Development Study, both aggressive delinquency and juvenile police contact significantly predicted physically abusive behavior toward romantic partners in adulthood (Moffitt & Caspi, 1999). Likewise, Giordano and colleagues found girls' and boys' self-reported level of delinquent activity in adolescence to be significantly related to engagement in relationship violence ten years later (Giordano, Millhollin, Cernkovich, Pugh, & Rudolph, 1999). Although the extent to which these findings extend to violence toward children has not been explored, recent work examining the overlap between different types of family-based violence suggests that intimate partner violence and child maltreatment often go hand in hand. Hazen, Connelly, Kelleher, Lansverk, and Barth (2004) analyzed data from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW), a probability study of U.S. children involved in child protective services investigations, and found that nearly half of all female caregivers reported for childhood maltreatment also experienced relationship violence at some point in their lifetime.

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Moreover, many correlates of juvenile delinquency are also known risk factors for the perpetration of child maltreatment, suggesting that the level of maltreatment risk found within delinquent samples may be particularly high. Indeed, retrospective studies examining the early histories of known juvenile offenders indicate that one-third to two-thirds of youth involved in delinquency have themselves experienced some form of childhood maltreatment (Wiebush, Freitag, & Baird, 2001), placing them at greater risk for later perpetration. Although the association is far from deterministic, numerous studies have shown that individuals who experience maltreatment as children are significantly more likely than their non-maltreated peers to become abusive and neglectful parents later in life (Dixon, Hamilton-Giachritsis, & Browne, 2005; Egeland, Jacobvitz, & Sroufe, 1988; Kaufman & Zigler, 1987; Pears & Capaldi, 2001).

High rates of early childbearing in delinquent samples may also increase the likelihood that youth with histories of delinquency will maltreat in early adulthood. In the Denver Youth and Rochester Youth Development studies, pregnancy rates by age 17 were high (42% and 29% respectively, particularly among girls involved in some form of delinquent activity (Huizinga, Loeber, & Thornberry, 1993). The proportion of boys heavily involved in delinquent activity who became fathers by age 20 was also considerable, with estimates from two longitudinal studies ranging from 19% to 47% (Thornberry, Wei, Stouthamer-Loeber, & Van Dyke, 2000). As teen parents cope less effectively with the stresses associated with parenting and engage in harsh/punitive parenting practices more often than mature parents (George & Lee, 1997; Stier, Leventhal, Berg, Johnson, & Mezger, 1993), early transitions into parenting roles may increase both opportunity and risk for engaging in child maltreatment.

Finally, other problems frequently found in delinquency samples—mental health disorders (Caffman, Feldman, Waterman, & Steiner, 1998; Teplin, Abram, McClelland, Dulcan, & Mericle, 2002; Ulzen & Hamilton, 1998), substance abuse (McClelland, Teplin, & Abram, 2004), and post-release employment difficulties (Bullis, Yovanoff, Mueller, & Havel, 2002; Sampson & Laub, 1990)—may also interfere with youth's ability to successfully transition into healthy caregiving roles. Both population and clinical-based studies of child maltreatment consistently report higher rates of mental health disorders and substance use among parents who maltreat (Debellis et al., 2001; Kelleher, Chaffin, Hollenberg, & Fischer, 1994; Walsh, MacMillan, & Jamieson, 2003). Similarly, unemployment rates and financial hardship have been linked to harsh parental behavior and higher child maltreatment rates in numerous child welfare studies (Gillham et al., 1998; McLoyd, Jayaratne, Ceballo, & Borquez, 1994).

In short, findings from the various lines of research reviewed above suggest that the family sphere represents a likely, albeit largely unexamined, context for the expression of antisocial behavior in early adulthood. Research examining how youth with histories of delinquency fare within this domain is therefore needed in order to gain a more comprehensive picture of these youth's early adult functioning.

1.1. Gender and the expression of adult antisocial behavior

In particular, exploring the extent to which youth with histories of delinquency become abusive and neglectful caregivers may help to broaden our understanding of the long-term consequences and costs of female delinquency. Studies examining criminal recidivism rates among known offenders typically find that women are less likely than men to reoffend (Benda, 2005; Cottle, Lee, & Heilbrun, 2001; Langan & Levin, 2002; Mazerolle, Brame, Paternoster, Piquero, & Dean, 2000; Minor, Wells, & Angel, 2008; Sothill, Ackerley, & Francis, 2003). This finding is often taken to indicate that female offenders are less persistent in their antisocial behavior than male offenders, and hence of lesser societal concern.

However, it is also possible that differences in adult gender roles simply alter the landscape in which men and women have the

opportunity to misbehave. Women are more likely than men to live with children and spend considerably more time engaged in caregiving tasks than their male counterparts (Fields, 2003; Kreider, 2008; Zick & Bryant, 1996). Consequently, while this greater pull toward family responsibilities may play a potentially influential role in fostering women's desistance from crime as some research suggests (Broidy & Cauffman, 2006; Graham & Bowling, 1995; Runggay, 2004), it may also serve to create new family-based opportunities for deviance that are simply less likely to trigger the attention of the criminal justice system. Indeed, research from both criminology and child welfare indicates that women's misbehavior is more likely than men's to center around the home. Women are more likely than men to target their violent behavior toward intimates, parents, and family members (Franke, Huynh-Hohenbaum, & Chung, 2002; Greenfeld & Snell, 1999; Snyder & Sickmund, 2006; Zahn et al., 2008) and are more likely to be identified as perpetrators of abuse and neglect within the general population (Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996). Thus while it appears that girls with histories of delinquency are less persistent in their antisocial behavior than their male counterparts, the veracity of this assertion may depend upon the context in which youth's behavior is examined. Apparent differences between boys' and girls' behavior may be reduced, or even disappear, if we expand our exploration of adult deviance to include abusive and neglectful acts within the family domain. Cross-domain research aimed at simultaneously documenting boys' and girls' involvement in multiple forms of adult antisocial behavior, such as crime and family violence, is therefore needed to help determine how sex and context interact to shape our understanding of adult outcomes.

1.2. The current study

In hopes of providing a more comprehensive picture of the long-term functioning of youth with histories of delinquency, the present study examines the extent to which male and female youth served by the juvenile justice system engage in both child maltreatment and crime during their early adult years. Three core aims guide our research. First, as little is currently known about how youth with histories of delinquency behave within the family domain, we begin by providing gender-specific information on the prevalence, frequency, and type of youth's adult involvement with child protective services (CPS) up to age 28. We then briefly describe youth's criminal involvement during this same period and explore whether involvement in adult antisocial behavior varies across domain and sex. Specifically, we hypothesize that girls with histories of delinquency will be more likely than boys with histories of delinquency to become perpetrators of child abuse and neglect, while boys with histories of delinquency will be more likely than girls with histories of delinquency to enter the adult criminal justice system.

Third, we explore how knowledge of maltreatment outcomes adds to our understanding of the prevalence and scope of adult antisocial behavior within delinquent samples by describing patterns of cross-system involvement in early adulthood in a sample of youth released from juvenile justice facilities. How many of these youth avoid contact with the adult criminal justice system, but go on to maltreat the children under their care? How many offend in both domains? Do patterns of cross-systems involvement vary by gender and, if so, what are the theoretical and practical implications of these differences?

2. Methods

2.1. Research design

To answer these questions, we use existing state research, child welfare, and criminal justice databases to identify and prospectively track a large sample of male and female youth served by the NYS juvenile justice system in the early 1990s. Participants' names are drawn from a research database originally created to examine short-term

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