



## Do childhood experiences of neglect affect delinquency among child welfare involved-youth?



Susan M. Snyder<sup>a,\*</sup>, Darcey H. Merritt<sup>b,1</sup>

<sup>a</sup> School of Social Work, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 325 Pittsboro St. CB#3550, Chapel Hill, NC 27599, USA

<sup>b</sup> Silver School of Social Work, New York University, 1 Washington Square North, Office # 316, New York, NY 10003, USA

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### ABSTRACT

Child neglect, which is the most common form of maltreatment in the United States, has been repeatedly linked to an increased risk of delinquency. However, the existing literature lacks studies that simultaneously investigate how distinct types of neglect differentially influence delinquency among child welfare involved-youth. In addition, few studies of the relationship between neglect and delinquency include measures of ADHD, peer deviance or community violence, even though these variables have been strongly associated with delinquency. This study uses data from 784 11 to 17 year old youth who participated in Wave I of the Second National Survey of Child and Adolescent Wellbeing (NSCAW II) to examine whether supervisory neglect, physical neglect and parental substance abuse affect delinquency after controlling for ADHD, peer deviance, exposure to community violence, and out-of-home placements. We conducted a negative binomial regression to account for the low rates of delinquency among NSCAW II participants. We did not find significant main effects for supervisory neglect, physical neglect or parental substance abuse. Our study found that as youth age the count of delinquency acts increases. Black and Hispanic youth had higher counts of delinquency than youth with White, multi-racial, or "other" racial identities. Youth in out-of-home care had nearly double the rate of delinquency. Youth with more deviant peer affiliations and youth who had been exposed to community violence engaged in more delinquent behaviors. Our findings underscore the importance of the environment surrounding the youth, and the peers with whom the youth affiliates.

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### 1. Introduction

While it is well-established that child neglect increases the risk of delinquency (c.f. Chapple, Tyler, & Bersani, 2005; Kazemian, Widom, & Farrington, 2011; Maxfield & Widom, 1996; Zingraff, Leiter, Myers, & Johnsen, 1993), studies have yet to simultaneously investigate how distinct types of neglect, such as supervisory neglect, physical neglect and parental substance abuse differentially influence delinquency. In addition, few studies regarding the relationship between neglect and delinquency include measures that capture the influence of peer relationships (for exceptions see Chapple et al., 2005; Garnier & Stein, 2002; Kim & Cicchetti, 2010) or the exposure to community violence (for exceptions see Manly, Oshri, Lynch, Herzog, & Wortel, 2013). The absence of these variables is problematic because they have been strongly associated with delinquency. As a result our knowledge about how child neglect impacts delinquency needs further development in these respects.

For the past 30 years scholars have referred to the dearth of studies regarding child neglect as the "neglect of neglect" (c.f. Hildyard & Wolfe, 2002; Kendall-Tackett & Eckenrode, 1996; Wolock & Horowitz, 1984). This study aims to help fill this gap in the literature by investigating how supervisory neglect, physical neglect and parental substance abuse impact delinquency. To ensure that this study elucidates the association between each type of neglect and delinquency, the study also controls for the influences of ADHD, deviant peers, exposure to community violence, and living in out-of-home care, because each has strongly been associated with a risk for delinquency.

In 2012, child neglect accounted for 78.3% of substantiated child maltreatment victims in the United States. Child neglect is considered to be an adverse childhood experience with long-term deleterious effects (Duke, Pettingell, McMorris, & Borowsky, 2010). The consequences of neglect may be as detrimental as sexual or physical abuse (Erickson & Egeland, 2011), or more detrimental (DePanfilis, 2006; Garbarino & Collins, 1999). Approximately 70% of child maltreatment-related deaths were due to child neglect (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau, 2013). Additionally, child neglect contributes to adverse brain development and compromised neuropsychological and psychosocial outcomes (De Bellis, 2005; DePanfilis, 2006). These alterations in brain

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 919 962 4372.

E-mail address: [darcey.merritt@nyu.edu](mailto:darcey.merritt@nyu.edu) (D.H. Merritt).

<sup>1</sup> Tel.: +1 212 998 9186, +1 323 839 4144 (mobile).

development can affect memory acquisition, cognitive functioning, personality development, social interactions, and how children respond to fear and stress later in life (APSAC [APSAC], 2008). Finally, child neglect constitutes a traumatic experience that causes children to experience anxiety and distress (De Bellis, 2010).

### 1.1. Definitions

Although definitions of neglect vary widely in the literature, this study defines neglect as an overarching construct that includes acts of caregiver omission, wherein caregivers fail to provide necessary care for a child (APSAC, 2008). Although experiences of physical neglect, supervisory neglect and parental substance abuse fall within this rubric, each subtype may have distinct etiology and sequelae. Each subtype should accordingly be defined separately (Zuravin, 1999), as this study does. Physical neglect entails situations when a parent fails to protect a child from harm, or does not provide basic necessities, such as food, shelter and clothing (Erickson & Egeland, 2011). Supervisory neglect encompasses situations when a parent does not adequately protect a child from harmful people or situations (Coohey, 2003). Parental substance abuse includes situations where a parent's ability to adequately care for a child is impaired (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2012).

### 1.2. Social development model

Our study applies the social development model to investigate delinquency among child-welfare involved-youth. The social development model blends key elements of social control, social learning, and differential association theories to explain how risk and protective factors influence problematic behaviors, such as delinquency (Catalano & Hawkins, 1996). According to social control theorists, youth commit delinquent acts when the pleasure (i.e., benefits) associated with the behavior exceeds the punishment (i.e., costs). Thus, social control theorists assert that all youth are equally susceptible to engaging in delinquent behaviors, and the decision whether or not to engage in delinquent behavior depends on social controls (Hirschi, 1986, 2002; Kornhauser, 1978). Social controls are internal (i.e., guilt or shame) or external (i.e., supervision or surveillance) rewards or punishments that result from conforming to or deviating from societal norms (Hirschi, 2002). Primary sources of social control include a youth's bonds to his or her family and peers, and the community context that surrounds the youth. Naturally, experiences of neglect can impinge upon the development of internal and external social controls. In addition, youth with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) may not be able to focus enough to recognize the consequences of her behavior in advance. Wikström and Loeber (2000) found that youth with ADHD were at greater risk of engaging in delinquent behaviors.

Social learning theory assumes that youth engage in delinquent behaviors because youth act out of perceived self-interest that exceeds the risk of punishment. Both long- and short-term consequences of behaviors act as behavioral reinforcers. These reinforcers can provide either punishments or rewards for behavior. Within social learning theory, age, gender, and race determine an individual's location in the social structure. These characteristics can influence the extent to which an individual engages in prosocial or antisocial behaviors through social learning variables, including differential association (e.g., associating with peers who use engage in delinquent behaviors) and modeling (e.g., imitating a parent's disregard for laws, which the parent demonstrates by abusing illegal substances; Akers & Lee, 1999). Crime rate plots by perpetrator age show a steep upward slope during adolescence, which indicates that delinquent behaviors increase with age (Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1983). While several studies have found that males are at greater risk of delinquency than females (Connell, Cook, Aklin, Vanderploeg, & Brex, 2011; Farrington et al., 2010; Schwartz et al., 2010), others have found that females who have

experienced child maltreatment exhibit more delinquent behaviors than boys (Garbarino, Levene, Walsh, & Coupet, 2009). Both Black (Franke, 2000; Martin et al., 2011) and Hispanic youth have been found to be a greater risk of engaging in delinquency (Franke, 2000). It is difficult to disentangle the effects of race and class. According to Furstenberg, Cook, Eccles, and Elder (1999), "The effects of race confound differences in resources, opportunities, history, and culture, and combinations of these elements" (p. 57).

Differential association theory pinpoints the causal pathways that lead child welfare involved-youth either to engage in delinquent behaviors or prosocial behaviors. Prosocial family and peers can thwart delinquency, while parents and peers who model deviant behaviors, such as substance abuse or delinquency, can function as conduits to delinquency. The social development model also posits that prior experiences, such as child neglect, can have different impacts over the course of development (Catalano & Hawkins, 1996).

### 1.3. Physical neglect

Of all of the forms of neglect, physical neglect has been most clearly linked with poverty (Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996). Eamon and Kopels (2004) review of court cases found that youth who lived in poverty were more likely to be placed in out-of-home care. Unfortunately, being placed in out-of-home care has been associated with a greater likelihood of delinquency (Ryan & Testa, 2005). Jonson-Reid, Drake, and Kohl (2009) found that poor youth with child maltreatment reports are at substantially greater risk of negative outcomes, including delinquency. Although poverty has been linked with physical neglect it is important to emphasize that poverty is not synonymous with physical neglect. It is also important to acknowledge that impoverished communities may expose youth to more violence, which may contribute to delinquency. Thus, it is necessary to differentiate whether physical neglect or exposure to community violence are correlated with delinquency.

Although the extant literature has furthered our understanding of the relationship between physical neglect and delinquency, the few studies that have focused explicitly on physical neglect as a risk factor for delinquency have some noteworthy limitations. While most youth offenders initiate delinquent behaviors between 12 and 13 years old (Thornberry, 1996), much of the literature regarding physical neglect focuses on young children. In addition, existing studies have used fairly small samples drawn from limited geographical areas. Manly et al. (2013) followed 101 urban low-income children in upstate New York from four to nine years old, and found that the severity of physical neglect was positively associated with externalizing behavior. They also found that rates of neighborhood crime mediated the relationship between neglect and externalizing behavior. Using data from cohorts of 310 first graders and 361 fifth graders from a mid-sized metropolitan area, Knutson, DeGarmo, and Reid (2004) found that physical neglect predicted antisocial behavior both at baseline and five years later. Erickson and Egeland (2011) had teachers complete the Child Behavior Checklist for 267 children in grades 1, 2, 3 and 6 in Minneapolis. They found that teachers rated youth who experienced physical neglect with higher delinquency ratings on the child behavior checklist compared to children who had not been maltreated. Furthermore, youth who had been physically neglected were more likely to be expelled from school or dropout, and use alcohol. Chapple et al. (2005) found that physical neglect predicted adolescent violence. They also found that youth who experienced physical neglect were rejected by their peers, and that peer rejection led to violent behaviors. Chappell and colleagues concluded that peer rejection functioned as the impetus for forming relationships with deviant peers.

### 1.4. Supervisory neglect

Although supervisory neglect is the most common form of neglect (Coohey, 2003; Mennen, Kim, Sang, & Trickett, 2010), it is one of the

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