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Research article

Chronic neglect and aggression/delinquency: A longitudinal examination



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ABSTRACT

Neglect is the most common form of maltreatment in the United States, yet its impact on development remains understudied, especially for chronic neglect. Chronic neglect is also one of the most costly burdens on child welfare systems. This study examines the effects of chronic neglect, including two subtypes (Failure to Provide and Lack of Supervision) on adolescent aggression and delinquency using a diverse longitudinal sample of youth. Chronic neglect and chronic failure to provide (ages 0–12) predicted aggression/delinquency (age 14) even after controlling for the effects of other maltreatment (ages 0–12). Chronic lack of supervision, however, did not. Gender significantly moderated these effects, suggesting that males are more likely to respond to neglect by becoming aggressive/delinquent. Finally, social problems (age 12) partially mediated for boys, and fully mediated for girls, the connections between chronic neglect and aggression/delinquency, bolstering theorizing that neglect impairs social functioning broadly. Implications include the need for further research on chronic neglect, especially in providing guidance for child welfare systems. Interventions for chronically neglected youth should include social skill development.

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Of maltreated children involved in child protective systems in the United States, 78.3% were due to neglect, 18.3% were due to physical abuse, 9.3% were due to sexual abuse, and 8.5% were due to psychological maltreatment ([U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012](#)). Although the vast majority of child maltreatment cases are related to neglect, this remains an under-studied issue. Of particular concern is chronic neglect. Chronic neglect has not yet been clearly defined in practice or research but is distinct from single-incident neglect in terms of patterns and frequency of reports, complexity of presenting issues, and duration of need for continued services ([Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013](#)). Prior research has established a link between maltreatment experienced as a child and adolescent aggressive and delinquent behavior. However, less is known about the specific relationship between childhood neglect and adolescent aggression and delinquency. This current study explores the unique impact of chronic neglect on later aggression and delinquency, as well as testing the moderating effects of gender and the mediating capacity of social competency.

Defining Chronic Neglect

In considering the relationship between chronic neglect and later aggression and delinquency, it is first necessary to clearly define the concept of neglect. Child neglect may include medical, educational, or emotional neglect, in which caregivers

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fail to provide for children's medical needs, ensure school enrollment and attendance, or provide emotional nurturance (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013). Neglect also includes failure to provide for basic needs of a child, including food, clothing, and shelter, or failure to provide adequate supervision of children appropriate to the children's ages and developmental capacities. There is a well-established link between poverty and child neglect, with some scholars suggesting that public child welfare systems often equate or confuse neglect with poverty in state statute (Duva & Metzger, 2010; Roberts, 2002).

Chronic neglect refers to neglect that recurs persistently over time, although scholars have defined chronicity in several different ways. One way to operationalize chronicity is simply a total count of reported incidents of maltreatment over time (English, Graham, Litrownik, Everson, & Bangdiwala, 2005; Jonson-Reid, Kohl, & Drake, 2012). Other researchers examined the impact of maltreatment in early childhood (before the age of 2) compared to later childhood (including two-year time periods up to the age of 8) (Kotch et al., 2008). Several scholars using the longitudinal dataset LONGSCAN adopted a developmental framework in defining chronicity. Graham et al. (2010) compared the use of a developmental framework to the use of duration of maltreatment (as operationalized by the length of time investigations were kept open for all types of maltreatment). The developmental framework used four ordinal categories based on Erickson's developmental stages (Graham et al., 2010), and maltreatment was defined as chronic if there were incidents across more than one developmental stage. The developmental definition of chronicity was shown in this study to be a more robust predictor of some outcomes compared to using the duration of maltreatment as a predictor (Graham et al., 2010).

Chronic Neglect and its Impact

Chronic neglect families often experience more stressors compared to cases of single incident neglect and are more likely to be characterized by chaotic environments (Nelson, Saunders, & Landsman, 1993). Specific familial stressors linked to chronic neglect include extreme poverty, persistent substance abuse and mental health issues, developmental disabilities of children or parents, larger families with more children and lack of social support (Nelson et al., 1993; Wilson & Horner, 2005). Children who experience neglect are more likely to experience recurring maltreatment compared to children that only experience physical or sexual abuse (Jonson-Reid, Drake, Chung, & Way, 2003; Loman, 2006). Additionally, one study found that family poverty was the strongest predictor of re-referral (Connell, Bergeron, Katz, Saunders, & Tebes, 2007). This highlights the need to understand not just cases of single-incident neglect, but also better understand cases of repeated or chronic neglect.

The impact of chronic neglect is not yet fully understood, but research indicates that the effects create a harmful accumulation of problems for children and families, as well as child welfare systems. Chronic neglect is a serious burden on child welfare agencies. One evaluation of a state's child welfare expenditures found that although families experiencing chronic neglect comprised about one-fifth of the child protection population, they accounted for over half of all expenditures (Loman, 2006). Research has also found that chronic neglect can have a negative effect on children's mental health and socio-emotional wellbeing (English, 1999). Other research has shown that chronic neglect may also impact early brain development, which can trigger trauma symptoms and negatively impact later cognitive development and affect regulation (Perry & Pollard, 1998). There is growing evidence to suggest that the short-term impacts of maltreatment on emotional regulation and social relational competencies, may also have long-term impact on later outcomes in adolescence, including aggressive and delinquent behaviors.

It is also true that many children experience more than one type of maltreatment, particularly those children who experience chronic maltreatment. Several studies have found that the type of initial maltreatment does not predict later types of maltreatment in subsequent reports for cases of chronic maltreatment (DePanfilis & Zuravin, 1999; Jonson-Reid et al., 2003; Loman, 2006). Additionally, Jonson-Reid, Emery, Drake, and Stahlschmidt (2010) found that the factors that predict increased risk of a second report of maltreatment may not be the same factors that predict subsequent reports.

Child Maltreatment and Later Aggression/Delinquency

There is strong empirical support for a connection between maltreatment in childhood and later aggression and delinquency (Grogan-Kaylor, Ruffolo, Ortega, & Clarke, 2008; Kaufman & Cicchetti, 1989; Kim, Tajima, Herrenkobl, & Huang, 2009; Mersky & Reynolds, 2007). Maltreatment that persists over time and across developmental periods is also linked with more negative outcomes, including increased delinquency, compared to maltreatment that occurred in only one developmental stage (Logan-Greene, Nurius, Hooven, & Thompson, in press; Thornberry, Ireland, & Smith, 2001); however one study found that some of these effects exhibited through adolescence diminish in adulthood when controlling for other adverse experiences (Jonson-Reid et al., 2012).

Studies on the impact of the type of maltreatment on later aggression and delinquency have been mixed. Some studies have found no association between the type of maltreatment or severity of maltreatment and delinquency (Mersky & Reynolds, 2007; Platt, 2012), while others found that youth who experienced physical abuse were more likely to exhibit delinquent behaviors in adolescence compared to youth who experienced neglect (Grogan-Kaylor et al., 2008; Villodas et al., 2012). However, a recent study using a nationally representative data set found that neglect was a stronger predictor of delinquency than physical abuse (Yun, Ball, & Lim, 2011). As this illustrates, there is still debate within the literature about

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