



Pergamon

Child Abuse & Neglect 26 (2002) 1011–1027

Child Abuse
& Neglect

Relative contributions of parent substance use and childhood maltreatment to chronic homelessness, depression, and substance abuse problems among homeless women: mediating roles of self-esteem and abuse in adulthood[☆]

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Received 8 August 2001; received in revised form 12 April 2002; accepted 24 April 2002

Abstract

Objective: This study, using latent variable methodology, explores simultaneously the relative effects of childhood abuse and early parental substance abuse on later chronic homelessness, depression, and substance abuse problems in a sample of homeless women. We also examine whether self-esteem and recent violence can serve as mediators between the childhood predictors and the dysfunctional outcomes.

Method: The sample consists of 581 homeless women residing in shelters or sober living centers in Los Angeles (54% African-American, 23% Latina, 22% White, mean age = 33.5 years). Multiple-indicator latent variables served as predictors and outcomes in structural models. Childhood abuse was indicated by sexual, physical, and verbal abuse.

Results: Childhood abuse directly predicted later physical abuse, chronic homelessness, depression, and less self-esteem. Parent substance use directly predicted later substance use problems among the women. Recent physical abuse predicted chronic homelessness, depression, and substance use problems. Greater self-esteem predicted less depression and fewer substance use problems. Childhood abuse also had significant indirect effects on depression, chronic homelessness, and drug and alcohol problems mediated through later physical abuse and self-esteem.

Conclusions: Although there was a strong relationship between childhood abuse and parent drug use, childhood abuse was the more pervasive and devastating predictor of dysfunctional outcomes. Childhood

[☆] Support for this research was provided by Grant DA01070-28 from the National Institute on Drug Abuse and Grant MH52029 from the National Institute of Mental Health.

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abuse predicted a wider range of problems including lower self-esteem, more victimization, more depression, and chronic homelessness, and indirectly predicted drug and alcohol problems. The mediating roles of recent physical abuse and self-esteem suggest salient leverage points for change through empowerment training and self-esteem enhancement in homeless women.

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Keywords: Childhood abuse; Substance abuse; Homeless women; Depression

Introduction

Using a latent variable methodology, we test simultaneously the relative contributions of childhood abuse and parent substance abuse to later chronic homelessness, depression, and substance abuse problems in a sample of currently homeless women. Associations have been demonstrated numerous times between childhood maltreatment and adverse outcomes such as personality disorders, depression, low self-esteem, and substance abuse problems in women (Banyard, 1997; Bensley, Van Eenwyk, & Simmons, 2000; Brayden, Deitrich-MacLean, Deitrich, Sherrod, & Altemeier, 1995; Marcenko, Kemp, & Larson, 2000). Furthermore, childhood maltreatment has been linked to a cycle of later traumatic victimization and maltreatment among women by spouses or other domestic partners which in turn often leads to homelessness or intermittent periods of housing instability in the women's attempts to escape their abusive environments (Browne, 1993; Browne & Bassuk, 1997; El-Bassel, Witte, Wada, Gilbert, & Wallace, 2001; Muehlenhard, Highby, Lee, Bryan, & Dodrill, 1998; Tyler, Hoyt, Whitbeck, & Cauce, 2001; Wenzel, Leake, & Gelberg, 2001). In addition, women who report childhood abuse and neglect often report concomitant high levels of parent substance abuse problems during their childhood (Fox & Gilbert, 1994; Melchert, 2000; Shah, Dail, & Heinrichs, 1995). This study explores whether early abuse, as manifested in sexual, physical, or verbal abuse, or parent substance abuse have the more pervasive effect on later adverse behavioral and psychological outcomes and whether recent physical abuse and lower self-esteem can mediate between childhood influences and current maladaptive outcomes.

It is important to examine the relative contributions of antecedents of chronic and severe homelessness, depression, and substance abuse problems. Research and interventions among homeless, impoverished women tend to concentrate on current lifestyle behaviors; less attention has been given to the role of their early childhood experiences. Exploring the contribution of early life experiences to a current lifestyle of maladaptive behaviors, chronic homelessness, and psychological distress would highlight the importance and value of early interventions among dysfunctional families. Homeless women report disproportionately high rates of childhood physical and sexual abuse histories (Browne, 1993; Browne & Bassuk, 1997; Goodman, 1991) along with childhood histories of economic and social disadvantage, and turmoil (Sullivan, Burnam, Koegel, & Hollenberg, 2000).

Furthermore, women with substance abuse problems combined with episodes of homelessness, mental illness, and interpersonal violence are often in poor health (Gelberg, 1996) and are at high risk for contracting sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), hepatitis B and C, HIV, and AIDS (Noell, Rohde, Seeley, & Ochs, 2001; Nyamathi, Stein, & Swanson, 2000;

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