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Research article

Recorded offending among child sexual abuse victims: A 30-year follow-up



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ABSTRACT

In this paper we employed a prospective design to examine the effect of child sexual abuse (CSA) on life-course offending by comparing victims to both their siblings and random controls in the Netherlands. Information on victimization was gathered from court files and on offending from official criminal records. We found that victims of CSA were more at risk of offending than random controls, but so were their siblings. Only female victims were more likely to offend than their own siblings. The increased risk for offending was not specifically found for sexual offenses, instead it was found for various types of offenses. The found difference between female victims and siblings held true for abuse perpetrated by someone outside the family. We therefore conclude that family and environmental factors are the most important to explain offending among male CSA victims, while these factors alone are not enough to explain the effect of CSA on offending for females.

1. Introduction

Child sexual abuse (CSA) can have harmful effects. Most of this burden is carried by victims themselves, who, for example, often cope with physical health problems (Irish, Kobayashi, & Delahanty, 2010) and depression (Chen et al., 2010; Neumann, Houskamp, Pollock, & Briere, 1996; Paolucci, Genuis, & Violato, 2001), as well as lower educational attainment or lower incomes (de Jong, Alink, Bijleveld, Finkenauer, & Hendriks, 2015). Consequences of CSA have repercussions for society more broadly, in addition to the direct effects on victims. For instance, because CSA is also thought to place victims at elevated risk for later offending. An increased risk for arrests for CSA victims in adulthood was found in a recent literature review, although evidence of this effect is still thin (de Jong et al., 2015). Few studies have employed prospective designs and even fewer have controlled for selection effects, such as family and background characteristics, related to the risk for CSA victimization in the first place. In this study we use a prospective design to examine the relationship between CSA and offending up to middle adulthood. We test whether CSA victims are at an elevated risk for offending compared to a population-based comparison group. We also examine whether victims of CSA are at risk of committing particular types of offenses. We extend existing research considerably by comparing the offending of CSA victims to that of their same-sex siblings, thereby controlling for family and structural background factors that might otherwise contribute to selection effects.

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1.1. The relationship between CSA and offending

1.1.1. Theoretical considerations

Developmental and life-course criminology (DLC) theories frame offending as being influenced by both the interaction of risk and protective factors with each other over time, as well as the developmental timing of events over the life-course (Farrington, 2003). Family factors such as inconsistent or harsh discipline, poor supervision, parental conflict, low parental involvement, cold parental attitude, physical abuse, and neglect are associated with an elevated risk for offending (Farrington, 2003). Poverty and disorganization in the family and neighborhood disadvantage are also related to the emergence of delinquency (Thornberry & Krohn, 2005). Structural adversity and stress can influence ineffective parenting which in turn can have an adverse effect on young people's offending behavior (Thornberry & Krohn, 2005).

In addition to the accumulation of risks affecting pathways into offending, the nature of the risks at important developmental phases or transitions is also critical (Thornberry & Krohn, 2005). At a broad level, the consequences of maltreatment for young people may vary in terms of the diversity of experiences and pathways of individuals prior to maltreatment in conjunction with diversity in outcomes (Thornberry, Ireland, & Smith, 2001), all of which may vary in relation to the developmental stage of a young person when maltreated (Cicchetti & Toth, 1995). Within the maltreatment literature, there is mounting evidence that the timing of maltreatment plays an important role in the risk for offending. Specifically, young people who were maltreated were more likely to offend in adolescence if their maltreatment occurred in adolescence or persisted into adolescence (Hurren, Stewart, & Dennison, 2017; Stewart, Livingston, & Dennison, 2008; Thornberry et al., 2001). Smith, Ireland and Thornberry (2005) found that maltreatment in adolescence also increased the odds of arrest, offending, and illicit drug use in young adulthood. However, studies on the timing of CSA and subsequent offending are contradictory; while Ogloff et al. (2012) found that CSA victimization after age 12 was related to an increase in later offending, Widom and Ames (1994) did not find this effect of age.

1.1.2. Previous research

Empirical studies to date have been limited by an over-reliance on retrospective research designs that inadequately address selection effects that may contribute to the association between CSA victimization and offending. Retrospective studies have found rates of CSA histories among sex offenders to be up to 75% higher than among the general population (Graham, 1996; Hickey, McCrory, Farmer, & Vizard, 2008; Romano & De Luca, 1997). However, these retrospective studies only included individuals who did commit sexual offenses, and subsequently look back to see if those offenders experienced CSA victimization. Unsurprisingly, this leads to relatively high rates. These studies are not informative of how many of those who experienced CSA did not commit these offenses. In order to examine the effect of CSA on offending prospective studies are needed, which include victims regardless of whether they became offenders or not. To our knowledge, only four relevant prospective studies have been conducted that specifically focused on CSA and adolescent and adult offending.

Ogloff et al. (2012) used records based on suspected CSA cases reported to the police to prospectively study victims. They found CSA victims to be almost five times more likely to commit any offense than a control group matched only on gender and age range. The most marked elevation was for sexual and violent offenses. Siegel and Williams (2003) examined a sample of 206 female CSA victims who were brought to the emergency room of a municipal hospital some 20 years earlier, comparing them to controls of same sex, race, similar date of birth and approximate socioeconomic status. Based on arrest records they found no significant difference for arrests in general, but abused females were more likely to be arrested specifically for violent offenses and for running away. In adulthood, victims of CSA were more likely to be arrested in general, and also specifically for violent offenses and drug offenses. Unfortunately, only victims who were under the age of 12 at the time of abuse were included.

The other two prospective studies compared CSA victims also to victims of other types of abuse and found more modest results. Widom and Ames (1994) examined substantiated abuse cases processed through courts and examined arrest records of the victims around age 26. Their sample included males and females, although less than one fifth was male. They found that, compared to controls matched on sex, race and date of birth, abused and neglected children were at increased risk of arrest in general, and specifically for property, order, and drugs offenses. However, this risk was not significantly higher for sexually abused children than for those who were physically abused or neglected. CSA was only uniquely associated with adult arrests for prostitution. More recently, Leach, Stewart and Smallbone (2016) reported in their prospective birth cohort study among males, that victimization of CSA only was not related to sexual or violent offenses. However, poly-victimization, which included CSA, was significantly related to later perpetration of sexual offenses, violent offenses, and other offenses. Unfortunately, their sample consisted only of males who were abused, who offended, or both, and there was no random control group. Furthermore, information on the abuse came from state-based child protection services and therefore mainly consisted of CSA within families.

Taken together, previous research found mixed results for an effect of CSA victimization on offending. Most, however, did find an increased risk of offending for CSA victims. In particular, an effect on general, violent, and drugs offenses was found multiple times. Only one prospective study compared males and females in the results, and found that the increased risk for females was higher than that for males (Ogloff et al., 2012).

The previously mentioned studies could not properly address the issue of confounding variables, though this is important considering the previously mentioned role of family and environmental risk factors in the emergence of delinquency. It is possible that the relationship between CSA and offending is a spurious one, with growing up in disadvantaged families or neighborhoods as a factor explaining both victimization and offending (e.g. parental conflict: Farrington, 2005; Finkelhor & Baron, 1986). The adverse effect of poor parenting could even increase after the abuse has taken place. CSA could lead to a weakening of the bond between victims and their parents, particularly when the abuse occurred within the family or the family knew the offender. Parental anger

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