



Exploring the longitudinal offending pathways of child sexual abuse victims: A preliminary analysis using latent variable modeling



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ABSTRACT

Very little research has been conducted to show the way in which criminal behavior unfolds over the life-course in children who have been sexually abused, and whether it differs from the 'age-crime' patterns consistently documented in the criminology literature. This study investigated the temporal pathways of criminal offending between the ages of 10–25 years among medically confirmed cases of child sexual abuse (CSA), and considered whether abuse variables, offense variables, and the presence of other adverse outcomes, were associated with heterogeneity in offending pathways among CSA survivors. This study utilized data gathered as part of a large-scale study involving the linkage of forensic examinations on 2759 cases of medically ascertained CSA between 1964 and 1995, to criminal justice and public psychiatric databases 13–44 years following abuse, together with a matched comparison sample of 2677 individuals. We used the subsample of 283 offending individuals (191 victims; 92 comparisons) for whom complete offending data were available. We compared the aggregate age-crime curves for CSA victims and comparisons, and applied longitudinal latent class analysis to identify distinct subgroups of offending pathways between ages 10–25 years within the abuse sample. Four latent pathways emerged among sexually abused offenders, labeled: *Early-Onset/High-Risk/Adolescence-Limited*; *Intermediate-Onset/Low-Risk/Adolescence-Limited*; *Late-Onset/Low-Risk/Slow-Declining*; and *Early-Onset/High-Risk/Persistent* offenders. Age at abuse, the nature and frequency of offending, and mental health problems, were associated with the offending pathway followed by CSA victims. Consistent with criminological literature, findings indicate considerable heterogeneity in the longitudinal offending patterns of offenders exposed to CSA. Implications for clinical practice and directions for research are highlighted.

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1. Introduction

The sexual abuse of children is a perennial issue in society with ripples spanning all levels of the community. Epidemiological studies have estimated that child sexual abuse (CSA) involving penetration is experienced by between 5 and 10

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per cent of the general population, with rates for other forms of contact abuse being at least twice as high (Fergusson & Mullen, 1999; Stoltenborgh, van Ijzendoorn, Euser, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2011). CSA has demonstrated associations with immediate and ongoing problems in emotional, physical, behavioral and social functioning (Browne & Finkelhor, 1986; Fergusson & Mullen, 1999; Gilbert et al., 2009; Putnam, 2003). One such problem, which has received increasing research attention of late, arguably due to its overt nature and the fact that it is of particular public concern and social consequence in its own right (DeLisi, Kosloski, Vaughn, Caudill, & Trulson, 2014; Leach, Stewart, & Smallbone, 2016; Ogloff, Cutajar, Mann, & Mullen, 2012), is that of criminal behavior.

There has long existed a belief that abuse and trauma in childhood can significantly increase the risk of engaging in crime and violence later in the life course, and that those sexually abused are, in particular, more likely to become perpetrators of sexual crimes (Curtis, 1963; Dutton & Hart, 1992; Ryan, 1989; Widom, 1989). Although the empirical literature suggests that the majority of people who have been sexually abused as children do not go on to offend, either sexually or non-sexually (Leach et al., 2016; Ogloff et al., 2012; Salter et al., 2003), retrospective studies indicate that up to 70 per cent or more of sexual offenders disclose a history of CSA (e.g., Dhawan & Marshall, 1996; Johnson et al., 2006; Worling, 1995). Similarly, the prevalence of CSA histories among non-sexual offenders is reported to be greater than the general population, though not as high as among sexual offenders (Jespersen, Lalumière, & Seto, 2009).

Prospective studies have also supported an association between CSA and subsequent offending (Ogloff et al., 2012; Salter et al., 2003; Swanston et al., 2003; Widom & Ames, 1994). For example, among the broader sample of CSA victims from which the present sample was drawn, almost one quarter (24%) had a recorded offense compared with 6% of a comparison sample, and CSA victims were 7.6 and 8.2 times more likely to be charged with a sexual and violent offense, respectively (Ogloff et al., 2012). The field is yet to reach a consensus as to whether it is the sexual nature of the harm inherent to the victimization experience that represents a specific risk factor for later offending (sexual and/or other), or whether the relationship between CSA and offending is captured by the more general and well-established association between childhood maltreatment and antisocial involvement, which in turn may be partly or wholly an artifact of the social/family environment and context in which the maltreatment occurs (Burton, 2003; DeLisi et al., 2014; Leach et al., 2016; Widom & Ames, 1994). Adding further complexity to this matter, researchers have suggested there may be several abuse-specific factors likely to influence the relationship between CSA and subsequent offending, such as the timing (i.e., victims' stage of development at time of abuse), frequency, duration, and physical intrusiveness of the abuse, as well as whether poly-victimization is present (Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Turner, 2007; Leach et al., 2016; Ogloff et al., 2012; Stewart, Livingston, & Dennison, 2008).

Most research has investigated the link between CSA and offending by focusing on offense variables including prevalence, nature, diversity, and frequency of offending (DeLisi et al., 2014; Leach et al., 2016; Ogloff et al., 2012), with few studies reporting offense variables such as onset, duration, stability and change in criminal activity over time. Contrast this with the general criminological literature in which the age-crime curve, namely that offending rises during early adolescence, peaking at around the age of 17 years, and substantially declining thereafter into adulthood, is one of the most commonly observed and reported findings (DeLisi & Piquero, 2011; Farrington, 1986; Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1983; Piquero, Farrington, & Blumstein, 2003). Despite previous research showing a higher propensity toward offending among CSA victims, it is unclear whether the experience of CSA also influences the profile of CSA survivors' offending careers over time relative to children with no history of CSA. Given the typically immediate and often enduring nature of CSA sequelae, many of which are also established risk factors for offending behavior (e.g., substance misuse, risky behavior, mental health problems, interpersonal difficulties; see Tanner-Smith, Wilson, & Lipsey, 2013), it may be that variation in the parameters of the age-crime curve exists for CSA victims, such as the age of onset, the peak age, median age, and/or the speed of decline following the peak age, despite perhaps still seeing the general pattern of decline with age that is well-documented. Demonstrating some support for this notion, earlier large-scale studies by Dennison and Stewart (2001) and Widom and Maxfield (2001), although not focusing specifically on CSA, demonstrated that the experience of early childhood victimization appeared to accelerate the age of onset of offending compared to non-maltreated children.

In addition to understanding the aggregate age-crime pattern of offending among CSA victims, it is important to consider the potential heterogeneity underlying this pattern. Drawing upon the broader criminological literature, several theoretical frameworks have been advanced to explain individual variation in the development of criminal behavior over time (e.g., Le Blanc & Loeber, 1998; Moffitt, 1993; Patterson, 1996; Sampson & Laub, 2005). One that has been particularly influential, and which the current study draws on, is Moffitt's (1993) developmental taxonomy. Moffitt argued that the shape of the aggregate age-crime curve actually masks the variability in offending profiles of two general subpopulations of offenders, namely *life-course-persistent* and *adolescence-limited* offenders, who differ in terms of their rates and manner of offending, the developmental period in which they offend, and their underlying reasons for engaging in crime. Subsequent empirical investigation has identified that a small minority of offenders indeed follow this life-course-persistent pathway (for reviews, see Jennings & Reingle, 2012; Moffitt, 2006b; Piquero, 2008). This subpopulation has been shown to possess a range of neurocognitive difficulties, familial fragmentation, early regulatory and mental health problems, drug abuse, and disrupted schooling (e.g., Chung, Hawkins, Gilchrist, Hill, & Nagin, 2002; Moffitt & Caspi, 2001; Odgers et al., 2008). In contrast, the adolescence-limited pathway is the trajectory followed by the majority of juvenile offenders, albeit with significant heterogeneity in the point of onset, intensity of offending, and speed of desistance once reaching maturity (e.g., Fergusson & Horwood, 2002; Jennings, 2011; Pepler, Jiang, Craig, & Connolly, 2010). Much of the risk-taking and criminal behavior observed among those following this pathway has been explained in terms of normative processes of social and cognitive

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