



Research article

The association between childhood maltreatment experiences and the onset of maltreatment perpetration in young adulthood controlling for proximal and distal risk factors[☆]



Vered Ben-David*, Melissa Jonson-Reid, Brett Drake, Patricia L. Kohl

Brown School of Social Work, Washington University in St. Louis, Campus Box 1196, One Brookings Drive, St. Louis, MO 63130, USA

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ABSTRACT

The evidence for association between child maltreatment victimization and later maltreatment perpetration is both scant and mixed. The objective of the present study was to assess the association between childhood maltreatment experiences and later perpetration of maltreatment in young adulthood controlling for proximal young adult functioning, prior youth risk behaviors, and childhood poverty. The study included 6,935 low-income children with ($n = 4,470$) or without ($n = 2,465$) maltreatment reports prior to age 18 followed from ages 1.5 through 11 years through early adulthood (ages 18–26). Administrative data from multiple regional and statewide agencies captured reports of maltreatment, family poverty and characteristics, system contact for health, behavioral risks and mental health in adolescence, and concurrent adult functioning (crime, mental health and poverty). After controlling for proximal adult functioning, repeated instances of neglect or mixed type maltreatment remained associated with young adult perpetration. Females and subjects with adolescent history of runaway, violent behaviors or non-violent delinquency also had higher risk. Greater caregiver education remained associated with reduced risk. The study concludes that prevention of recurrent neglect and mixed forms of maltreatment may reduce risk of maltreatment for future generations. Intervening to increase parental education and decrease adolescent risk behaviors may offer additional benefit.

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Introduction

Child maltreatment is a public health concern with numerous untoward outcomes prior to adulthood (e.g., Fang, Brown, Florence, & Mercy, 2012; Gilbert et al., 2009; Kohl, Jonson-Reid, & Drake, 2009), during adulthood (Jonson-Reid, Kohl, & Drake, 2012; Widom, Czaja, & Dutton, 2008) and potentially extending into future generations (e.g., Berlin, Appleyard, & Dodge, 2011; Thompson, 2006; Thornberry, Knight, & Lovegrove, 2012). The evidence from prospective studies linking child

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* Corresponding author.

maltreatment victimization to later maltreatment perpetration is both scant and mixed. Several studies found that being abused or neglected in childhood increases the likelihood of perpetrating child maltreatment later as a parent (e.g., Belsky, 1993; Dixon, Browne, & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2005; Egeland, Bosquet, & Chung, 2002; Ertem, Leventhal, & Dobbs, 2000; Kaufman & Zigler, 1989; McCloskey & Bailey, 2000; Newcomb & Locke, 2001; Pears & Capaldi, 2001; Thompson, 2006; Thornberry & Henry, 2013), while other studies found only limited (Berlin et al., 2011; Renner & Slack, 2006; Sidebotham, Golding, & the ALSPAC Study Team, 2001) or no support (Altemeier, O'Connor, Sherrod, Tucker, & Vietze, 1986; Widom, 1989a, 1989b).

Some of these inconsistencies may be attributable to differences in samples, comparison groups, and measurement of maltreatment in both generations (Thornberry et al., 2012). For example, Renner and Slack (2006) used self-report for parents' history but official reports for the subsequent generation; this is the only study that acknowledged the need to include unsubstantiated reports in measuring maltreatment when using official records. Thornberry and Henry (2013) used substantiated reports only to measure maltreatment in both generations; and Widom (1989a, 1989b) used substantiated reports for childhood history but adult arrest for maltreatment for subsequent perpetration.

The magnitude and/or sustained impact of childhood maltreatment on later maltreatment of children separate from other risk factors is not clear. Most of the literature on onset of maltreatment perpetration has focused on factors like comorbid psychopathology, early childbearing, disciplinary practices, and income during adulthood (Dixon et al., 2005; Pears & Capaldi, 2001; Thompson, 2006). Two studies found that adult concurrent risk factors partially mediated or moderated the link with prior maltreatment (Dixon et al., 2005; Pears & Capaldi, 2001), while others reported no effect of prior maltreatment once proximal factors were controlled (Sidebotham et al., 2001; Thompson, 2006). The intervening or sustained role of other childhood risk factors is less clear. For example, poverty (Drake & Jonson-Reid, 2014) and caregiver substance use (Herrenkohl & Herrenkohl, 2007; Young, Boles, & Otero, 2007) have been found to be associated with maltreatment, but it is unclear whether these factors originated in adulthood or had onset earlier. One study found that chronic reports of maltreatment were associated with greater risk of separate outcomes of adult mental health treatment, criminal behavior, or adult perpetration of maltreatment after adjusting for violence, injury and mental health issues during adolescence. This study, however, did not control for continuity of poverty, potential role of maltreatment type, nor the potential association between the adult risk factors (Jonson-Reid et al., 2012).

Conceptual Framework

According to a *cycle of violence* perspective, abuse (as compared to neglect) leads to abuse perpetration (Smith, Cross, Winkler, Jovanovic, & Bradley, 2014; Widom, 1989a, 1989b). Theoretically, exposure to abusive parents increases the risk that the victim will learn that such behaviors are acceptable and effective, incorporating them into their own parenting styles as adults (Thornberry & Henry, 2013). In contrast, trauma and stress theories would assert that it is not the behavior learned, but rather the powerful or continued experiences like maltreatment (trauma) or persistent psychological distress associated with material hardship (stress) (Mistry, Vanderwater, Huston, & McLoyd, 2002) that put an individual at increased risk for later perpetration. Hypothetically either trauma or stress may lead to a type of psychopathology in adulthood (Binder et al., 2008; Bradley et al., 2008) which increases the risk of later perpetration. Another possibility is that the intermediate effects of maltreatment on transition to adulthood impacts likelihood of perpetration. Neglect has tended to be most powerfully associated with poverty (Slack et al., 2011; Slack, Holl, McDaniel, Yoo, & Bolger, 2004) and is also strongly associated with adolescent risk behaviors such as delinquency or educational failure (Chapple & Vaske, 2010; Nikulina, Widom, & Czaja, 2011). If neglect strongly predicts adult perpetration this may be due to its impact on one's achievement of economic stability in young adulthood. In other words, neglect leads to increased likelihood of second generation poverty which in turn is a risk factor for maltreatment.

The Present Study

This study helps fill the gap in our understanding of the link between childhood maltreatment and onset of maltreating behaviors among young adults by controlling for both childhood factors and concurrent problems in adulthood. The research questions are:

- (1) Within a low-income sample, is there an association between maltreatment experience and later onset of maltreatment perpetration in young adulthood? If children with prior physical or sexual abuse are more likely to become perpetrators than non-maltreated or neglect only cases, a trauma or 'cycle of violence' theory might best guide intervention. If neglect is more strongly associated with perpetration compared to poverty only or abuse, a chronic stress theory or economic impact of neglect framework may be more useful.
- (2) Does such an association hold once proximal risks in adulthood, distal adolescent risk behaviors, and family characteristics are controlled? Because no study has adequately incorporated both concurrent adult and lifetime childhood risks, no hypothesis is offered.

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