

An Exploration of Differences in Childhood Maltreatment between Violent and Non-Violent Male Delinquents

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Using prospective data collected from a sample (N = 161) of male, incarcerated youth, we compared the maltreatment histories of violent (n = 59) and nonviolent (n = 78) offenders. We measured the frequency of physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, physical neglect, and emotional neglect for both groups. Data were analyzed using logistic regression. We found that violent offenders reported significantly greater frequency of physical neglect and sexual abuse and a higher total score on the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire than nonviolent offenders. This contradicts past literature (Capaldi & Patterson, 1996; Farrington, 1991; Haapasalo & Hamalainen, 1996) suggesting that there may be more differences in the amount and type of maltreatment experienced by violent and nonviolent offenders than previously thought.

Keywords physical neglect, sexual abuse, childhood maltreatment, violence, juvenile offender

Although rates of violent crime in the United States have been decreasing (despite a slight increase in 2006) since 1994 (Bureau of Justice Statistics, Key Facts, 2010), violence remains a serious problem in the United States. Violent crime includes homicide, aggravated assault, simple assault, and robbery (Bureau of Justice Statistics, Violent Crime, 2010). In 2008, about 4.9 million violent crimes occurred, which is 19.3 victimizations per 1,000 persons over the age of 12 (Crime in America.Net, 2009). Violence has serious economic and public health consequences for society. In 2000, \$70 billion was spent on nonfatal injuries and deaths caused by violence, \$64.4 billion was due to lost wages, and \$5.6 billion was used for medical care (Corso, Mercy, Simon, Finkelstein, & Miller, 2007). In terms of public health consequences, violence may cause injury; psychological and behavioral problems; and, most severely, death (Krug, Mercy, Dahlberg, & Zwi, 2002; Rosenberg, O'Carroll, & Powell, 1992; Sherline, Skipper, & Broadhead, 1994). Due to these considerable consequences, it is important that an attempt is made to decrease societal violence.

Although adults commit the bulk of this nation's violent crime, juveniles contribute significantly to the violent crime problem in the United States and committed 12% of all violent crimes in 2004 (Snyder, 2006). Most juvenile delinquents offend exclusively during

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adolescence; however, there is a group that goes on to offend in adulthood as well (Moffitt, 1993). Researchers (Kempf-Leonard, Tracy, & Howell, 2001) have found that juvenile offenders are at a significantly increased risk to become adult offenders as compared to adolescents who do not break the law. There is continuity between childhood aggression and adult violence in which aggressive and antisocial boys may become deviant and antisocial adults who commit violent acts (Farrington, 1989, 1991). Establishing effective interventions to reduce rates of juvenile violent crime will not only reduce current violent crime levels but should also impact adult crime rates by stopping future adult offenders in adolescence (Garrido & Morales, 2007).

There are many individual and family characteristics that may predispose adolescents to become violent (Buka & Earls, 1993; Cornell, 1990; Farrington, 1989; Howard & Jenson, 1999; Saner & Ellickson, 1996; Sherline et al., 1994; Stattin & Magnusson, 1989; Stone & Dover, 2007) including childhood maltreatment, which has a significant effect on later violence (Rivera & Widom, 1990; Widom, 1989). The myriad of negative and lasting effects that childhood and adolescent maltreatment has on its victims (Davies, 2004; Eckenrode, Laird, & Doris, 1993; Egeland, Yates, Appleyard, & van Dulmen, 2002; Johnson et al., 2002; Reidy, 1977) partly explains why maltreatment might increase subsequent violent behavior. There are other theories that also help explicate the maltreatment and delinquency connection.

The Freudian theory of repetition compulsion (Mitchell & Black, 1995) and Bandura's (1986) social learning theory may be helpful in understanding the maltreatment–delinquency connection. Repetition compulsion is the human propensity to repeat maladaptive relationship patterns and to seek out relationships that simulate early, significant attachments with caregivers (Mitchell & Black, 1995). According to social learning theory, children learn through observation and then replicate what they have seen (Burton & Meezan, 2004). These theories suggest that maltreated children who become juvenile offenders would likely commit offenses that mimic the maltreatment they suffered in an unconscious attempt to re-create their early attachments. Children who suffered violent abuse would be more likely than nonviolently abused children to become violent offenders, because by committing violent offenses, they are re-creating and mimicking the traumatic environment in which they grew up. It seems plausible that these theorists would posit that violent juvenile delinquents may have more severe violent maltreatment histories than nonviolent juvenile delinquents.

Researchers have compared violent and nonviolent offenders on measures other than maltreatment history such as neuropsychological assessments (Spellacy, 1977; Tarter, Hegedus, Alterman, & Katz-Garris, 1983), the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (Spellacy, 1977), intellectual abilities such as IQ (Auffrey, Fritz, Lin, & Bistak, 1999; Tarter et al., 1983; Walsh, 1987), educational tests (Tarter et al., 1983), child and parental substance abuse, juvenile court history, assaultive behavior, and sexual deviance (Auffrey et al., 1999). However, fewer researchers (Capaldi & Patterson, 1996; Haapasalo & Hamalainen, 1996; Loeber & Schmalings, 1985; Rivera & Widom, 1990; Widom, 1989) have examined violent and nonviolent offenders and their maltreatment histories (Haapasalo & Hamalainen, 1996) and their findings are inconsistent.

A few researchers have found no differences in the maltreatment histories of violent and nonviolent offenders. For instance, in two different longitudinal studies, researchers found no significant differences in the amount or severity of the negative verbal interactions (Capaldi & Patterson, 1996), cruel parental attitude, or authoritarian parenting (Farrington, 1991) experienced by violent and nonviolent offenders. There have also been no differences found in the amount or severity of domestic violence (Auffrey et al., 1999), psychological

abuse (Haapasalo & Hamalainen, 1996), physical abuse (Auffrey et al., 1999; Capaldi & Patterson, 1996; Haapasalo & Hamalainen, 1996; Lewis et al., 1985), or neglect (Haapasalo & Hamalainen, 1996) endured by violent and nonviolent offenders. In fact, one group of researchers (Gutierrez & Reich, 1981) found that physically abused children were less likely than their siblings and a nonabused control group to partake in aggressive and violent behavior.

The researchers who have directly compared the maltreatment histories of violent and nonviolent juveniles also have conflicting results. Researchers have found a connection between maltreatment and later violence ranging from near significance (Lewis, Shanok, Pincus, & Glaser, 1979), to a significant but small relationship (Rivera & Widom, 1990), to large and significant (English, Widom, & Brandford, 2002). In a comparison of mildly violent juveniles (no violence, isolated fire setting, or threatening violence) with severely violent juveniles (having committed murder, rape, assault, armed robbery, or multiple episodes of arson), researchers found that the severely violent juveniles had experienced significantly more abuse and witnessed significantly more violence than less violent juveniles (Lewis et al., 1979). Rivera and Widom (1990) found that, overall, abused and neglected children had higher frequencies of violent offending, but interestingly the frequencies did not always reach significance. However, in a similar study, English et al. (2002) found that abuse and neglect had a more significant effect on later violence than previously thought in which abused and neglected children were 11 times more likely than the control group to be arrested for juvenile violence.

Because so few researchers have directly compared violent and nonviolent juveniles and their histories of childhood maltreatment (Haapasalo & Hamalainen, 1996), it is necessary to look at related studies. For example, Lewis, Pincus, Lovely, Spitzer, and Moy (1987) compared delinquents to nondelinquents and found that the delinquent group experienced significantly more physical abuse and came from more violent homes than the nondelinquent group. Within each group, physical abuse distinguished the more aggressive individuals from the less aggressive ones, suggesting that maltreatment may be one etiological factor for aggressive behavior, which is a known precursor to violence (Tremblay et al., 2004). In a longitudinal study, another group of researchers (Cohen, Smailes, & Brown, 2004) looked at the effects of physical abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect separately and found that physical abuse had the most significant effect on later adult violence. Adults physically abused as children were more likely than adults who were not maltreated as children to commit later violence. It is therefore possible that physical abuse also increases violence for juveniles. Loeber and Schmalting (1985) examined children and adolescents who fought only (violent offending), stole only (nonviolent offending), fought and stole (both violent and nonviolent offending), or had no delinquent behavior. They found that the group that fought only and the group that fought and stole had the most disturbed child-rearing practices. That is, they were the least well monitored and had the highest level of maternal rejection, suggesting that neglect may contribute to later violence. Another group of researchers compared juvenile murderers to nonviolent juvenile delinquents and found that the murderers were more likely to have been raised in violent households and were almost twice as likely to have been physically abused as the nonviolent delinquents (Lewis et al., 1988).

In summary, there is a group of researchers who have found that maltreatment does not affect later violence and one group even found that it decreased later violence. Additionally, some researchers have found that maltreatment has a limited effect on later violent behavior and other researchers have found that childhood maltreatment has a significant effect on later violence. Part of the reason for this discrepancy is due to the fact that many different

types of methods have been used for analyzing delinquent behavior including longitudinal and retrospective analyses. Researchers using both types of methodologies have both confirmed and disputed that childhood maltreatment results in later violence.

The current study differs from past studies in that it examines five specific types of maltreatment (physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, physical neglect, and emotional neglect) as opposed to one type and tests differences between violent and nonviolent youth's experiences of maltreatment. Therefore, the following research question is proposed: Do violent and nonviolent male offenders differ in their histories of childhood maltreatment?

Methods

Participants

After appropriate human subjects board permissions and subsequent consents were obtained, confidential data were collected from male youth with nonsexual offenses in six residential facilities in a Midwestern state. Multipaged pencil and paper surveys were collected from 161 adjudicated delinquent youth.

In this sample, 47.3% ($n = 78$) of the youth admitted to only nonviolent crimes (i.e., endorsed at least one of the following: substance abuse or sales, public disorderly conduct, status crimes, etc.) and 35.8% ($n = 59$) of the youth admitted to both violent (i.e., endorsed at least one of the following: attacked someone with the idea of seriously hurting or killing that person, was involved in gang fights, hit or threatened to hit one of my parents, hit or threatened to hit my supervisor or another employee, used force or strong arm methods to get money or things from people) and nonviolent crimes. These groups were used for further analyses.

The average age of the sample ($N = 137$) was 16.51 years ($SD = 1.23$ years) with no difference between the groups. On average they were in the ninth grade ($SD = 1.32$ grades) with no differences between the groups. In terms of race, 53.9% of participants selected African American, 33.9% of participants selected Caucasian, 6.0% of participants selected "other," and 6.2% of participants did not select any option for race. There were no significant differences by race among the groups.

Materials

The Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ; Bernstein & Fink, 1998) is a 37-item scale that provides a brief and relatively noninvasive screening of traumatic experiences in childhood using a 5-point frequency scale ranging from 1 (*never true*) to 5 (*very often true*). There are five subscales: Physical Abuse, Emotional Abuse, Sexual Abuse, Physical Neglect, and Emotional Neglect. All of the subscales have acceptable to good internal consistency in this study, Cronbach's alphas on the five CTQ subscales range from .73 (Physical Neglect) to .91 (Emotional Neglect; see Table 1).

Elliot, Huizinga, and Ageton's (1985) Self Reported Delinquency Measure (SRD) was used to assess delinquency. The scale has 32 questions using a 7-point frequency scale from 1 (*never*) to 7 (*2-3 times per day*) on questions ranging from drug use to aggression. The instrument has several subscales including General Delinquency, Property Damage, Public Disorderly, Felony Assault, Felony Theft, Robbery, Alcohol Use, Drug Use, and Selling Drugs. However, for the purposes of this study, the scales were collapsed to create a Violent Crime subscale and a Nonviolent Crime subscale. All of the subscales have acceptable to

Table 1
Cronbach's alpha for Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ) and Self Reported Delinquency Measure (SRD) scales

Scale	Cronbach's alpha	Number of items
CTQ sexual abuse	.778	6
CTQ physical abuse	.899	5
CTQ emotional abuse	.852	5
CTQ emotional neglect	.913	9
CTQ physical neglect	.730	8
CTQ total	.890	34
SRD total	.910	32
SRD nonviolence	.906	24
SRD violence (note: without rape)	.628	5

good internal consistency in this study; Cronbach's alphas on the SRD subscales range from .63 (Violent Crime) to .91 (Total Delinquency; see Table 1).

The Millon Adolescent Clinical Inventory (MACI) is based on Millon's theory of patterns in personality (Millon, 1993) and is devised for youth in treatment or in correctional institutions. It was normed on 579 adolescents in such facilities, with two smaller cross-validation samples. Its scales comprise 160 true-false questions, including one validity and three modifying indices that assist with socially desirable responding. The MACI was used in the current project to cull out youth with socially desirable or invalid responding profiles. Thereby, data from three juveniles were not used for this study.

Results

Using *t* tests to analyze the data, violent youth reported a significantly greater frequency of physical neglect ($t = 4.67, p < .001$) and sexual abuse ($t = 2.72, p = .008$) and a higher total CTQ score ($t = 2.82, p = .006$) than nonviolent youth. The two groups did not differ significantly on physical abuse ($t = 1.61, p = .11$), emotional abuse ($t = 1.82, p = .07$), or emotional neglect ($t = .47, p = .64$). See Table 2 for group means.

The CTQ abuse scales were regressed onto group status in a logistic regression. The regression was significant with $\chi^2(5, N = 131) = 16.79, p = .005$. The CTQ variables accounted for 14.2% of the variance in group status. Overall 65.1% of the group was classified correctly (86% of the nonviolent group and 32.2% of the violent group). The only variable that predicted group membership significantly was physical neglect (see Table 3).

Discussion

The present results support researchers who found that violent youth have experienced more childhood maltreatment than nonviolent youth (English et al., 2002; Lewis et al., 1979; Rivera & Widom, 1990). We found that violent offenders reported more physical neglect, sexual abuse, and total maltreatment than did nonviolent offenders. The present findings make sense in light of research conducted by Robertson and Burton (in press) showing that physical neglect and sexual abuse are significant predictors of the frequency

Table 2
Group Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ) means for violent
and nonviolent offenders

Abuse type	Violent/Nonviolent	<i>N</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>
CTQ total*	Nonviolent	75	48.00*	16.01
	Violent	57	55.89*	15.92
Physical Neglect**	Nonviolent	75	11.09**	3.72
	Violent	57	15.18**	5.74
Sexual Abuse*	Nonviolent	75	7.36*	2.13
	Violent	56	8.66*	3.08
Physical Abuse	Nonviolent	75	6.57	3.63
	Violent	57	7.65	3.94
Emotional Abuse	Nonviolent	75	6.12	3.45
	Violent	56	7.13	2.85
Emotional Neglect	Nonviolent	75	15.41	8.05
	Violent	57	16.04	7.00

* $p < .01$. ** $p < .001$.

Table 3
Logistic regression^a

Variable ^b	β	Standard error	Wald statistic	95% CI
Physical Neglect	.136*	.044	9.361	1.050–1.250
Sexual Abuse	.027	.072	.140	.892–1.182
Emotional Abuse	-.018	.088	.043	.827–1.166
Physical Abuse	.003	.069	.002	.877–1.148
Emotional Neglect	.000	.023	.990	.955–1.047

Note. CI = confidence interval.

^aThe model is predicting membership in the violent or nonviolent groups. ^bSorted by p value.

* $p = .002$.

of delinquency and that only physical neglect is a significant predictor of property damage, violent crime, and status offending. In light of this past and present research, it seems that physical neglect and sexual abuse have serious and lasting consequences on victims, especially in terms of later violence.

Physical neglect is the refusal or delay of health care; inadequate supervision; expelling a child from the home; disregarding a child's safety; and ignoring a child's physical needs such as nutrition, clothing, or hygiene (Goldman, Salus, Wolcott, & Kennedy, 2003). Physical neglect affects a wide range of developmental needs, which means it impacts many aspects of a child's life and development. Negative effects of neglect can be observed in babies, with neglected infants showing more disturbed attachments with caregivers than nonneglected infants (Carlson, Cicchetti, Barnett, & Braunwald, 1989). In older children, neglect leads to increases in aggressive, disruptive, and oppositional behavior in comparison to nonmaltreated children (Manly, Kim, Rogosch, & Cicchetti, 2001). Additionally, school-aged neglected children have significantly more academic problems than even physically abused children (Wordarski, Kurtz, Gaudin, & Howing, 1990). These

social and academic limitations of neglected children may impair their decision making, rendering them more likely to engage in violent activity.

Child sexual abuse (CSA) also has severe and lasting effects on its victims. In an extensive review of the literature examining the effects of CSA on children and adolescents, Browne and Finkelhor (1986) present a plethora of effects including emotional disturbance ranging from mild to severe, increased anger, hostility, depression, fear, guilt, shame, phobias, disturbances in sleeping and eating, school problems, running away, low self-esteem, and inappropriate sexualized behavior. These effects may endure into adulthood as evidenced by researchers who have found that adults who were sexually abused as children have many problems including higher rates of depression and interpersonal problems (Whiffen, Thompson, & Aube, 2000), increased suicide attempts (Briere & Runtz, 1986; Dube et al., 2005), poorer health (Sachs-Ericsson, Blazer, Plante, & Arrow, 2005), family and marital problems, and illicit drug use (Dube et al., 2005). In general, trauma, which is often experienced via neglect and sexual abuse, results in a violation of trust, causes disturbed attachments, and interferes with empathy (Greenwald, 2002), which can help explain why neglect and sexual abuse effect later violence. The increase in negative emotions such as anger and hostility also helps explain why they contribute to later violence.

It is also important to focus on the nonsignificant results in this study. Why did physical abuse not have an impact on later violence? According to the Freudian theory of repetition compulsion and Bandura's social learning theory (Bandura, 1986; Mitchell & Black, 1995), it seems that physical abuse would increase later violent offending, but in this study it did not. This is an interesting finding as past researchers have found that abused children are more aggressive than neglected or nonmaltreated children (Howes & Eldredge, 1985; Reidy, 1977).

Seligman's theory of learned helplessness (Maier & Seligman, 1976; Peterson, Maier, & Seligman, 1995; Seligman & Maier, 1967) may help explain these results. When Seligman's dogs became unable to escape a painful shock, they initially struggled and then ceased to fight and passively accepted the pain. Perhaps this is what happens to abused children. They initially fought back aggressively but then gradually learned that no amount of fighting would change their caregiver's abusive behavior and they gave up. Initial childhood aggression is extinguished because it ceases to stop the physical abuse and therefore physically abused children do not end up being violent. Children may feel that their abuse is uncontrollable and eventually stop trying to change their situation.

Another possible explanation is that physical abuse may often be utilized as a type of punishment and child victims may feel responsible for the abuse and may reason that they deserved it because they behaved badly. Perhaps children feel less responsible for physical neglect and sexual abuse and feel more responsible for physical abuse. This self-blame may create a false sense of control in which physically abused children may feel more in control of their abuse than physically neglected or sexually abused children. Maier and Seligman (1976) cite past researchers who have found that uncontrollable unpleasant events cause more emotional disruption than unpleasant events that are perceived as controllable. Maybe a perceived sense of control renders abused children less likely to become violent.

In light of the present research, it seems that interventions used to treat victims of maltreatment should be carefully tailored to target specific types of maltreatment. Future research should begin to examine what specific interventions work most effectively to combat the effects of specific types of maltreatment. Considering the present and past research (Robertson & Burton, in press), it is clear that intervening and treating the effects of physical neglect is particularly important. Because physical neglect is not as violent or

physically damaging as physical abuse, it may often be overlooked, which can have dire consequences. Early detection and treatment of physical neglect is vital and researchers and clinicians should continue examining effective ways of identifying and combating the effects of physical neglect.

It is also important to consider what other variables contribute to violent behavior and how these variables are affected by childhood maltreatment. Not every child who was physically neglected or sexually abused becomes violent; indeed, most do not. Therefore, researchers should continue to examine protective factors and look at ways in which clinicians can boost the resiliency of maltreatment survivors.

It is important to consider how the limits of the sample size may have impacted the results. The sample was limited as participants were adjudicated, incarcerated, adolescent boys held in six treatment facilities in the Midwest. Therefore, the results of this study cannot be extended to other geographic regions, females, sexually offending males, or noninstitutionalized males. It is likely that the youth in this study had more severe criminal records than noninstitutionalized youth, which may have affected the results. If the sample had included delinquent adolescents who suffered from maltreatment but were not in residential treatment facilities, perhaps the results would have been different.

There are a variety of additional limitations that may have influenced the results of this study. First, although the Cronbach's alphas for the subscales of delinquent crime were adequate, the Violent Crime scale was .628, which means it did not measure violent crime as reliably as it could have, which may have impacted the results. Second, even though socially desirable and invalid responding was controlled for, it is likely that some participants were not totally truthful when filling out their surveys or simply could not accurately remember their pasts, which could have impacted the results. Third, it is possible that factors other than maltreatment influenced violent behavior and influenced the results. For example, genetics plays a role in violence and it was certainly beyond the scope of this study to examine genetics. Therefore, when interpreting the results, it is important to keep extraneous and unmeasured variables in mind.

The results of this study indicate that there are in fact differences in the childhood maltreatment experiences of violent and nonviolent youth for this particular sample. However, maltreatment is not the only determinant of later violence. Violent behavior can best be conceptualized as an equation with a myriad of individual, family, and environmental characteristics constituting the different parts of the equation. Every individual's development is different and many different equations result in violent behavior. Therefore, it is impossible to figure out an exact and fixed equation for violent behavior. However, researchers should continue to strive to understand the many elements of the equation in order to better understand the causes of violent behavior. This current research should be used to help researchers as they continue on the quest of better understanding the causes of violent behavior, so that successful interventions may be created with the ultimate goal of decreasing juvenile violence.

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