



## Research article

# Longitudinal examination of peer and partner influences on gender-specific pathways from child abuse to adult crime<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

Research provides increasing evidence of the association of child abuse with adult antisocial behavior. However, less is known about the developmental pathways that underlie this association. Building on the life course model of antisocial behavior, the present study examined possible developmental pathways linking various forms of child abuse (physical, emotional, sexual) to adult antisocial behavior. These pathways include child and adolescent antisocial behavior, as well as adulthood measures of partner risk taking, warmth, and antisocial peer influences. Data are from the Lehigh Longitudinal Study, a prospective longitudinal study examining long-term developmental outcomes subsequent to child maltreatment. Participant families in the Lehigh Longitudinal Study were followed from preschool age into adulthood. Analyses of gender differences addressed the consistency of path coefficients across genders. Results for 297 adult participants followed from early childhood showed that, for both genders, physical and emotional child abuse predicted adult crime indirectly through child and adolescent antisocial behavior, as well as adult partner and antisocial peer influences. However, for females, having an antisocial partner predicted an affiliation with antisocial peers, and that in turn predicted adult crime. For males, having an antisocial partner was associated with less partner warmth, which in turn predicted an affiliation with antisocial peers, itself a proximal predictor of adult crime. Sexual abuse also predicted adolescent antisocial behavior, but only for males, supporting what some have called “a delayed-onset pathway” for females, whereby the exposure to early risks produce much later developmental outcomes.

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## Introduction

Child abuse is a well-established risk factor for later social, emotional, and behavioral problems over the life course (Cicchetti & Lynch, 1995; Herrenkohl, 2011; Masten et al., 2005; Rogosch, Oshri, & Cicchetti, 2010; Wildeman et al., 2014).

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Research has shown that child abuse is a particularly salient risk factor for antisocial behavior and adult crime (Allwood & Widom, 2013; Jung, Herrenkohl, Klika, Lee, & Brown, 2015; Klika, Herrenkohl, & Lee, 2012; Thornberry, Henry, Ireland, & Smith, 2010; Widom & Maxfield, 2001). For example, using prospective data from a sample ( $N = 1,196$ ) in a metropolitan area in the Midwest, Widom and Maxfield (2001) identified an association between child abuse and adult crime later in adulthood. In fact, 42% of the participants in that study who had been physically or sexually abused and neglected as children were arrested for crimes in adulthood (up to age 33), compared to about 33% of the matched controls. Additionally, Moffitt and Caspi (2001) found that abusive parenting practices, such as smacking or hitting a child, and depriving a child of necessities, not only predicted more crime in adulthood, but also more serious and persistent crime over many years.

While findings like these have helped establish a link between child abuse, particularly physical and sexual abuse, and later crime and criminal involvement during adulthood, the developmental pathways that underlie this link are not well understood (Bender, 2010; Burnette, Oshri, Lax, Richards, & Ragbeer, 2012; Cullerton-Sen et al., 2008; Herrenkohl, Huang, Tajima, & Whitney, 2003). There is some evidence that child abuse increases the early onset of conduct problems and that these problems, once established, can lead to more serious forms of antisocial behavior (e.g., delinquency and crime) as children transition through adolescence into adulthood (Cullerton-Sen et al., 2008; Herrenkohl, Tajima, Whitney, & Huang, 2005; Jaffee, Caspi, Moffitt, & Taylor, 2004; Klika et al., 2012; Loeber & Farrington, 2000; Maxfield & Widom, 1996; Moffitt & Caspi, 2001; Smith & Thornberry, 1995; Topitzes, Mersky, & Reynolds, 2011). As one example, Widom, Schuck, and White (2006) found that child abuse and neglect predicted adolescent antisocial behavior and that adolescent antisocial behavior predicted later violent crime.

The life course model of antisocial behavior posited by Sampson and Laub (Sampson & Laub, 1990, 1993, 1997; Simons, Stewart, Gordon, Conger, & Elder, 2002) helps explain how early antisocial behavior, as a consequence of child abuse, can lead to adult crime. According to the theory, early onset of antisocial behavior weakens a child's bond to prosocial others, which tends to deter delinquency and crime. Unrestrained by prosocial bonds, and possibly reinforced by antisocial peers, that child's behavior can progress to more serious forms of antisocial behavior, if not remediated. Sampson and Laub proposed that the relative salience of different socializing units varies across developmental periods (Sampson & Laub, 1990, 1993) and that antisocial behavior is tied to how a child is socialized over time. As a child grows older, socializing influences of the family give way to peers and adults outside the home. While there is individual variability in how this dynamic unfolds during adulthood, it is expected that spouses and intimate partners are particularly influential at this time (Capaldi, Kim, & Owen, 2008; Jaffee, Lombardi, & Coley, 2013; Rhule-Louie & McMahan, 2007; Sampson & Laub, 1990, 1993; Sampson, Laub, & Wimer, 2006; Simons et al., 2002). This basic proposition—that antisocial partners and the quality of romantic relationships influence crime to a greater extent in adulthood than do others—has been empirically supported in several studies: their own (Sampson & Laub, 1990, 1993; Sampson et al., 2006) and those of others (Capaldi et al., 2008; Jaffee et al., 2013; Rhule-Louie & McMahan, 2007; Simons et al., 2002).

In addition, an emerging understanding in the crime literature highlights the role of peers in the continuity of antisocial behavior. There have been many studies of antisocial peer influences on delinquency and crime among *adolescents* (Dishion, Spracklen, Andrews, & Patterson, 1996; Gifford-Smith, Dodge, Dishion, & McCord, 2005; Matsueda & Anderson, 1998; Thomas & McGloin, 2013), but relatively few of peer influences on *adult* crime (Capaldi et al., 2008; Simons et al., 2002; Warr, 1998; Wright, Caspi, Moffitt, & Silva, 2001). There are, however, a few studies on the topic worthy of mention. For example, Wright et al. (2001) found that antisocial peer influences were associated with increased criminal involvement at age 21 among participants of the Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Development Study. Using data from a community-based sample of 206 young men at risk for delinquency, Capaldi and colleagues (2008) found that having antisocial peers predicted more criminal arrests during young adulthood, even after accounting for partner influences. These findings raise the possibility that peer influences may play as much a role as do spouses and other intimate partners in promoting crime in adults, although this proposition has not been tested, particularly in the context of child abuse experience.

In one study, Simons et al. (2002) investigated a developmental pathway for antisocial behavior that conceptually links early onset antisocial behaviors, antisocial adult partners, the quality of adult romantic relationships, and antisocial peers. In that study, informed by the notion of “assortative mating” (Knight, 2011; Rhule-Louie & McMahan, 2007), Simons and colleagues proposed that individuals who have a history of early antisocial behavior will develop intimate relationships in adulthood with others who have a similar behavior history. Furthermore, they posited that individuals in an intimate relationship with an antisocial partner are likely to experience less support from their partner, since antisocial partners “are likely to be self-centered and difficult, thereby decreasing the chances of a committed, supportive relationship.” As a result, it is expected that the poor quality of this intimate relationship will promote and reinforce crime in those already so inclined. Romantic partners are also, according to the authors, expected to predict adult criminal behavior indirectly by influencing other relationships in an individual's social circle, including peers. In the same study, they reported empirical evidence supporting the proposed path. Yet, very little is known about whether the pathways articulated by Simons et al. (2002) may explain the influence of partners and peers during adulthood on antisocial behavior, particularly beyond the normative peak age that is triggered by child abuse measured many years earlier.

Building on the life-course model of antisocial behavior and the prior studies discussed above, the current investigation focuses on the life course process of antisocial behavior as the developmental pattern underlying the link between physical, emotional, and sexual child abuse and crime during adulthood. Specifically, we hypothesize that child abuse of various forms will increase an individual's initial vulnerability to antisocial behavior during childhood, which is in line with prior empirical studies (Allwood & Widom, 2013; Jung et al., 2015; Klika et al., 2012; Thornberry et al., 2010; Widom & Maxfield, 2001;

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