



## Discussion

# Why do some maltreated youth become juvenile offenders? A call for further investigation and adaptation of youth services

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## ABSTRACT

Experiencing maltreatment is an established risk factor for delinquency. Yet, an understanding of the maltreatment–delinquency link is incomplete as few models have elucidated how maltreated youth become juvenile delinquents. This paper utilizes the latest empirical evidence to propose a diagram detailing pathways from maltreatment to delinquency through potential intervening risk factors, including substance abuse, mental health problems, school difficulties, negative peer networks, and running away from home. Hypothesized gender differences in pathways from maltreatment to delinquency are delineated. Implications for adaptation of child welfare and juvenile justice services to address the link between maltreatment and delinquency are discussed. This paper calls for testing and refining of the proposed pathways from maltreatment to delinquency in order to advance understanding of these complex relationships.

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## 1. Introduction

In the United States, approximately 3 million cases of child abuse or neglect are reported annually (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009). Without intervention, these maltreated youth are 38% more likely to commit violent crimes (Widom, 1992). The social science literature consistently documents that maltreated youth are at increased risk for subsequent serious delinquency (Bergen, Martin, Richardson, Allison, & Roeger, 2004; Smith & Thornberry, 1995; Swanston et al., 2003). Maltreated youth initiate delinquent behaviors earlier (Rivera & Widom, 1990), continue to have more arrests into adulthood (Maxfield & Widom, 1996), and are more likely to become violent offenders than non-maltreated youth (Lansford et al., 2002). This effect appears to be cumulative, with youth who experience multiple forms of maltreatment at greatest risk of violent delinquent behavior as juveniles (Crooks, Scott, Wolfe, Chiodo, & Killip, 2007). Furthermore, among maltreated youth, those repeatedly maltreated demonstrate more repetitive recidivism (Chang, Chen & Brownson, 2003).

The pattern whereby victimized children commit subsequent violence or delinquent behavior has been termed the Cycle of Violence, and it has been one of the most influential assertions informing studies of family violence (Widom, 1989). Although years of research have led to the common acceptance of this “violence

breeds violence” hypothesis, understanding of this cycle is incomplete. Rarely do children who experience violence immediately become violent individuals; rather, they follow complex pathways through adolescence, experiencing various psychological and behavioral problems before eventually displaying delinquent or violent behavior (Moffitt & Caspi, 2001). Little is known, however, about how exactly this cycle is perpetuated. A better understanding of factors that link maltreatment and delinquency is essential to interrupting the Cycle of Violence. Development of services that effectively prevent maltreated youth from becoming delinquent is contingent upon a more comprehensive model explicating the experiences youth face on their paths from maltreatment to delinquency (see Fig. 1).

The purpose of this paper is to propose an empirically-based diagram explaining how maltreated youth may become juvenile delinquents. Explicating such a framework has important implications for understanding the needs of youth receiving services in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems.

## 1.1. The importance of gender

Past victimization plays a distinct and particularly influential role in the lives of female juvenile delinquents (Hubbard & Pratt, 2002; Widom, 2000). The prevalence of victimization reported by female juvenile offenders far exceeds that of male offenders and non-offending female counterparts (Cauffman, Feldman, Waterman, & Steiner, 1998; Gaarder & Belknap, 2002; McClellan, Farabee, & Crouch, 1997). Not only do female offenders report more victimization than male offenders, but they report more extreme victimization and more

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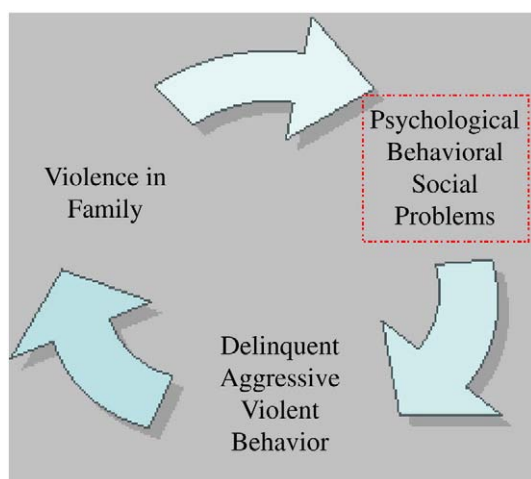


Fig. 1. A Cycle of Violence addressing intervening variables.

repeat victimization experiences (Wood, Foy, Goguen, Pynoos, & James, 2002a). In fact, female offenders are significantly more likely than males to report that victimization was a key factor leading to their offending (Belknap & Holsinger, 2006).

Females' emotional and behavioral reactions to abuse differ from males' (Sullivan, Farrell, & Kliewer, 2006). While males tend to respond to childhood maltreatment in overt ways, including aggressive acts towards others, conduct problems, violence, and sexual risk behaviors, females are more likely to respond to maltreatment with aggression that is focused inward such as depression, self blame, suicidal ideation/behaviors, and disordered eating (Leadbeater, Blatt, & Hertzog, 1999; McClellan et al., 1997). Like males, females' experiences of physical and sexual abuse are likely to evoke anger, but for females this anger is also accompanied by guilt (Hay, 2003), depression, emotional withdrawal (Sharp, Brewster, & Love, 2005) and anxiety (Jang & Johnson, 2005). The differential impact of, and responses to, maltreatment suggest that males' and females' pathways from maltreatment to delinquency are likely to be significantly different. A more complete understanding of those factors that link maltreatment and delinquency must, therefore, consider potential gender differences.

## 1.2. A gap in our understanding of the maltreatment–delinquency relationship

While researchers have made great strides in confirming the existence and strength of the maltreatment–delinquency relationship, several prominent researchers have called for closer examination of the factors that link maltreatment and delinquency (Smith & Thornberry, 1995). Yet, few scholars have conducted research that explains the maltreatment–delinquency relationship. A likely reason for this gap is the divergence of related research into two bodies of literature that have developed independent of one another. On one hand, a body of child welfare research has identified multiple consequences of child maltreatment (Bergen et al., 2004; Ford, 2002; Kaplan, Pelcovitz, & Labruna, 1999). On the other hand, juvenile delinquency research has established numerous predictors of aggressive behavior and other forms of delinquency (Chang et al., 2003; McClellan et al., 1997; Warr, 2002). Several important factors examined in these two fields of research overlap considerably. Many of the problems youth face as a consequence of maltreatment put them at increased risk for becoming delinquent. To date, little work has integrated knowledge from these two disparate fields. Through a thorough review of these two bodies of work, this paper introduces a proposed diagram highlighting potential intervening factors in the Cycle of Violence. Five potential intervening factors:

running away, mental health problems, substance abuse problems, school disengagement, and deviant peer networks are discussed.

## 2. Potential intervening factors in the maltreatment–delinquency relationship

### 2.1. Running away from home

Running away from home is recognized as both a consequence of maltreatment and a risk factor for delinquency (Chesney-Lind, 2001). Youth facing abuse at home often runaway, seeking safety and escaping dangerous family conflict (Thompson, Bender, & Kim, in press). Research on homeless youth confirms elevated rates of physical abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect (Thompson, Bender, Windsor, Cook, & Williams, in press) with as many as 80% of homeless youth having had a caretaker throw something at them and 43% reporting being beaten up by a caretaker (Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Ackley, 1997). Not only do abused youth run away more frequently, but they also stay away from home longer than non-abused youth (Kurtz, Jarvis, & Kurtz, 1991). Aside from running away, many youth find themselves homeless after being thrown out of the home by their abusive parents (Thompson, Bender, & Kim, in press; Thompson, Bender, Windsor et al., in press).

Once youth run away, they are more vulnerable to participating in multiple delinquent behaviors (Baron, 2003; Baron & Hartnagel, 1998). Becoming part of the runaway or homeless youth community subjects youth to delinquent peer groups already engaged in deviant behaviors (Warr, 2002). Thus, the longer youth are on the streets without adult supervision and in the company of deviant peers, the more delinquent they tend to be (Heinze, Toro, & Urberg, 2004). Many runaway youths' delinquent acts are attempts to survive financially, protect themselves, and cope with their dangerous lives on the street (Bender, Thompson, McManus, Lantry, & Flynn, 2007). Homeless youth report engaging in more drug sales, shop lifting, burglary, robbery, and prostitution compared to their housed counterparts (Baron, 2003; Baron & Hartnagel, 1998). Violent crimes are also more common among street youth with 25% of homeless youth reporting having attacked someone with a knife and 22% reporting having shot someone (Kipke, Montgomery, Simon, & Iverson, 1997). Research findings indicating that, among runaway youth, those who have experienced victimization during childhood are even more likely to participate in delinquent behavior, demonstrates the role running away plays as an intervening factor in the maltreatment–delinquency relationship (Baron & Hartnagel, 1998).

Studies suggest that running away from home is a likely intervening variable for both males and females. A status offense is one of few offense categories where prevalence rates are quite similar for males and females (Chesney-Lind & Sheldon, 1998). Much of the research on female offenders identifies a pathway that includes victimization at home, running away to escape such victimization, substance abuse and prostitution to survive on the streets, resulting in a deeper involvement in delinquency (Chesney-Lind, 2001; Gaarder & Belknap, 2002). While this pattern has not been studied in as great detail for males, research indicates that runaway males report high rates of abuse histories as well as delinquent behaviors. This suggests that it is likely that male youth also leave home to escape violence thereby becoming more involved in delinquent lifestyles.

### 2.2. Mental health problems

Mental health problems are a second potential mechanism linking maltreatment and delinquent behavior. After experiencing maltreatment, youth often exhibit mental health symptoms (Kaplan et al., 1999). Youth who experience violence, whether physical, sexual or witnessed, report high levels of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression (Kilpatrick et al., 2003). Youth with histories of

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