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## Research article

# Which maltreated children are at greatest risk of aggressive and criminal behavior? An examination of maltreatment dimensions and cumulative risk

Melissa Van Wert<sup>a,\*</sup>, Faye Mishna<sup>b</sup>, Nico Trocmé<sup>a</sup>, Barbara Fallon<sup>b</sup><sup>a</sup> Centre for Research on Children and Families, McGill University, Suite 106, Wilson Hall, 3506 University Street, Montreal, Quebec H3A 2A7, Canada<sup>b</sup> Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto, 246 Bloor Street West, Toronto, Ontario, M5S 1V4, Canada

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the well-documented relationship between child maltreatment and aggressive and criminal behavior, specifically examining several dimensions of maltreatment and cumulative child and family risk. Using data from the provincially representative Ontario Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (OIS-2013), this paper utilizes a developmental lens to examine whether maltreatment dimensions and cumulative risk can differentiate maltreated young people who exhibit aggressive and criminal behaviors and those who do not.

A total unweighted sample of 1837 substantiated maltreatment investigations was examined in this analysis using chi-square, *t*-test, and logistic regression. The findings indicate that 13% of maltreated children and youth served by the Ontario child welfare system exhibited aggression and 6% of maltreated adolescents were involved in the youth justice system. Aggressive children and youth were more likely to experience severe and co-occurring forms of maltreatment and to experience higher levels of cumulative child risk. In adolescence, youth exhibiting aggressive and/or criminal behavior commonly were investigated because of neglect, specifically because their caregivers were no longer willing or able to remain in a caregiving role. Implications for child welfare policy and practice are discussed.

## 1. Introduction

From infancy to adolescence, young people who experience maltreatment are at significant risk of physical health, mental health, behavioral, educational, and vocational challenges (Gilbert et al., 2009). Widely studied as a consequence of abuse and neglect, aggressive and criminal behaviors are consistently associated with maltreatment (e.g., Allwood & Widom, 2013), although this association remains poorly understood. It is critical to better understand the relationship between maltreatment and behavior problems, in order to provide a foundation to determine which children are at greatest risk for experiencing maltreatment and developing aggressive and criminal behaviors, and to target interventions accordingly. Analyzing data from a representative study of child welfare investigations, the purpose of this paper is twofold: (1) to understand why maltreatment is related to aggressive and criminal behavior for certain young people but not others, by examining various dimensions of maltreatment and cumulative child

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [melissa.vanwert@mail.mcgill.ca](mailto:melissa.vanwert@mail.mcgill.ca), [melissa.vanwert@utoronto.ca](mailto:melissa.vanwert@utoronto.ca) (M. Van Wert), [f.mishna@utoronto.ca](mailto:f.mishna@utoronto.ca) (F. Mishna), [nico.trocme@mcgill.ca](mailto:nico.trocme@mcgill.ca) (N. Trocmé), [barbara.fallon@utoronto.ca](mailto:barbara.fallon@utoronto.ca) (B. Fallon).<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2017.04.013>

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and family risk; (2) to use a developmental lens to examine the relationship between maltreatment and behavior problems across various stages of childhood and adolescence.

## 2. Maltreatment dimensions and aggressive and criminal behavior

Maltreatment experiences are multi-dimensional, varying widely in typology, severity, chronicity, and the subjective interpretations of the experience (English et al., 2005), and this diversity of experiences may explain why maltreatment is related to aggressive and criminal behavior for certain children and youth but not others. Children who are neglected (e.g., Jonson-Reid & Barth, 2000; Smith, Ireland, & Thornberry, 2005; Verrecchia, Fetzer, Lemmon, & Austin, 2010), and children who experience corporal punishment or physical abuse are at risk of displaying externalizing, antisocial, and criminal behaviors (Eckenrode, Izzo, & Smith, 2007; Fagan, 2005; Grogan-Kaylor, Ruffolo, Ortega, & Clarke, 2008; Jaffee, Caspi, Moffitt, & Taylor, 2004; Klika, Herrenkohl, & Lee, 2013). Other maltreatment typologies, such as emotional abuse (Jonson-Reid, 2002) and exposure to intimate partner violence (Eckenrode et al., 2001) are also associated with aggression and crime. Sexual abuse is less consistently associated with externalizing, antisocial, and criminal behavior problems, with some studies showing an association (Mallie, Viljoen, Mordell, Spice, & Roesch, 2011; Woodruff & Lee, 2011) and others finding no relationship (Grogan-Kaylor & Otis, 2003; Jonson-Reid, 2002).

Evidence indicates that more severe (i.e., extreme and injurious) maltreatment is related to higher levels of aggressive and criminal behaviors (Cicchetti, Rogosch, & Thibodeau, 2012; Jackson, Gabrielli, Fleming, Tunno, & Makanui, 2014; Smith & Thornberry, 1995). Experiencing multiple and co-occurring types of maltreatment simultaneously or sequentially are also associated with a greater likelihood of aggression (Moylan et al., 2010), violent delinquency (Crooks, Scott, Wolfe, Chiodo, & Killip, 2007), and entry into the justice system (Jonson-Reid, 2002; Jonson-Reid & Barth, 2000). In addition, chronic or recurrent maltreatment is associated with a greater likelihood of behavior problems including antisocial behavior (Cicchetti et al., 2012), substance abuse, criminality, and entry into the justice system (Eckenrode et al., 2001; Ryan & Testa, 2005; Verrecchia et al., 2010).

## 3. Cumulative child and family risk and aggressive and criminal behaviors

The accumulation and interaction of negative influences at the individual, family, neighborhood, and societal levels are generally considered more detrimental to child development than any single risk or disadvantage (Sameroff, Bartko, Baldwin, Baldwin, & Seifer, 1998; Scannapieco & Connell-Carrick, 2005). A cumulative risk perspective underscores that for some children, maltreatment will only play a role in behavior problem development in the context of other accumulating risk factors such as internalizing concerns (e.g., depression, anxiety), poverty, parental mental health issues, social isolation, school difficulties, peer rejection, and genetic vulnerability. Likewise, while behavior problems alone may not put a child at risk of maltreatment, a child with behavior problems who also lives in the context of accumulating disadvantages may be at increased risk of abuse or neglect.

Research suggests that children and youth who experience maltreatment are at greater risk of developing externalizing behaviors such as aggression and delinquency when they live in the context of other accumulating risks (MacKenzie, Kotch, Lee, Augsberger, & Hutto, 2011; Tabone et al., 2011). Whereas parental mental health and substance abuse problems are risk factors for externalizing behaviors among young people who have experienced abuse and neglect (Tabone et al., 2011), other caregiving behaviors, such as caregiver monitoring and positive caregiver-child relationships, are protective factors for delinquency (Grogan-Kaylor et al., 2008). Likewise, youth who live in low income families and experience maltreatment in childhood are at higher risk of committing an offence when compared to youth who have been maltreated but do not live in low income families (Bright & Jonson-Reid, 2008; Fagan, 2005). Positive community factors such as support, safety, and cohesion, on the other hand, can mitigate the relationship between maltreatment and behavior problems (Tabone et al., 2011; Verrecchia et al., 2010). Boys, who exhibit aggression and criminality to a greater extent than girls (Ellenbogen, Trocmé, & Wekerle, 2013), tend to be more vulnerable to the cumulative impact of living in poverty and experiencing maltreatment (Bright & Jonson-Reid, 2008).

Individual-level risk factors and vulnerabilities may also impact the relationship between maltreatment and behavior problems. Maltreated young people with developmental disabilities, learning disabilities, academic difficulties, substance abuse issues, emotional disturbances, depression, and other mental health problems are more likely to exhibit aggressive and criminal behavior compared to those without these difficulties (Mallett, Dare, & Seck, 2009; Tabone et al., 2011). Internalizing disorders in particular are well-documented consequences of maltreatment and known predictors of delinquency and crime (Bender, 2010). Although knowledge of the precursors of aggressive and criminal behavior in females is less advanced than in males, research suggests internalizing issues are more strongly associated with delinquent behaviors in girls compared to boys (Pepler, Jiang, Craig, & Connolly, 2010; Postlethwait, Barth, & Guo, 2010).

## 4. Present analysis

Although many studies have established a relationship between maltreatment and aggressive and criminal behavior, relatively few studies have gone beyond this to examine the factors that distinguish maltreated young people with aggressive and criminal behaviors from their maltreated counterparts who do not display such behavior. The hypothesis that the association between maltreatment and behavior problems can be explained by cumulative child and family risk and the various dimensions of maltreatment is explored using data from the latest cycle of the Ontario Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (OIS-2013). Conducted every five years since 1993, the objective of the OIS is to examine the incidence of reported child maltreatment and the characteristics of the children and families investigated by child welfare services in Ontario, Canada. As most research in this area

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