



Research article

Transitions and turning points revisited: A replication to explore child maltreatment and youth offending links within and across Australian cohorts



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ABSTRACT

In this study we examined the consistency of life-course child maltreatment trajectories and youth offending links across birth cohorts. In so doing we demonstrated the value of replication studies for maltreatment research. We applied the methodology of Stewart et al. (2008) and linked population-based (1990 birth cohort) child protection and youth justice administrative data from Queensland, Australia. We performed a group based trajectory analysis to identify distinct maltreatment trajectory groups distinguishable by maltreatment timing and frequency across the life-course. We explored group-based youth offending outcomes with consideration of variations in maltreatment chronicity, timing, and frequency, multi-type maltreatment, gender and race (Indigenous Australian versus non-Indigenous Australian youths). To determine the consistency of maltreatment trajectories and offending links across cohorts (1983/84 versus 1990) we compared our results with those of Stewart et al. (2008). Consistent with Stewart et al. (2008): (1) We identified six distinct maltreatment trajectory groups; (2) Trajectory groups characterised by chronic maltreatment and/or adolescent maltreatment had the largest proportion of young offenders; and (3) Maltreatment frequency commonly peaked at transition points. Extending beyond Stewart et al. (2008) we noted considerable overlap between maltreatment dimensions and a potential impact of race and multi-type maltreatment on maltreatment and offending links. We endorse replication studies as a valuable tool to advance child maltreatment policy and practice and recommend further research on interactions between maltreatment dimensions, gender, race, and youth offending.

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1. Introduction

The link between child maltreatment and subsequent youth offending is widely accepted, but the processes underlying this link remain unclear (Malvaso, Delfabbro, & Day, 2015; Stewart, Livingston, & Dennison, 2008). Though prospective, longitudinal studies have increased knowledge of the maltreatment and offending link, methodological variations across these studies have made it difficult to directly compare results and draw definitive conclusions (Malvaso et al., 2015). Put simply, questions of generalisability are still relevant in current child maltreatment research (Wekerle, 2016). As replication studies test generalisability of results, they are key to effective policy and practice, to the efficient use of already limited

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resources, and to ensuring the safety of vulnerable children and young people (McNeeley & Warner, 2015). Unfortunately, replication studies in this area are especially rare. In this study we performed a replication of Stewart et al. (2008). Specifically, we used linked child protection and youth justice administrative data from Queensland, Australia, to explore distinct life-course maltreatment trajectories and their youth offending outcomes. We compared our results to those of Stewart et al. (2008) to determine the consistency of maltreatment trajectories and youth offending links across distinct birth cohorts from the same jurisdiction.

Administrative data are collected as part of the standard functioning and management of an agency, and provide a record of interactions with individuals (Stewart et al., 2015). When linked at the individual level these data enable time and cost effective research that is prospective, longitudinal and population-based (Brownell & Jutte, 2013; Stewart et al., 2015). Stewart et al. (2008) used cohort based linked child protection and youth justice administrative data that represented life-course child protection and youth justice system contacts of individuals with a 1983/4 birth date. We applied the methodology of Stewart et al. (2008) to cohort based linked administrative data that represented system contacts of individuals with a 1990 birth date.

This study makes two important contributions to the child maltreatment field: (1) we explored the consistency of maltreatment trajectories and offending links across two distinct birth cohorts from a single jurisdiction; thereby providing a stronger platform on which to base current child protection and youth justice policy and practice; and (2) we illustrated the value of replication studies for the child maltreatment and youth offending literature base with particular focus on the likelihood of change over time, especially in administrative data.

Developmental and life-course theoretical frameworks have long emphasised that developmental outcomes of children and young people are affected by the dynamic, complex, and multi-level developmental systems surrounding them (Tanner-Smith, Wilson, & Lipsey, 2013). These complex developmental systems vary over time and place, particularly in relation to individual factors, family factors, neighbourhood and community factors, and broader social and political climate (Elder, 1998; Tanner-Smith et al., 2013). Change over time and place is expected; hence, these frameworks highlight the value of longitudinal methodologies and the need for cohort comparisons (Sampson, 2015).

Each State and Territory in Australia has a separate and distinct child protection system. Recorded rates of maltreatment notifications and substantiations differ across Australian jurisdictions, and change over time, partly because they are impacted by changes to legislation, policies and practice, and community awareness (Child Family Community Australia, 2016). To explain marked growth in Australian statutory child protection systems from the 1980s onwards, Higgins (2011) noted the introduction of mandatory reporting, the development of an increasingly risk averse culture, increased system capacity and professionalization of child protection, broadening of child maltreatment definitions to include a wider range of harms and harm risks (including the addition of emotional abuse, neglect, and exposure to domestic violence as categories of maltreatment or harm when the previous focus was physical and sexual abuse), and responsibility for protection of children moving from communities to governments.

Researchers in the USA have observed changes in child maltreatment and victimisation over time, including reliable declines in physical and sexual abuse and possible declines in neglect from 1993 to 2004 (Finkelhor & Jones, 2006). More recent figures indicate that these declines continued through to 2013, albeit with a one-year discontinuity in 2012 (Finkelhor, Saito, & Jones, 2015). Finkelhor & Jones (2006) drew attention to the potential impact of a range of broader social factors on rates of maltreatment and victimisation over time. They emphasised "...economic prosperity, increasing agents of social intervention, and psychiatric pharmacology..." as potential explanations for the breadth and timing of these changing rates of child maltreatment and victimisation from 1993 to 2004 (Finkelhor & Jones, 2006; p.685). The above information demonstrates the potential for variations in observed maltreatment experiences and developmental outcomes across cohorts, and the potential value of longitudinal replication studies using administrative data.

1.1. Links between maltreatment and offending

In this study we replicated the method of Stewart et al. (2008) to enable comparison of two distinct cohorts from the same jurisdiction. Stewart et al. (2008) used the semi-parametric group-based method of trajectory analysis (SPGM; Nagin, 2005) to identify distinct maltreatment trajectory groups distinguishable by the timing and frequency of maltreatment experienced over the life-course. They identified six distinct maltreatment trajectory groups and observed different rates of offending across each. Stewart et al. (2008) concluded that: (1) maltreatment that began or continued in adolescence was associated with a higher rate of offending than maltreatment restricted to early childhood; and (2) maltreatment commonly peaked at the transition from pre-school to primary school, and the transition from primary school to secondary school. In Queensland these transitions occurred around the age of five years and 12 years, respectively. Stewart et al.'s (2008) results also indicated that a relatively high proportion of young offenders appeared in chronic maltreatment trajectories. Chronic trajectories were those in which maltreatment occurred across more than one developmental period. These developmental periods included early childhood (0–5 years), middle childhood (6–11 years; also known as late childhood) and adolescence (12–18 years) (Thornberry, Ireland, & Smith, 2001). Finally, Stewart et al. (2008) noted that Indigenous Australian youths were particularly overrepresented in chronic maltreatment trajectories, and trajectories with high proportions of young offenders.

The findings of Stewart et al. (2008) are consistent with a range of other studies. For example, Ireland et al. (2002) concluded that maltreatment that occurred during adolescence (including adolescent-only and persistent maltreatment)

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