



Maltreatment, family environment, and social risk factors: Determinants of the child welfare to juvenile justice transition among maltreated children and adolescents



Sarah Vidal^{a,*}, Dana Prince^b, Christian M. Connell^c, Colleen M. Caron^d, Joy S. Kaufman^c, Jacob K. Tebes^c

^a Westat, United States

^b Case Western Reserve University, United States

^c Yale University School of Medicine, United States

^d Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth, and Families, United States

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ABSTRACT

This study prospectively examines the transition from the child welfare system into the juvenile justice system among 10,850 maltreated children and adolescents and explores how patterns of risks, including severity and chronicity of maltreatment, adverse family environment, and social risk factors, affect service systems transition. Almost three percent of maltreated children and adolescents had their first juvenile justice adjudication within an average of approximately six years of their initial child protective services investigation (CPS). Social risk factors, including a child's age at index CPS investigation (older), gender (boys), and race/ethnicity (Black and Hispanic) significantly predicted the risk of transition into the juvenile justice system. Recurrence of maltreatment and experiencing at least one incident of neglect over the course of the study period also increased the risk of transition into the juvenile justice system. However, subtypes of maltreatment, including physical, sexual, and other types of abuse did not significantly predict the risk of juvenile justice system transition. Finally, family environment characterized by poverty also significantly increased the risk of juvenile justice system transition. These findings have important implications for developing and tailoring services for maltreated children, particularly those at-risk for transitioning into the juvenile justice system.

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1. Introduction

It is estimated that approximately 30% of children under the care of the child welfare system (CWS) are subsequently involved in the juvenile justice system (JJS) due to involvement in delinquent behaviors (Smith, Ireland, & Thornberry, 2005). More commonly referred to as crossover youth (Herz et al., 2012), these children and adolescents are a high risk and vulnerable population with complex needs, likely because of their experience of multiple adversities and trauma (Baglivio, Wolff, Piquero, & Epps, 2015; Herz, Ryan, & Bilchik, 2010). For example, maltreatment, including neglect, and physical, sexual, and other types of abuse, is among the most common risk factors associated with service systems crossover (Herz et al.,

* Corresponding author at: Child Welfare and Justice Division, Westat, 1600 Research Blvd., Rockville, MD 20850, United States.
E-mail address: SarahVidal@Westat.com (S. Vidal).

2012; Mersky, Topitzes, & Reynolds, 2012). Despite the strong evidence demonstrating the link between maltreatment and delinquency, however, many children and adolescents who experience maltreatment do not engage in delinquent behaviors nor do they transition into the JJS (Widom, 1989a, 1989b). Thus, it is critical to examine what factors might differentiate maltreated children and adolescents who transition into the JJS from those who do not, in order to inform service delivery and prevent deeper involvement in service systems.

Childhood adversities such as maltreatment do not happen in isolation. A challenging family environment, for example, is associated with negative developmental outcomes such as maltreatment (Dodge, Greenberg, & Malone, 2008; Beyers, Bates, Pettit, & Dodge, 2003). An adverse family environment may also impact the likelihood of involvement in delinquent behaviors among maltreated children and adolescents (Najman et al., 2010), and may contribute to transition into the JJS. Evidence also suggests that transition from the CWS into the JJS is characterized by disparities based on social risk factors. Boys and racial/ethnic minority youth are disproportionately represented in the crossover youth population (Herz et al., 2012). In this study, we prospectively tracked a cohort of maltreated children and adolescents referred to child protective services and then identified patterns of risks between those who transitioned from the CWS into the JJS compared to those who did not. Understanding how patterns of risks contribute to service systems transition is critical to intervention development and resource allocation for high risk and vulnerable children and adolescents.

2. The link between maltreatment and the child welfare-juvenile justice (CWS-JJS) transition

There is strong empirical evidence demonstrating the association between maltreatment and delinquency (Postlethwait, Barth, & Guo, 2010; Ryan & Testa, 2005; Stouthamer-Loeber, Wei, Homish, & Loeber, 2002). This evidence supports the assumption that maltreated children and adolescents are likely to engage in more delinquent behaviors, and also, transition from the CWS into the JJS. For example, in a longitudinal study of 884 urban youth, Smith and colleagues (2005) examined the impact of maltreatment during adolescence on young adult offending. Their findings indicate that about 35% of youth had substantiated cases of maltreatment prior the age of 12 and approximately 9% of youth experienced maltreatment between the ages of 12 and 17. Compared to non-maltreated youth, maltreated youth had higher rates of arrests for general, violent, and substance abuse offenses during late adolescence and early adulthood.

The cycle of violence theory (Widom, 1989a, 1989b) provides some insight into explaining the link between maltreatment and delinquency. Consistent with a social learning perspective (Bandura, 1973), this theory posits that maltreatment increases the likelihood of involvement in crime and delinquency through modeling of aggressive behavior. For example, matched comparison studies between maltreated and non-maltreated children have shown that physical abuse compared to other types of abuse had the greatest impact on delinquent behaviors (Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1990; Widom, 1989a), and maltreatment perpetrated by parents is believed to have more severe health repercussions than incidents committed by other family or nonfamily members (DiLillo et al., 2010). In line with the commonly held belief that violence begets violence, the cycle of violence theory suggests that maltreatment may exacerbate the risk for subsequent involvement in delinquent or violent behaviors (Widom, 1989b).

An alternative perspective based on cumulative risk theory posits that the accumulation of risks over time significantly contributes to poor developmental outcomes (Appleyard, Egeland, van Dulmen, & Sroufe, 2005; Bauman, Silver, & Stein, 2006; Sameroff, Seifer, Zax, & Barocas, 1987). For example, early and chronic exposure to adverse events may place children at greater risk for poor behavior outcomes in adolescence (Appleyard et al., 2005). In one study, Ryan and Testa (2005) compared the delinquency rates between maltreated and non-maltreated children, and examined whether factors such as recurrence of maltreatment is associated with involvement in delinquent behaviors. Their findings showed that children who experienced two to three substantiated reports of maltreatment had a greater likelihood of involvement in delinquency. Chronicity of maltreatment may expose a child to new risk factors and exacerbate the progression of risk within and across development due to the child's removal from home or having to experience multiple residential transitions (Connell et al., 2009; Leve et al., 2012). Thus, children who experience frequent maltreatment and are exposed to more risk factors for long periods of time are at greater likelihood for externalizing behaviors, including involvement in delinquent behavior (Cicchetti, 2013; Dodge et al., 2008; Stouthamer-Loeber et al., 2002). Yet, it is not clear how severity and chronicity of maltreatment differentially influence children's prolonged involvement in and transitions across service systems.

3. Family environment as a risk factor in CWS-JJS transition

Research suggests that children and youth who experience service systems transitions are more likely to come from disadvantaged family backgrounds that have less stable family relationships and lower social support compared to single system-involved youth (Herz et al., 2010; Ryan, Williams, & Courtney, 2013). For instance, two-thirds of youth who experienced a CWS-JJS transition were in an out-of-home placement when they were arrested (Dale, Baker, Anastasio, & Purcell, 2007), two-thirds had a history of running away (Dale et al., 2007), and up to one-third had parents with drug and alcohol problems (Ryan et al., 2013). These risk factors do not happen in isolation and are typically compounded by other challenges, including poverty and domestic violence.

Exposure to poverty in early childhood plays a critical role in shaping developmental outcomes during adolescence (Aneshensel, 2009; Duncan, Yeung, Brooks-Gunn, & Smith, 1998). For example, persistent exposure to poverty during childhood is linked to increased involvement in delinquency (Jarjoura, Triplett, & Brinker, 2002). Strikingly, financial difficulties

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