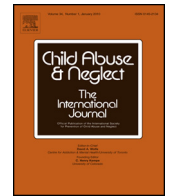


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# Child Abuse & Neglect



Growing up with adversity

## Growing up with adversity: From juvenile justice involvement to criminal persistence and psychosocial problems in young adulthood



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### ABSTRACT

Several studies have been carried out to investigate the effect of child maltreatment on juvenile justice involvement and future criminal life. However, little is known about the impact of other forms of adversity, beyond abuse and neglect, on juvenile delinquency and criminal persistence. The effect of early adversity on psychosocial problems is underexplored, particularly in juvenile delinquents. This study, using the Childhood Adverse Experiences (ACE) questionnaire, a tool accessing the exposure to different types of abuse, neglect and serious household dysfunction, explored the role of each adverse experience on juvenile justice involvement, persistence in crime and psychosocial problems during young adulthood. A Portuguese sample of 75 young adults with official records of juvenile delinquency in 2010/2011, and 240 young adults from a community sample completed ACE questionnaire and measures of psychosocial adjustment. Seven out of ten adverse experiences were significantly more prevalent in young adults with juvenile justice involvement than in the community sample, after matching the main demographic variables. The strongest predictor of juvenile justice involvement and criminal persistence during early adulthood was sexual abuse. Dimensions of child/adolescent emotional maltreatment and a mental illness in the household predicted a set of psychosocial problems in young adulthood. This study indicates that early adversity is significantly related to juvenile justice involvement, criminal persistence and psychosocial problems. This study also suggests that each experience has a different role in this process. There is an urgent need to screen, prevent and stop serious adversity. Future scientific directions and recommendations for policies are provided.

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## 1. Introduction

Worldwide, it is estimated that 38.8% of the population has been a victim of at least one serious adverse experience during the first 18 years of life (Kessler et al., 2010). Particularly in Portugal, a representative sample of parents (N = 2391) showed that 25.9% of the participants self-reported committing at least one act of emotional abuse (22.4%) or physical abuse (12.3%), during the last year alone (Machado, Gonçalves, Matos, & Dias, 2007). Despite the high prevalence in the general

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community, this situation is even more serious among juvenile offenders. A recent study conducted with 64,329 juvenile offenders in the United States has shown that 98.2% of the youths were victims of abuse, neglect or serious household dysfunction (Baglivio et al., 2014). This study also showed that the number of adverse experiences substantially increased the risk of recidivism. However, apart from physical and sexual abuse, the role played by other childhood adverse experiences in juvenile delinquency and adult criminal behavior is underexplored.

### 1.1. Early adversity, delinquent behavior and psychosocial problems: scientific evidence

There is a growing body of evidence that identifies child maltreatment as a predictor of lifetime anti-social and criminal behavior. A recent meta-analysis of 118 longitudinal studies (Derzon, 2010) showed that child maltreatment is a predictor of aggression, criminal and violent behavior throughout life. For example, the longitudinal study conducted by Widom and Maxfield (2001) over the course of more than 30 years ( $N=1575$ ) indicated that a child who experienced child abuse or neglect is 59% more likely to be arrested during adolescence, and 28% more likely to be arrested during adulthood.

Physical and sexual abuse are the two subtypes of maltreatment that have been most studied. Several studies have found that physical and sexual abuse are predictors of childhood anti-social behavior and youth delinquency, even after controlling for a set of other risk factors (Cernkovich, Lactôt, & Giordano, 2008; Lee, Herrenkohl, Jung, Skinner, & Klika, 2015; McGrath, Nilsen, & Kerley, 2011). In recent years, the relationship between delinquency and neglect has been also studied. Some longitudinal studies have found that neglect predicted juvenile delinquency and persistence in crime (Kerig & Becker, 2015). However, the study conducted by Kazemian, Widom and Farrington (2011) found that this relationship was mediated by other adverse events (e.g. high-risk family; parental criminality).

The importance of analyzing the influence of other types of adversity, apart from abuse and neglect, on youth delinquency has been recently highlighted (Kerig & Becker, 2015). For example, one of the few studies exploring the relationship between childhood adverse experiences and early initiation of problem behaviors (Duke, Pettingell, McMorris, & Borowsky, 2010) found that each type of adverse childhood experiences is significantly associated with adolescent interpersonal violence perpetration (eg. delinquency, physical fighting) and also self-directed violence (eg. suicidal attempt). More recently, a study conducted by Grasso, Dierkhising, Branson, Ford, & Lee (2015), suggested that children and adolescents exposed to multiple types of adverse experiences have higher rates of subsequent problem behaviors, including juvenile justice involvement. The same effect was observed on a large sample of youth offenders ( $n=22,575$ ), Fox, Perez, Cass, Baglivio, and Epps (2015) found that exposure to emotional neglect, physical, sexual and emotional abuse, household substance abuse, exposure to domestic violence, and an incarcerated household member during the first 18 years of life, predicted serious, violent, and chronic juvenile offending compared to juveniles with one non-violent felony, after controlling for the main demographic confounding variables and other forms of adversity. In the Portuguese context, a study conducted among youths with juvenile justice involvement suggested a relationship between serious psychosocial adversity and the severity of criminal offenses (Lemos & Faísca, 2015). Both psychological and neurological explanations have been proposed to account for link between early adversity and juvenile offending. Caregiver's violence and/or rejection could lead to a pattern of hypervigilance and hostile attribution bias about others intentions (Lee & Hoaken, 2007). Those reactions tend to increase the likelihood of establishing dysfunctional relationships overtime, affecting the psychological development and increasing the risk for anti-social behavior (Cicchetti & Toth, 2005; Pinto, Fernandes, Mesquita, & Maia, 2015). Literature has also suggested that continued exposure to stress situations caused by early adverse events could lead to the dysregulation of the biological stress system (e.g. abnormal release of cortisol, adrenaline) and affect the maturation of brain structures (e.g. hippocampus, prefrontal cortex) which are involved in emotional regulation and self-control processes (Lee & Hoaken, 2007; Watts-English, Fortson, Gibler, Hooper, & DeBellis, 2006). Given the central role of both processes, one possible explanation is that self-control and emotion regulation may mediate the relationship between early adverse events and a wide range of psychosocial problems, including youth delinquency (Roberton, Daffern, & Bucks, 2012).

In this line, recent literature has highlighted the importance of deepening and extending this field to populations at high risk of social marginalization suggesting a relationship between early adverse experiences and adult psychosocial outcomes, not only in the general population (e.g. Strine et al., 2012), but also in youths with file records of child maltreatment (Pinto & Maia, 2013a). For example, in the Portuguese context, a retrospective longitudinal study conducted by Pinto & Maia (2013a) suggested the number of childhood adverse experiences in the child protective service file records is an important predictor of psychopathology, physical complaints, health risk behavior during late adolescence and young adulthood. Additionally, juvenile justice involvement and the common psychosocial problems among juveniles with deviant behavior have been pointed as risk factors for criminal behavior during adulthood (e.g., Bender, 2010).

In the light of this knowledge, studying the relationship between exposure to adversity and future psychosocial problems in juvenile offenders is relevant, but has rarely been done. As far as we know, this is the first study conducted in Portugal. Worldwide, the only study we found evaluating the relationship between different forms of child maltreatment and a wide range of psychosocial problems in juvenile offenders stressed the need to investigate this topic in more depth. This study evaluated 13,613 young offenders, aged between 12 and 18 years, and showed that juvenile offenders who were victims of child maltreatment had a significantly higher number of psychosocial problems (e.g., school maladjustment, mental health problems) than non-victims (Van der Put, Lactôt, Ruiter, & Van Vugt, 2015).

The main purpose of this paper is to explore the role of exposure to different forms of early adversity, including abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction, on juvenile delinquency, persistence in crime, and psychosocial problems in young

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