

Adolescent delinquency in child welfare system: A multiple disadvantage model



Tyrone C. Cheng^{a,*}, Qingyi Li^b

^a School of Social Work, University of Alabama, Room 2138, Capital Hall, Box 870314, Tuscaloosa AL 35487, United States

^b School of Social Work, University of Alabama, Room 104, Farrah Hall, 324 University Blvd, Tuscaloosa AL 35487, United States

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ABSTRACT

This longitudinal study of adolescents in the child welfare system examined delinquent behaviors' relationships with social structural, social-relationship, and mental health factors. This study employed a sample of 788 adolescents (age 11–17 years) extracted from 3 interview waves of the longitudinal National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW-II). Results of negative binomial regression showed that deviant peer affiliation, alcohol use, use of substances while alone, depression, need for services, receipt of services for delinquency, male gender, and age were associated positively with higher “counts” of delinquent acts. In turn, parental monitoring was associated negatively with such counts. Social structural factors and maltreatment types had no significant associations with delinquent acts. Implications of the results include a need for cultivating prosocial friends, providing parental monitoring, and conducting drug screens to address adolescents' delinquency.

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1. Introduction

In investigations of reported child maltreatment featuring a parent or caregiver approving of or facilitating delinquent behaviors, that delinquency may be categorized as “other” maltreatment. Only 1.9% of children placed in foster care have experienced this type of “other” maltreatment; the percentage is even lower, 0.6%, for children receiving in-home services (Children's Bureau, 2015). Generally, of course, older children in foster care exhibit a higher rate of delinquency than the public population; their relatively high rate of delinquency is one barrier to a permanency outcome for older foster children (Children's Bureau, 2013). The purpose of the present study was to identify and examine risk factors for delinquency among, specifically, children involved in the child welfare system. The study did not include children not involved in that system.

2. Literature review

The present study used the multiple disadvantage model, applied previously to explain homicide victimization (Lo, Howell, & Cheng, 2013), intimate partner violence (Cheng & Lo, 2016), and adolescents' alcohol use (Cheng & Lo, 2015, in press). Initially, the model proposed that homicide was an act springing from disadvantaging social structural factors, social integration, mental health-related factors, and

substance abuse. The model also proposed these four factors' cumulative direct or indirect impact on homicides (Lo et al., 2013). In contrast, the model in this study contended that delinquent acts by adolescents in the child welfare system would be fostered by disadvantageous social structural, social-relationship, mental health, and substance use factors (see Fig. 1). In the general population, risk factors including poverty or low family income place chronic stress on adolescents, who may eventually display delinquency (Aseltine, Gore, & Gordon, 2000). However, a study of adolescents in the child welfare system showed no significant association between delinquency and disadvantageous neighborhood (one with high percentages of poverty, unemployment, public assistance receipt, single motherhood, etc.) (Huang, Ryan, & Rhoden, 2016).

Other social structural factors, including adolescents' ethnicity and gender, have been linked to delinquency among child welfare system clients. The multiple disadvantage model suggests that violence enacted by ethnic minority individuals, especially by African Americans, is generated by angry frustration that is a response to historical and structural racism (Lo et al., 2013). The present study speculated that this type of frustration underlies delinquency among adolescent child welfare system clients of minority ethnicity. African American and Latino adolescents involved in the system engage in delinquent behaviors at a higher rate than Caucasian adolescents (Garcia, Greeson, Kim, Thompson, & DeNard, 2015; Snyder & Merritt, 2014). Similarly, African American adolescents in one study (Ryan, Testa, & Zhai, 2008) were at relatively high risk of delinquency, although another study (Taussig, 2002) found no significant association between

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: ccheng@sw.ua.edu (T.C. Cheng), qli31@crimson.ua.edu (Q. Li).

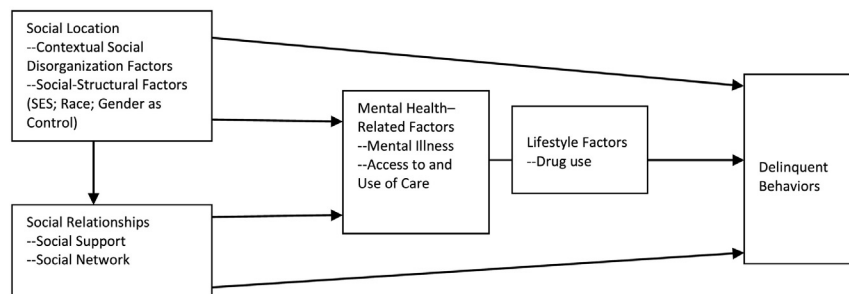


Fig. 1. The multiple disadvantage model explaining adolescent delinquent behaviors.

adolescents' African American ethnicity and their delinquency. Extant findings about delinquency's relationship with African American adolescents in the child welfare system are obviously mixed. Findings about its relationship with client adolescents' gender, however, are consistent: The research shows adolescent male clients to be more likely than adolescent female clients to display delinquency (Huang et al., 2016; Ryan et al., 2008; Taussig, 2002).

In the multiple disadvantage model, social relationships (which we viewed as representing social integration) serve as either risk or deterrent factors in adolescents' delinquency. Peer affiliation is a proven, critical contributor to adolescents' delinquent or anti-social behaviors, because in general, adolescents learn more from their peers than from other social groups (Burk, Kerr, & Stattin, 2008; Burt & Klump, 2013; Cook, Buehler, & Henson, 2009). While peer relationships are an essential part of adolescents' development, their influence on adolescents can be negative, leading to anti-social behaviors and/or delinquent behaviors (Allen, Porter, & McFarland, 2006; Dilorio et al., 2001; Hops, Andrews, Duncan, Duncan, & Tildesley, 2000; Lin, 2014; Prinstein, Boergers, & Spirito, 2001; Urberg, Degirmencioglu, & Pilgrim, 1997). The greater the risk of exposure to delinquent peers, the greater the risk of committing violent behaviors, studies show (Burt & Klump, 2013; Laird, Criss, Pettit, Dodge, & Bates, 2008; Maschi, Bradley, & Morgen, 2008). Adolescents in the child welfare system resemble those in the general population in that their associations with deviant peers and gangs increase their risk of engaging in delinquent behaviors (Snyder & Merritt, 2014; Thompson, Wojciak, & Cooley, 2016).

Another social-relationship factor that directly or indirectly influences deviant behaviors is parent-child relationship. In general, the quality of the parent-child relationship is a significant factor in delinquent behaviors (Gault-Sherman, 2012; Hair, Moore, Garrett, Ling, & Cleveland, 2008). Poor relationships between parents and adolescents have been linked to higher likelihood that the latter associate with delinquent peers (Asscher, Wissink, Dekovic, Prinzie, & Stams, 2014; Caldwell, Beutler, Ross, & Silver, 2006; Dijkstra et al., 2015; Keijsers, Loeber, Branje, & Meeus, 2011; Laird et al., 2008). Much research has demonstrated that insufficient parental monitoring and control are linked to deviant behaviors (Cheng, 2004; Fletcher, Steinberg, & Williams-Wheeler, 2004; Jacobson & Crockett, 2000; Laird et al., 2008). Moreover, parental monitoring and disapproval communications are effective for reducing adolescents' affiliations with deviant peers (Tilton-Weaver, Burk, Kerr, & Stattin, 2013). Concerning adolescents involved in the child welfare system, one study found that minimal parental monitoring increased children's delinquency (Tyler & Melander, 2010), but another observed no association between delinquency and parental support (Taussig, 2002).

In the general population, child maltreatment—which is a manifestation of a non-nurturing parent-child relationship—has been linked to adolescents' delinquency and violent behaviors (Chapple, Tyler, & Bersani, 2005). One recent study with a sample of adolescents in the child welfare system (Snyder & Smith, 2015)

observed a link between delinquency and case substantiation. Other studies on maltreated children have shown that neglected and physically abused children's risk of delinquency is higher than other maltreated children (Huang et al., 2016; Taussig, 2002). Furthermore, among maltreated children, sexualized behaviors mediate the maltreatment experience–delinquency relationship (Merrick et al., 2015). Some research, however, has not found adolescent delinquency to demonstrate significant correlation with neglect or sexual abuse (Snyder & Merritt, 2014; Taussig, 2002).

According to the multiple disadvantage model, chronic stress arising from social structural and social-relational disadvantages may foster mental illness and other problems that eventually lead to maladaptive coping behaviors such as delinquent behaviors. Within the general population, adolescents who experience trauma (whatever the type and severity) are relatively likely to demonstrate delinquent behaviors (Maschi et al., 2008). Not surprisingly, among children involved in the child welfare system, as many as 63% have experienced at least one mental health (e.g., depression) or substance abuse problem (Heneghan et al., 2013; Shipman & Taussig, 2009); only a fraction of such children received associated services (Shipman & Taussig, 2009). Moreover, while the receipt of services can nearly always be said to mirror the fact that a problem exists, receipt says nothing about the complete delivery of services or about client outcomes. Not surprisingly, studies show depression and substance use to have significant influence on the delinquent behaviors of adolescents in foster care settings (Bender, Postlewait, Thompson, & Springer, 2011; Lalayants & Prince, 2014; Postlewait, Barth, & Guo, 2010; Traube, James, Zhang, & Landsverk, 2012; Woods, Farineau, & McWey, 2013). Two studies found that adolescents placed out of home (especially those placed in group homes) were at elevated risk of substance abuse and mental health challenges (Heneghan et al., 2013; Keller, Salazar, & Courtney, 2010). Two others (Cheng & Lo, 2010a, 2010b) found no significant associations between out-of-home placement and use of either alcohol or hard drugs, although a third study (Cheng & Lo, 2011) showed out-of-home placement to reduce marijuana use. Overall, though, among those in the child welfare system, out of home placement does appear to be associated with increased delinquency (Snyder & Merritt, 2014).

The literature available on delinquency of adolescents involved in the child welfare system suggests a list of risk factors for their delinquency. If the present study confirmed those risks and deterrents, then the directions likely to lead to the most effective interventions could begin to be understood. We point out, furthermore, that the extant research conducted with NSCAW data evidences little effort to investigate simultaneously the roles of family income and receipt of services. In contrast, the present study hypothesized that low family income, ethnic minority status, child maltreatment, out-of-home placement, deviant peers, mental health problems, and substance use would be associated positively with delinquent behaviors, but that parental monitoring and receipt of services would be associated negatively with such behaviors.

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