

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](https://www.sciencedirect.com)

Child Abuse & Neglect

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/chiabuneg

Physical neglect in childhood as a predictor of violent behavior in adolescent males

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Childhood physical neglect
Male adolescents
Violent behavior
Delinquent

ABSTRACT

Research has established that childhood maltreatment experiences are associated with negative outcomes in adolescence, including violent and antisocial behavior (Chapple et al., 2005). Neglect is the most prevalent form of childhood maltreatment (U.S. DHHS, 2012), the consequences of which require further investigation. This study used archival data to explore whether childhood physical neglect increased the likelihood of violent behavior in a random sample of 85 males between the ages of 12–19 held at a long-term detention facility in the Northeastern United States.

An anonymous survey gathered background information and data regarding childhood physical neglect and violent behavior in adolescence. A step-wise hierarchical regression model controlled for the effects of age, self-esteem, personal competency, depression, chemical drug use, family violence and a childhood history of physical abuse. Results showed that a history of childhood physical neglect was the strongest predictor of violent adolescent behavior in this sample when the data was tested for all moderator and mediator effects.

1. Introduction

Neglect is the most common form of child maltreatment in the United States. Though it is reported in 78.3% of maltreatment cases (U.S. DHHS, 2012) more easily identifiable forms of maltreatment, such as physical and sexual abuse, garner more attention from interventionists, researchers, and the media. Despite this “neglect of neglect” (Wolock & Horowitz, 1984) the recent rise in official reports of child neglect reinforces the long held premise that more attention should be paid to this type of maltreatment (Dubowitz, 2007; Nikulina, Widom, & Czaja, 2011). Child neglect should be included in any comprehensive study of child maltreatment.

A major hurdle in establishing the importance of neglect is that it is characterized by the absence of nurturance and protection, rather than direct conspicuous acts of maltreatment. Since children who experience neglect may simultaneously experience other forms of maltreatment, this co-occurrence often allows the independent effects of child neglect to be ignored. Incident-based forms of abuse are simply more dramatic and identifiable than the cumulative effects of patterns of neglectful parenting. This is particularly problematic, as emergent research suggests the outcomes of child neglect can be as severe as those resulting from other maltreatment types.

For example, child neglect is known to be strongly associated with delinquent behavioral outcomes (Maxfield & Widom, 1996; Ryan, Williams, & Courtney, 2013; Widom, 2001), the severity of which seems to increase proportionally with duration, frequency, and severity of the neglect experiences. Neglected children often do not have pro-social behavior modeled for them in the home. As a result, neglected children are more likely to display violent behaviors (Chapple, Tyler, & Bersani, 2005), and to be diagnosed with

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antisocial personality disorder as adults (Luntz & Widom, 1994). In extreme cases, psychopathic and homicidal behaviors have been associated with childhood neglect (Farrington, 2006).

There has been discourse as to whether it would be prudent to more clearly delineate between physical, environmental, and emotional neglect as distinct typologies (Zuravin, 1999). The current exploratory study examined the link between distinct childhood physical neglect experiences and their impact on adolescent violent behavior.

2. Literature review

A study by Mennen, Kim, Sang, and Trickett (2010) investigated the co-occurrence of neglect with other types of maltreatment among a sample of 303 maltreated children in Southern California. Data came from interviews with the caretakers and children, and records from the Department of Children and Family Services. Children participating in the study were between 9 and 12 years of age ($m = 10.8$ years), both males ($n = 152$) and females ($n = 151$) were equally represented, and the children were predominantly African American (40.6%) or Latino (35.0%). Results showed the majority of maltreated children (71%) had experienced childhood neglect but the study did not distinguish between specific types of neglect.

Dubowitz, Pitts, and Black (2004) examined relationships among physical, psychological, and environmental neglect. Existing research generalizes these three subtypes, prompting an investigation of whether discerning between subtypes would advance the understanding of neglect, current theory, and interventions. Neglect scales were created using data from the Home Observation Measure of the Environment (HOME), the Child Well-Being Scales (CWBS), and the Perceived Neighborhood Scale (PNS). Interviews with caregivers and teachers measured children's behavior via the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL). A total of 173 children were evaluated when the children were five years old, and again at six. Most children were African-American (90%) and half were male. A modest correlation was found between physical and psychological neglect, suggesting both types existed when a child's basic needs were not being met. Parents reported more behavior problems in children who experienced environmental neglect, while teachers reported more problematic peer interactions in those who experienced physical or psychological neglect. These findings suggest that all three subtypes of neglect may result in specific negative outcomes on behavior and that future research should focus on the negative effects of each type of neglect.

A study by Maughan and Moore (2010) examined the effect of neglectful parental behavior on subsequent delinquent behavior in children. Data was drawn from the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development (Farrington, 1981) a longitudinal study of 411 boys, the majority of whom (97%) were White. Data was gathered from interviews conducted by school psychologists when the participants were 8, 10, and 14 years of age; and from interviews with social science graduates in the Cambridge University research office when the participants were 16, 18, 21, and 24 years of age. Delinquency was assessed by official criminal convictions. Childhood neglect was associated with both juvenile delinquency and adult criminal behavior.

Huang et al. (2011) examined the relationship between childhood maltreatment, subsequent drug use, and drug-related problems. Data from Waves 1 and 3 of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) were used for this study. Data in the Add Health study (Harris et al., 2003) was gathered via questionnaires and self-report interviews. Wave 1 data included 6504 American students in grades 7 through 12. Of the Wave 1 respondents, 75.1% ($n = 4882$) participated in Wave 3 when they were between the ages of 18 and 26 ($m = 21.8$ years). Half (51%) were male, 68.3% were non-Hispanic White, 15.8% African-American, and 11.2% Hispanic.

Results showed that 31.9% of respondents experienced one or more types of childhood maltreatment. Neglect was reported by 20.7% of respondents, physical abuse by 14.3%, and sexual abuse by 4.3%. All three types of abuse were significantly associated with respondent's drug use and drug-related problems. Neglect was more strongly associated with drug use in females than in males. Authors suggested females may be more likely to internalize feelings associated with neglect, while males may be more prone to external acting out behaviors.

A recent study by Robertson and Burton (2010) investigated differences in childhood maltreatment histories between 78 non-violent and 59 violent offenders ($n = 137$) in a sample of incarcerated male youth in six residential facilities in a Midwestern state. The Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ) assessed traumatic childhood experiences (Physical Abuse, Emotional Abuse, Sexual Abuse, Physical Neglect, and Emotional Neglect). The Self-Reported Delinquency Measure (SRD) measured delinquent behavior. The participants had a mean age of 16.57 years. Most were African-American (54%) or Caucasian (34%). Results showed that violent youth experienced significantly more physical neglect, sexual abuse, and had a higher overall CTQ score than the non-violent participants. Physical neglect was the most accurate predictor of violent behavior. Surprisingly, experiencing physical abuse was not indicative of future violent behavior in this sample, which is in contrast to the results of earlier work by Howes and Eldredge (1985). Reviewing the published literature suggests that more can be learned about the effect of childhood physical neglect on violent adolescent behavior.

2.1. Obtaining the archival data

In 2004, a licensed minister employed by a private juvenile detention facility in the Northeastern United States contacted the first author. The minister was interested in knowing more about the childhood histories of the youth at the facility where he worked. The first author helped the minister develop valid measures to include in a self-report survey.

Each year this facility serves over 2000 male youth with prior histories of moderate to severe emotional problems, delinquency, aggression, truancy, abuse, neglect, and other behavior problems. All youth are referred by the juvenile justice system from the two major cities in the state. The facility has over 700 professional employees, all with post-secondary or masters degrees, including 120

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