



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Child Abuse & Neglect

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

The association between child maltreatment and adult poverty – A systematic review of longitudinal research

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Child maltreatment
Childhood adversity
Adult economic outcomes
Poverty
Welfare inequalities
Longitudinal
Systematic review

ABSTRACT

Child maltreatment is a global problem affecting millions of children and is associated with an array of cumulative negative outcomes later in life, including unemployment and financial difficulties. Although establishing child maltreatment as a causal mechanism for adult economic outcomes is fraught with difficulty, understanding the relationship between the two is essential to reducing such inequality. This paper presents findings from a systematic review of longitudinal research examining experiences of child maltreatment and economic outcomes in adulthood. A systematic search of seven databases found twelve eligible retrospective and prospective cohort studies. From the available evidence, there was a relatively clear relationship between 'child maltreatment' and poorer economic outcomes such as reduced income, unemployment, lower level of job skill and fewer assets, over and above the influence of family of origin socio-economic status. Despite an extremely limited evidence base, neglect had a consistent relationship with a number of long-term economic outcomes, while physical abuse has a more consistent relationship with income and employment. Studies examining sexual abuse found less of an association with income and employment, although they did find a relationship other outcomes such as sickness absence, assets, welfare receipt and financial insecurity. Nonetheless, all twelve studies showed some association between at least one maltreatment type and at least one economic measure. The task for future research is to clarify the relationship between specific maltreatment types and specific economic outcomes, taking account of how this may be influenced by gender and life course stage.

1. Introduction

Estimates of child maltreatment indicate that nearly a quarter of adults (22.6%) worldwide have suffered physical abuse as a child, 36.3% emotional abuse, 16.3% physical neglect and 11.8% sexual abuse (Stoltenborgh, Bakermans-Kranenburg, Alink, & IJzendoorn, 2015). Child characteristics such as gender, age, birth weight and disability and family characteristics such as parental

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2017.12.022>

Received 6 September 2016; Received in revised form 3 December 2017; Accepted 29 December 2017

0145-2134/© 2017 Published by Elsevier Ltd.

gender, age, psychological functioning, stress, family structure and size have all been identified as factors associated with increased risk of abuse (Krug, Mercy, Dahlberg, & Zwi, 2002). Numerous studies have also shown a strong association between poverty and child maltreatment (Bagley & Mallick, 2000; Cawson, Wattam, Brooker, & Kelly, 2000; Frias-Armenta & McCloskey, 1998; Hadi, 2000), with higher abuse rates in communities with high levels of unemployment and concentrated poverty.

In the UK, recent research also points to large inequalities in child welfare interventions rates with children living in deprived neighbourhoods being much more likely to be involved in child protection processes or be taken into state care than children living in more affluent neighbourhoods (Bywaters, Brady, Sparks, & Bos, 2014). A small number of US studies (Cancian, Yang, & Slack, 2013; Fein & Lee, 2003; Shook & Testa, 1997) have also examined variations in family income brought about by changes in social benefits programmes to highlight a causal link between income and involvement with child protection services. For example, Cancian et al. (2013) used data from a randomized experimental evaluation of a state child support program in Wisconsin to show that even very modest income increases (\$100 a month), reduced the risk of a “screened-in” maltreatment report by 10%.

Exposure to child maltreatment is associated with an array of negative outcomes in later life. A growing body of research shows clear and consistent evidence that those exposed to multiple adversities in childhood, including child abuse and neglect, are at increased risk of negative psychological, emotional and health-related outcomes in adulthood. This risk is cumulative, with the US Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study (Felitti & Anda, 2010) reporting a strong, graded relationship between the numbers of childhood adversities experienced and a wide range of negative outcomes. While investigation of the specific relationship between maltreatment in childhood and poverty in adulthood has been more limited, a number of cross-sectional studies have pointed to a strong association between the two [see for example Zielinski (2009) and Barrett, Kamiya, and O’Sullivan (2014)]. Nonetheless, it remains far from clear to what extent child maltreatment can be considered a causal factor in adult poverty.

Although establishing a causal link is far from easy, developing a better understanding of the relationship between the experience of child maltreatment and subsequent adult poverty is essential to reducing such inequalities. In the hierarchy of research evidence (Elamin & Montori, 2012) randomised controlled trials are considered the ‘gold standard’ in terms of establishing a causal link but are invariably not possible in maltreatment research for obvious ethical and legal reasons. While retrospective adult reports of childhood abuse can be used to establish a temporal order in cross sectional, case control and case series research, the risk of recall bias is elevated. There are also concerns that, because participants will already have developed the outcome of interest, those experiencing difficulties may be more inclined to interpret parental behaviors as abusive (Teicher, Samson, Anderson, & Ohashi, 2016). As such, these study designs are generally viewed as less reliable for establishing causality. Cohort studies, on the other hand, measure the antecedent before the outcome, either prospectively through following participants forward in time, or retrospectively through linkage with existing data which documents the exposure status of participants (Grimes & Schulz, 2002). Thus, in the absence of evidence from controlled trials, well designed cohort studies are widely considered the most robust means for making causal attributions.

Although methodological issues related to sample size, representativeness, response rate and attrition are all important factors in reviewing cohort studies, there are additional factors which are especially salient to the assessment of longitudinal maltreatment research. Key amongst these is how maltreatment has been defined and measured. There are no established international definitions of child abuse and neglect and legal definitions can vary both within and between countries (Stoltenborgh et al., 2015). Researchers use diverse standards in determining incidence rates and prevalence in clinical and population-based studies with some focusing on specific abuse types, others conflating abuse types to measure generic constructs of ‘child maltreatment’ (Petersen et al., 2014). While there is little doubt that exposure to ‘maltreatment’ poses a significant risk for a range of negative adult outcomes, a growing body of evidence points to differential outcomes, depending on the type or combination of abuse experienced, severity of exposure, and frequency of occurrence (Jackson, Gabrielli, Fleming, Tunno, & Makanui, 2014). Thus, it is increasingly important that researchers attempt to disentangle these factors from one another in analysis.

Consideration of whether maltreatment data has been collected prospectively or retrospectively also remains a key concern as, even within prospective cohort designs, the measurement of maltreatment exposure may have been conducted retrospectively. In maltreatment research prospective measures that collect data on current or past year exposure at various points during childhood are relatively rare, mainly because of reporting requirements to notify statutory authorities once abuse has been identified (Kendall-Tackett & Becker-Blease, 2004). As such, prospective maltreatment measures are more commonly based on official records of substantiated maltreatment collected when the child first came to the attention of child welfare professionals. Retrospective measures primarily rely on self-report data and are usually considered less reliable than prospective measures. However, as Kendall-Tackett and Becker-Blease (2004) note, in the context of maltreatment research ‘researchers should not assume that prospective is “better”. Child welfare records will only capture a portion of child maltreatment cases which occur within a given population, may be skewed towards more ‘serious’ cases, may themselves reflect biases in professional decision making and contain missing or incomplete data which do not allow for disaggregation by abuse type. Additionally, the potential for recall bias in retrospective studies may be minimised by the use of validated maltreatment measures which focus on the behaviors experienced by participants as opposed to their own perceptions of abuse, as well as by reducing the period of recall and/or using multiple data collection points or sources to triangulate results.

Given that the literature has shown child maltreatment to be both a cause and consequence of poverty, evaluating how individual studies have controlled for family of origin socio-economic status (SES) is also extremely important to establishing a causal link between child maltreatment and adult poverty. Indeed, many individual, family, and neighbourhood factors that increase the likelihood of child abuse and neglect are, in turn, associated with adult outcomes (Petersen et al., 2014). In order to disentangle the specific effects of child maltreatment from the effects of other childhood factors, including childhood poverty, consideration needs to be given to how studies have taken account of these potentially confounding factors. In cohort studies, this can be achieved by

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