



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

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Research article

# Predictors of justice system involvement: Maltreatment and education

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Keywords:

Child abuse

Education

Chronic absenteeism

Justice system involvement

## ABSTRACT

Decades of research have established that experience of abuse and/or neglect in childhood is related to negative outcomes, such as juvenile delinquency. Existing research has shown that involvement in child welfare services is also related to juvenile delinquency, particularly for children who are victims of neglect. Research has also identified educational factors such as chronic absenteeism as significant predictors of involvement in the juvenile justice system. However, little research has investigated the combined influence of educational factors, child abuse, and involvement in child protective services on justice system involvement. The current study examined the influence of educational factors and involvement in child protective services on justice system involvement. The study utilized records from an educational database of children who attended a school within a county of Mississippi in any year from 2003 through 2013. Cases were then matched with records from the county Youth Court, Law Enforcement agencies, and Child Protection Services. A multivariate logistic regression controlling for gender, race, current age, and time at risk was conducted to involvement in the justice system. In general, educational factors were stronger predictors of justice system involvement than allegations of maltreatment.

## 1. Introduction

Decades of research has illustrated that children who are abused and/or neglected are at a significant risk for an array of negative outcomes, including delinquency, aggressive behavior, and conduct problems (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016; Jaffee, Caspi, Moffitt, & Taylor, 2004; Mills et al., 2013; Ryan and Testa, 2005). Between 9–29% of youth involved with child protection services also become involved with the juvenile justice system (Herz, 2010). However, not all children who experience child maltreatment or come into contact with child protective services become involved with the juvenile justice system.

A number of educational factors also increase the risk for juvenile delinquency, or criminal behavior engaged in by minors. For example, chronic truancy is linked to serious delinquency (Henry, Caspi, Moffitt, Harrington, & Silva, 1999; Loeber & Farrington, 2000). It stands to reason that substantiated neglect and/or abuse directly influences a child's school attendance. If a parent is failing to care for their child, it is unlikely the child is actively engaged in school activities, and therefore, may miss essential instructional time in the classroom. In addition, children who are not attending school may be engaging in unsupervised activities that may result in interaction with law enforcement. However, little work has examined the combined influence of educational factors and child maltreatment on involvement with the justice system. Thus, the current study examined the influence of educational factors and

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involvement in child protective services on justice system involvement.

## 2. Child abuse and neglect and justice system involvement

Although the definitions by states may differ slightly, the federal government defines child abuse as “any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker, which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse, or exploitation, or an act or failure to act which presents an imminent risk of serious harm” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2016), there were 9.4 child victims of abuse and/or neglect per 1000 children in the United States in 2014. Of those cases, the majority (75.0%) were labeled as neglect; 17.0% were deemed as physical abuse; and 8.3% were cases of sexual abuse. On the other hand, approximately 19% of youth in justice custody report frequent physical abuse from an adult in their household or in another household, 12% report sexual abuse, and 7% report experiencing both physical and sexual abuse before entering custody (Sedlak & McPherson, 2010).

Children who are simultaneously involved in both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems are often referred to as “dually involved” whereas maltreated children who later engage in delinquent behavior are referred to as “crossover youth” (Herz, Ryan, & Bilchik, 2010). The most common sequence is for the children to first become involved with child welfare services and then later come to the attention of the juvenile justice system (Huang, Ryan, & Herz, 2012). However, this is somewhat dependent on the age of the child upon entry to child welfare services. For example, children that are involved in child welfare from infancy are less likely to transition into the juvenile justice system at a later time than children who enter the child welfare system around 9 or 10 years of age (Cutuli et al., 2016).

Many explanations exist as to why children who are abused and/or neglected are at a greater risk for justice system involvement. However, General Strain Theory (GST; Agnew, 2006) may offer unique insights as to how child maltreatment and delinquent behavior are connected. Strain results from negative interpersonal relationships, adverse life events, and chronic stressors that individuals experience as aversive, that threaten or actually result in loss, or that interfere with goal attainment. Some stressors are more likely to result in crime than others. Serious family dysfunction, such as violence among family members and physical or sexual abuse, are strains most likely to lead to delinquent behavior because they are seen as unjust, high in magnitude (e.g., severity of harm and duration of the strain), and involve exposure to others who model criminal behaviors (Agnew, 2001). Agnew also argues that negative emotions mediate the strain-delinquency relationship and that coping strategies may moderate the relationship (Agnew, 2006). The experience of childhood abuse is likely to generate negative emotions and exposure to maladaptive coping either from abusive family members or from friendships with delinquent peers. These individuals may, in turn, engage in delinquent or antisocial behavior to establish control over a perceived uncontrollable environment. Children who have strong social supports, whether in school or from other family members, may be less likely to develop maladaptive coping strategies.

The role of anger, anxiety and maladaptive coping in the strain-delinquency relationship was tested with a sample of adolescent female offenders (Robertson, Stein, & Schaefer-Rodleder, 2010). Strains consisted of exposure to Hurricane Katrina and 19 adverse life events such as parental separation or divorce, family financial problems, foster care placement, physical neglect, emotional abuse, incarceration of a family member, witnessing violence and victimization. Greater exposure to Hurricane Katrina, in terms of property damage, and displacement, was directly related to violent and other serious forms of delinquent behavior and to maladaptive coping, such as use of denial, escapist substance use, behavioral disengagement, and self-distraction. Hurricane Katrina exposure also had an indirect effect on minor delinquency and Post-Katrina juvenile justice involvement, i.e., arrests and incarcerations. Adverse life events were associated with increased anger, anxiety, and maladaptive coping. Anger mediated the relationship between adverse life events and serious delinquency, while anxiety mediated the relationship between adverse life events and minor delinquency, which included petty theft and incorrigible behaviors such as running away from home and skipping school. Finally, maladaptive coping strategies were associated with minor delinquency and juvenile justice involvement.

Washington, Watts, & McNulty, 2013 tested General Strain Theory as a theoretical framework for understanding the connection between child abuse and criminal behavior. The authors examined if depressive symptoms (i.e., negative emotionality associated with trauma) mediated the relationship between childhood physical and sexual abuse and self-reported offending behavior. In addition, the authors examined the influence of other control variables, including association with delinquent peers and school attachment, on the relationship between abuse and offending. Results from the study indicated childhood physical and sexual abuse and association with delinquent peers were significant predictors of self-reported criminal behavior, and depressive symptoms mediated the relationship between physical abuse and criminal behavior; however, this pattern of mediation was not found for sexual abuse. The authors noted that school attachment (i.e., 2 items; “Do you feel close to people at your school” and “Do you feel a part of your school?”) did not predict self-reported criminal behavior. However, it may be important to consider other school variables, such as school attendance. If a child is not attending school, then he/she has fewer opportunities to build strong social support with peers and/or teachers and may not develop appropriate coping strategies. As a result, the child has more opportunities to engage in unsupervised activities with delinquent peers which may lead to more frequent encounters with law enforcement (Ryan, Williams, & Courtney, 2013). Additionally, the results from this study are limited in that the authors relied on self-report of criminal behavior, rather than law enforcement records.

## 3. Educational factors

Poor school attendance is a risk factor for juvenile delinquency (Loeber & Farrington, 2000). For example, Henry and colleagues (1999) examined the role of school attendance (i.e., months of education) and self-control on both self-reported and criminal records

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