



Research article

The cycle of victimization: The relationship between childhood maltreatment and adolescent peer victimization



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ABSTRACT

Child maltreatment has been demonstrated to have many short- and long-term harmful consequences for victims, but whether or not child abuse is associated with an increased risk of peer victimization during adolescence is unclear. This study analyzed prospective data from 831 children and parents participating in the Longitudinal Studies on Child Abuse and Neglect (LONGSCAN) to investigate the relationships between child physical and sexual abuse and adolescent victimization by peers, as well as the potential for gender to moderate these relationships. Results from ordinal logit regression models indicated that children who were physically abused prior to age 12, based on official reports, parent reports, and child reports, had a greater risk of experiencing more intimidation and physical assault by peers at age 16. Having a history of sexual abuse predicted more physical assault but not intimidation. There was no evidence that gender moderated these relationships; in all cases, the relationship between abuse and revictimization was similar for boys and girls. The findings emphasize the need to provide victims of abuse with assistance to help prevent a cycle of victimization.

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1. Introduction

Child maltreatment is a public health concern which affects significant numbers of families and children each year (Fang, Brown, Florence, & Mercy, 2012; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015). The National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS), which collects official maltreatment reports from each state's child protective service agency, indicated that approximately 9.1 children per 1000 children in the U.S. population had substantiated cases of maltreatment in 2013, with a total of 679,000 victims (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015). These data likely underestimate the actual incidence of maltreatment given that child abuse is often not brought to the attention of law enforcement or child protective service agency investigators (Theodore et al., 2004; Widom, 1989b). Using reports from parents and adolescents, the 2011 National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence (NatSCEVII) found that over 25.6% of youth aged 0–17 had experienced maltreatment by parents in their lifetimes; 9.6% reported physical abuse, and 4.1 experienced sexual assault (Finkelhor, Turner, Shattuck, Hamby, & Kracke, 2015).

Gender differences in the types of maltreatment experienced have also been found. The Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-4), which is based on official records from state child protective services agencies, indicated that in 2005–2006, boys experienced more physical abuse and girls more sexual abuse (Sedlak & Basena, 2014). In the

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NatSCEVII, physical abuse was also more likely to be experienced by boys, and girls were more likely to be the victims of sexual assault (Finkelhor et al., 2015).

Child maltreatment has been shown to result in many negative consequences for victims, including impaired cognitive functioning, negative peer relationships, increased risk for aggression and crime, and revictimization (Cicchetti & Toth, 2005; Gilbert et al., 2009; Kim & Cicchetti, 2010; Widom, 2014). Although all of these adverse outcomes are important, the current paper examines the potential for childhood maltreatment to lead to victimization by peers in adolescence. We focus on this outcome given the large number of youth who experience peer victimization during the teenaged years (Finkelhor et al., 2015; Hillis, Mercy, Amobi, & Kress, 2016; Saunders, 2003), and the fact that adolescent victimization can itself result in numerous problems, including poor school performance, mental health problems, substance use, and criminal involvement (Hanish & Guerra, 2002; Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Juvonen & Graham, 2014; Macmillan, 2001; Nakamoto & Schwartz, 2010; Parker & Asher, 1998).

Peer victimization encompasses many types of direct and indirect aggression that might cause harm or influence an individual to do something he or she does not want to do. Peer victimization types include but are not limited to verbal and physical assault, relational aggression, intimidation, and bullying. Briefly, verbal aggression is defined as verbal attacks on an individual, such as teasing, name-calling, and threatening another person with harm, while physical aggression is any action that threatens an individual's physical well-being, such as hitting, kicking, or beating up someone (Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Mynard & Joseph, 2000). Relational aggression is an indirect form of victimization intended to damage one's peer relationships and can include excluding an adolescent from peer activities and spreading rumors about someone (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Intimidation includes physical or verbal aggression designed to produce fear or coerce someone to do something they do not want to do (Finkelhor et al., 2015). Finally, bullying is defined as unwanted verbal, physical, or relational aggression that is repeated or likely to be repeated and is characterized by a power imbalance between the victim and perpetrator (Gladden, Vivolo-Kantor, Hamburger, & Lumpkin, 2014).

All of these forms of peer aggression are prevalent in adolescence. For example, in the NatSCEVII, 72% of respondents aged 14–17 years reported at least one episode of relational aggression in their lifetime, 56% reported having ever been physically assaulted, and 34% had ever been physically intimidated by a peer (Finkelhor et al., 2015). Moreover, 48% of all respondents aged 17 or younger reported experiencing more than one type of victimization, (Finkelhor et al., 2015). Other studies have estimated that 25–35% of middle and high school students have been victims of bullying (Chester et al., 2015; Nansel et al., 2001; Robers, Kemp, & Truman, 2013). The NatSCEVII (Finkelhor et al., 2015) and some meta-analyses of victimization studies (Archer, 2004; Bjorkqvist, 1994) indicate that rates of peer victimization can vary by gender, with females more likely to experience verbal victimization and relational aggression, and males more likely to experience physical violence.

This study seeks to enhance our understanding of the relationship between childhood maltreatment and peer victimization during adolescence by analyzing prospective data from the Longitudinal Studies on Child Abuse and Neglect (LONGSCAN) (Runyan et al., 1998). We assess the impact of physical and sexual abuse on subsequent victimization by peers, as well as gender differences in these relationships. As discussed below, research on these issues is limited and additional knowledge can inform efforts to reduce the negative impact of childhood maltreatment and prevent adolescent victimization.

2. Review of the literature

2.1. The relationship between child maltreatment and adolescent peer victimization

Widom's prospective study of victims of child maltreatment was one of the first to identify a “cycle of violence,” whereby children exposed to abuse and neglect were shown to have an increased risk of perpetrating violence compared to non-victims (Widom, 1989a). In a similar vein, research suggests a “cycle of victimization” in which victims of abuse and neglect are likely to be revictimized later in life (Widom, 2014). A number of explanations have been offered to account for this cycle of victimization. For example, maltreated children often develop difficulties with emotional regulation, which can lead to problematic peer relationships (Kim & Cicchetti, 2010; Shields & Cicchetti, 2001; Trickett, Negri, Ji, & Peckins, 2011). Similarly, they may develop a hostile attribution style which increases the likelihood that they will interpret situations and individuals as threatening (Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1990). This orientation may increase their own aggressive behaviors and elicit aggressive responses from others, including peers (Schwartz, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1997). Conversely, some studies have shown that victims of maltreatment become submissive, socially withdrawn, and/or isolated, which can make them targets of intimidation, bullying, or relational aggression (Juvonen & Graham, 2014; Lereya, Samara, & Wolke, 2013; Widom, 2014).

The potential for gender differences in the cycle of victimization has been emphasized in feminist research, particularly studies investigating the relationship between sexual abuse and subsequent sexual assault and/or victimization by intimate partners, (Belknap, 2015; Gidycz, Nelson Coble, Latham, & Layman, 1993; Potter, 2006; West, Williams, & Siegel, 2000). This research recognizes that females are more likely than males to be victimized by family members and friends (Lauritsen & Heimer, 2008) and are especially likely to experience child sexual abuse, rape, and victimization by intimate partners (Belknap, 2015; Chesney-Lind, 1997; Dobash & Dobash, 1979). Feminist theory also emphasizes that girls spend more time in the home than do boys, and that they place greater importance on social relationships (Chesney-Lind, 1997; Gilligan, 1982), which suggests that the cycle of victimization could be stronger for females than males. However, most feminist research on this topic has focused on revictimization experienced during adulthood, not adolescence. In addition, the fact

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