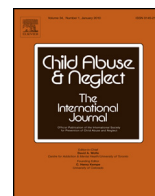




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## Child Abuse & Neglect



### Research article

# Child maltreatment among boy and girl probationers: Does type of maltreatment make a difference in offending behavior and psychosocial problems? ☆

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### ABSTRACT

This study examined differences in offending behavior and psychosocial problems between juvenile offenders who have been sexually abused ( $n = 231$ ), physically abused ( $n = 1,568$ ), neglected ( $n = 1,555$ ), exposed to multiple forms of maltreatment ( $n = 1,767$ ), and non-victims ( $n = 8,492$ ). In addition, the moderating effect of gender in the association between type of maltreatment and offending behavior/psychosocial problems was examined. Results showed that violent offenses were more common in victims of physical abuse and victims of multiple forms of abuse than in non-victims, both in boys and girls. In boys, sexual offenses were far more common in victims of sexual abuse than in victims of other or multiple forms of maltreatment or in non-victims. In girls, no group differences were found in sexual offending behavior. For both boys and girls, externalizing problems were relatively common in victims of physical abuse and neglect whereas internalizing problems were relatively common in victims of sexual abuse. In victims of multiple forms of maltreatment, both internalizing and externalizing problems were relatively common. Implications for clinical practice are discussed.

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### Introduction

Child maltreatment is an established risk factor for offending behavior (e.g., Lansford et al., 2007; Mersky & Reynolds, 2007; Salzinger, Rosario, & Feldman, 2007; Smith & Thornberry, 1995; Widom, 1989; Widom & Maxfield, 2001) and psychosocial problems (e.g., Cicchetti & Toth, 2005; Gilbert et al., 2009; Kim & Cicchetti, 2006; Widom, 2014). Until now, it is largely unknown whether different types of child maltreatment victimization have different consequences later in life (Higgins, 2004). Researchers often distinguish between five different types of child maltreatment: (a) sexual abuse, (b) physical abuse, (c) psychological maltreatment, including emotional abuse and psychological neglect, (d) physical neglect, and (e) witnessing family violence (Higgins, 2004). Whether this distinction is useful to better understand the consequences of child maltreatment is not clear because, as stated by Higgins (2004), “researchers have avoided asking whether the distinctions between the five broad categories of child maltreatment are helpful in conceptualizing abuse and neglect, or whether there is only one core construct: maltreatment” (p. 51). The aim of the present study was to enhance the knowledge on this topic

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by examining differences between juvenile offenders who were non-victims of child maltreatment, victims of specific types of child maltreatment (sexual abuse, physical abuse and neglect), and victims of multiple types of child maltreatment with regard to offending behavior and psychosocial problems. Particular attention was paid to the role of gender.

### *The Differential Effects of Child Maltreatment Types*

A number of studies indicate that the risk of behavioral or psychosocial problems depends on the type of maltreatment the child has experienced (Fang & Corso, 2007; Steward, Dennison, & Waterson, 2002; Zingraff, Leiter, Johnsen, & Myers, 1994). Some studies have shown that victims of physical abuse are at greatest risk of delinquent behavior (Steward et al., 2002; Zingraff et al., 1994) and externalizing symptomatology (Manly, Kim, Rogosch, & Cicchetti, 2001). Other studies reported that sexual abuse victims are no more at risk of offending (Steward et al., 2002; Zingraff et al., 1994), but more at risk of externalizing (Lynch & Cicchetti, 1998) and internalizing symptomatology (Manly et al., 2001) than non-maltreated children. Furthermore, Lynch and Cicchetti (1998) found that a history of sexual abuse was associated with an increased probability of having externalizing behavior problems, whereas a history of neglect increased the probability of internalizing problems, traumatic stress reactions and depressive symptomatology. Psychological or emotional maltreatment, compared to physical abuse, more strongly predicts psychosocial problems, including internalizing and externalizing disorders, suicidal behavior, and low self-esteem (Briere & Runtz, 1990; Gibb et al., 2001; McGee, Wolfe, & Wilson, 1997; Mullen, Martin, Anderson, Romans, & Herbison, 1996).

Additionally, there is some evidence that specific child maltreatment experiences are associated with specific offending behaviors (e.g., Bagley, Wood, & Young, 1994; Briere & Runtz, 1990; Dutton & Hart, 1992; Ford & Linney, 1995; Hamilton, Falshaw, & Browne, 2002; Jespersen, Lalumière, & Seto, 2009). For instance, juveniles with a sexual abuse history are more likely to commit sexual offenses than juveniles with other child maltreatment experiences (Bagley et al., 1994; Dutton & Hart, 1992), whereas juveniles with physical abuse experiences are more likely to commit violent offenses (Briere & Runtz, 1990; Dutton & Hart, 1992). Still, a number of studies failed to demonstrate these specific associations (e.g., Epps, Swaffer, & Hollin, 1996; Higgins & McCabe, 2000, 2003; Widom & Armes, 1994).

Although these studies shed light on the possible differential associations of types of child maltreatment and behavioral and psychosocial problems, they failed to consider the co-occurrence that often prevails among maltreatment experiences (Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Turner, 2007). Indeed, research has clearly shown that in a substantial proportion of cases, various types of child maltreatment co-occur (e.g., Arata, Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Bowers, & O'Farrill-Swails, 2005; Cyr et al., 2012; Dong et al., 2004; Finkelhor, Turner, Hamby, & Ormrod, 2011; Hamilton et al., 2002). For example, Arata and colleagues (2005) found that 47% of youth with a maltreatment history experienced multiple forms of maltreatment. Finkelhor and colleagues (2011) even found a percentage of poly-victimization of 65%. This co-occurrence of various types of child maltreatment makes it difficult to isolate the effects of a specific type of child maltreatment and may lead to biases when estimating the contribution of a specific maltreatment type to offending behavior and psychosocial problems. In addition, studies often do not identify groups of chronically or multiply victimized children who may be particularly at risk (Finkelhor et al., 2007). Yet, some studies suggested that experiencing multiple types of maltreatment is associated with higher symptom levels than experiencing a single type of abuse (Arata et al., 2005; Finkelhor et al., 2007) and that poly-victims are more symptomatic than children with repeated episodes of the same kind of victimization (Finkelhor et al., 2007).

Moreover, the lack of consideration of the role of gender in the association between child maltreatment and behavioral and psychosocial problems might have contributed to a limited understanding. For instance, Trickett and McBride-Chang (1995) found that neglected and sexually abused children tend to be more socially withdrawn and isolated, whereas physically abused children tend to show more aggressive and disruptive behavior. The authors specified that these observed effects might result from the fact that girls predominate in samples of sexual abuse victimization studies. Therefore, it is possible that the differences found between physically and sexually abused children result from gender differences rather than from the type of abuse experienced (Trickett & McBride-Chang, 1995). Thus, assessing the moderating effect of gender in the association between child maltreatment and different outcomes is of crucial importance.

### *Gender Differences in the Relationship between Child Maltreatment, Offending Behavior and Psychosocial Problems*

Many studies that examined the association between child maltreatment and subsequent offending behavior have focused on male samples (e.g., Farrington, Barnes, & Lambert, 1996). The few studies that examined gender differences found conflicting results. Some studies found the relationship between maltreatment and offending to be stronger in boys than in girls. For example, Asscher, Van der Put, and Stams (2015) found stronger associations between child maltreatment and offending behavior in male compared to female juvenile offenders. Topitzes, Mersky, and Reynolds (2011) found that child maltreatment predicted juvenile delinquency in males, but not in females. However, Topitzes and colleagues (2011) did find that child maltreatment predicted *adult* crime for both genders, which suggests that the effects of child maltreatment on delinquent behavior may be delayed in girls. Other researchers found no gender differences in the relationship between child maltreatment and offending behavior (e.g., Fang & Corso, 2007; Mersky & Reynolds, 2007) or suggested that the consequences of child maltreatment play a greater role in the development of delinquent behavior in females than in males (e.g., Herrera & McCloskey, 2001; Foy, Ritchie, & Conway, 2012; Makarios, 2007; McCabe, Lansing, Garland, & Hough,

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