



The maltreatment-violence link: Exploring the role of maltreatment experiences and other individual and social risk factors among young people who offend

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Maltreatment
Out-of-home care
Youth offending
Violence
Anger
Aggression

ABSTRACT

Objective: This study investigated the extent to which violent offending in a population of young people detained in secure care facilities is related to variations in child maltreatment after controlling for other known individual and social correlates of crime.

Method: Official child protection and youth justice records and survey information for 1819 young people were analyzed. Measures included: maltreatment factors (including type, timing and recurrence); out-of-home care placement factors (including type, age at first placement, stability and duration of placements); social factors (including family and peer risk indicators); and individual factors (including factors relating to intelligence and education, substance use, mental health problems, and behavior). Gender and cultural background were also investigated as potential moderating factors. Logistic regression was used to determine the independent effect of maltreatment factors on violent convictions in the presence of other risk factors.

Results: Persistent maltreatment was a consistent predictor of violent convictions. Other independent predictors included: aggression, anger, Indigenous status, and male gender, with household conflict also approaching significance.

Conclusion: Collaborative and integrated responses from both child protection and juvenile justice may be needed if comprehensive violence prevention strategies are to be developed for young offenders.

1. Introduction

Violence is a global criminal justice and public health issue which has widespread social and economic consequences requiring policies and interventions that prevent both its onset and development (World Health Organisation, 2002). There is now a robust body of evidence to suggest that the risk for violent offending is greater among victims of maltreatment, but it is also recognized that this association is often likely to be moderated or mediated by a range of individual psychological and social factors (for reviews see Malvaso, Delfabbro, & Day, 2016; Wilson, Stover, & Berkowitz, 2009). In general, this research shows that only a small proportion of victims of abuse will go on to commit violent offenses and it is likely that not all forms of child and adolescent maltreatment are equally associated with subsequent risk. While these associations are generally well known, relatively little is known about how variations in maltreatment experiences influence the nature and degree of offending. In this study, we attempt to gain

insights into which aspects of maltreatment appear to be most strongly associated with violent offending by studying a sample of youth who were placed in secure care under Youth Justice supervision in Australia, but after controlling for other individual and social risk factors. The following review summarizes the conceptual, theoretical and methodological issues taken into account in the analytical design as well as the choice of variables included for investigation.

1.1. Maltreatment experiences among young people involved in the criminal justice system

In general, relatively few detailed studies of maltreated young people have been undertaken using juvenile justice data (Ryan, 2006). Instead, most of these have been limited to descriptive analyses of the prevalence of maltreatment or victimization histories in young offender samples (for a review see Wilson et al., 2009), although some studies have also considered recidivism rates among young offenders who have

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a history of maltreatment or out-of-home care (OHC) placements (Huang, Ryan, Sappleton, & Chiu, 2015; Ryan, 2006; van der Put & de Ruiter, 2016). Some of these studies have estimated that up to 89% of detained or incarcerated youth have histories of maltreatment or placement (Halemba & Lord, 2005; Halemba, Siegel, Lord, & Zawacki, 2004). In Australia, a recent study reported that just over 70% of young people detained in secure care had a child protection history, defined as notifications or substantiations for abuse and/or neglect or a history of placement in OHC (Malvaso, Delfabbro, & Day, 2017a).

An exception to this is the growing body of work on adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) among juvenile offenders (e.g., Baglivio, Wolff, DeLisi, Vaughn, and Piquero, 2016; Baglivio & Epps, 2015; Wolff & Baglivio, 2016). ACEs include measures of child abuse and neglect, as well as other traumatic or stressful life events, such as parental separation or divorce, parental incarceration and house mental illness, substance misuse and mental illness. This research suggests that many ACEs are interrelated and exposure differs by gender and cultural background (Baglivio & Epps, 2015), therefore demonstrating the need to assess and investigate the effects of multiple ACEs among different subgroups of youth offenders.

However, investigations of the maltreatment-offending association among more serious or “deep-end” youth offenders, for example, those detained or placed in juvenile justice facilities are even more limited (Baglivio, Wolff, Piquero, et al., 2016). The Incarcerated Serious and Violent Young Offender study (Yang, McCuish, & Corrado, 2017), however, indicated that young people with a history of placement in OHC were more likely to be chronic offenders, with a disproportionate number continuing their offending into early adulthood. Other research has also shown that young people with OHC experiences start committing crimes earlier, are involved in a greater number of offenses and are incarcerated for longer periods of time (Malvaso & Delfabbro, 2015; McFarlane, 2015; Ryan, Herz, Hernandez, & Marshall, 2007). There have also been a number of longitudinal studies which have examined possible pathways from maltreatment to youth offending (see Malvaso et al., 2016 for a review). Although these studies tend to use community or child protection samples and focus only on the initiation of offending or first contact with the police or justice system, the findings from this body of research can be used to inform studies on serious and violent offenders because they identify potentially important risk factors for offending.

1.2. Child maltreatment factors associated with subsequent youth offending

Evidence suggests that it is important to avoid treating child maltreatment as a dichotomous variable. Such an approach fails to consider the varying effects of different types and experiences of maltreatment. For example, studies have found that juvenile and adult offending is more common in those individuals who have experienced more than one type of maltreatment (also referred to as multi-type maltreatment) and maltreatment that is recurrent (Hurren, Stewart, & Dennison, 2017; Ryan & Testa, 2005). Offending risk also appears to be related to the timing of maltreatment. Some studies have suggested that maltreatment that either starts or continues into adolescence is more consequential than maltreatment that is limited to the childhood years (Hurren et al., 2017; Malvaso, Delfabbro, & Day, 2017b; Smith, Ireland, & Thornberry, 2005), whereas others have asserted that childhood-limited maltreatment is also a critical factor in juvenile offending (Mersky, Topitzes, & Reynolds, 2012). Links have also been drawn between type and timing of maltreatment and offense type, with studies finding that adolescent maltreatment, physical abuse and neglect are associated with violent crime (Maxfield & Widom, 1996; Mersky & Reynolds, 2007; Smith et al., 2005; Thornberry, Henry, Ireland, & Smith, 2010).

Some young people whose maltreatment is particularly severe, and who are placed in out-of-home care (OHC) as a result, might be especially at risk of engaging in violent crime (DeGue & Widom, 2009; Lemmon, 2006). Although it is acknowledged that experiences prior to

being placed (for example, abusive or neglectful treatment) are likely to influence these findings, the OHC experience itself might also exacerbate these early vulnerabilities. For example, being placed at an older age, in group homes or residential care facilities, and moving placements frequently have all been associated with problematic behavior (Baskin & Sommers, 2010; Jonson-Reid & Barth, 2000; Widom, 1991). Only a handful of studies have considered how these variations in placement experiences relate specifically to violent offending. Lemmon (2006) reported that, although maltreatment recurrence predicted violent juvenile offending, this association was attenuated if the young person had subsequently been placed in foster care as a response to the abuse. Baskin and Sommers (2010) found that, although group home placement (or residential care) predicted both overall arrests and arrests for non-violent crimes, it was not associated with arrests for violent crimes. Finally, DeGue and Widom (2009) found that arrests for violent crimes among young people varied according to the type of placement they had experienced. For example, young people who had never been placed or who experienced foster care placements only were less likely to have been arrested for violent crimes in adolescence or adulthood. For young people who had been placed in non-foster care arrangements, or who had experienced a combination of foster and non-foster care placements, no associations with arrests for violent crime were found. Although these findings suggest that placement in foster care might be protective against violent offending, further exploration is needed to determine whether other placement factors, such as placement instability or duration of time in care, are associated with violent outcomes.

Given that not all individuals who experience maltreatment or who are placed in OHC go on to offend, and even fewer will commit violence offenses (Widom, 1991), it is likely that other individual characteristics will have discriminatory value. Yet only a few studies have examined the role of maltreatment in conjunction with other individual factors. For example, behavioral or emotional problems (e.g., conduct disorder, anger, aggression and poor social skills), factors relating to education (e.g., poor academic achievement or school engagement, impaired learning or reading abilities), mental health problems (e.g., depression, posttraumatic stress disorder and psychopathy), and substance misuse problems are all potential risk factors (Goodkind, Shook, Kim, Pohlig, & Herring, 2012; Topitzes, Mersky, & Reynolds, 2011; Verrecchia, Fetzer, Lemmon, & Austin, 2010).

Similarly, few studies have examined how other family background characteristics influence the maltreatment-violence link. Young people who are maltreated and those placed in OHC are likely to originate from complex families. Given that a history of poor family functioning has been consistently linked with youth crime (Sampson & Laub, 2005; Stouthamer-Loeber, Loeber, Homish, & Wei, 2001), it would be remiss to investigate the effects of maltreatment or OHC placement without reference to other underlying or pre-existing risk factors, such as the child's family background. A recent review of studies examining the broader maltreatment-offending association concluded that a multitude of familial factors play a role in mitigating or exacerbating risk (Malvaso et al., 2016). Parental separation or single parent families, parents with particular characteristics (e.g., lower levels of education and a history of substance abuse, mental health problems or criminality), and poor parent-child and peer relationships were all found to increase the risk of offending. Taking these factors into account might help us better understand the maltreatment-violence link.

Furthermore, relatively few studies have explored how gender and ethnicity might moderate the maltreatment-violence association while also controlling for other individual and social factors. This is an important consideration because it is likely that offending patterns are not uniform across gender and cultural subgroups (Broidy et al., 2015). An example of this type of research is a study by Goodkind et al. (2012), in which it was found that having received services related to substance abuse was associated with an increased likelihood of juvenile justice involvement for Caucasian boys, but a decreased likelihood for African

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