



# Sexual victimization in childhood and the propensity for juvenile delinquency and adult criminal behavior: A systematic review

Shelly A. McGrath, Ashlyn Abbott Nilsen, Kent R. Kerley \*

University of Alabama at Birmingham, United States

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 5 October 2010

Received in revised form 22 February 2011

Accepted 16 March 2011

Available online 24 March 2011

### Keywords:

Family violence

Domestic violence

Intergenerational transmission of violence

Childhood sexual abuse

Intimate partner violence

## ABSTRACT

Child sexual abuse has been suggested as a precursor to criminal and deviant behaviors in adolescence and adulthood. This review will examine and consolidate findings from the empirical research concerning childhood sexual abuse and the propensity of victims to become juvenile and adult offenders. First, we develop a demographic profile of sexual abuse victims most likely to commit juvenile and adult offenses. Second, we explore the literature to determine whether, in general, sexually abused children have an increased likelihood of criminality as juveniles and as adults. Third, we explore whether the types of crimes and delinquent acts committed by sexual abuse victims are unique or consistent with traditional crime trajectories. Fourth, the methodological and statistical limitations of this literature will be discussed, and suggestions for future research will be presented.

Published by Elsevier Ltd.

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## 1. Introduction

Child sexual abuse (CSA) has been the subject of a great deal of empirical research over the last several decades. Child sexual abuse can be defined as “forced or coerced sexual behavior imposed on a child” or as “sexual activity between a child and a much older person whether or not obvious coercion is involved” (Browne & Finkelhor, 1986, p. 66). Accurate national estimates of CSA are difficult to obtain and such estimates vary greatly depending on sample size and region, thus making the subject

difficult to study (Briere, 1992; Finkelhor, Hammer, & Sedlak, 2008). Nevertheless, some consistent patterns have emerged. Estimates of the prevalence of CSA suggest that in a given year approximately 1 in 12 children will be victims of sexual abuse (Finkelhor, Ormrod, Turner, & Hamby, 2005). The likelihood of victimization appears to be greater for females than for males (Douglas & Finkelhor, 2005; Finkelhor et al., 2008). Among sexual assaults reported to law enforcement agencies, females were six times more likely to be victims than males (Snyder, 2000; see also Finkelhor et al., 2005). The family context is also an important determinant of child sexual abuse. Children who live in homes in which intimate partner violence occurs have a greater chance of experiencing sexual abuse themselves (e.g., Cawson, 2002).

In addition to developing a demographic profile of CSA victims and offenders, investigators have explored myriad outcomes of this crime.

\* Corresponding author at: University of Alabama at Birmingham, Department of Justice Sciences, 1201 University Boulevard, Suite 210, Birmingham, AL 35294, United States. Tel.: +1 205 934 8548 (office); fax: +1 205 934 2067.

E-mail address: krkerley@uab.edu (K.R. Kerley).

Investigators have focused much attention on uncovering the psychological and emotional outcomes of victimization from both short-term and long-term perspectives. For example, Walsh, Fortier, and DiLillo (2010) recently reviewed 39 studies of adult functioning and coping among CSA victims. They identified CSA as a “non-specific risk factor” for adult functioning issues given that 10 to 25% of victims experienced no direct psychological problems in childhood, and 20 to 40% of victims had no clear symptomatology in adulthood (Walsh, Fortier, & DiLillo, 2010, p. 2). Nevertheless, for the majority of CSA victims, the trauma of childhood sexual abuse was linked (directly or indirectly) to a wide range of negative adult outcomes, including depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, relationship difficulties, and substance abuse.

Investigators have also studied many behavioral outcomes of CSA and other forms of family violence. Typically, the focus is on whether abuse victims have a greater likelihood of becoming victims or perpetrators of family violence as adults. The relationship between childhood victimization and adult offending or victimization in the family context is one of the most established relationships in the empirical literature, including cross-cultural studies (Bassuck, Dawson, & Huntington, 2006; Bensley et al., 2003; Feerick & Haugaard, 1999; Corvo, 2006; Jin et al., 2007; Kalmuss, 1984; Kerley, Xu, Sirisunyaluck, & Alley, 2010; Kernsmith, 2006; Mihalic & Elliott, 1997; Schewe et al., 2006; Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980; Swinford et al., 2000; Whitfield, Anda, Dube, & Felitti, 2003). One of the first studies to identify this relationship was the National Family Violence Survey conducted by Straus et al. (1980). The authors found that males and females who had experienced higher levels of physical abuse (direct exposure) as children were more likely to engage in violence against their spouses and children as adults. In addition to the long-term effects of this direct victimization, Straus et al. (1980) and Kalmuss (1984) further established that males and females who had witnessed parental violence (indirect exposure) as children were also significantly more likely to abuse their adult partners than children who did not witness such abuse. Based on a meta-analysis of over 160 studies, Stith et al. (2000) concluded that children growing up in an abusive home have a significant, albeit not statistically large, likelihood of being involved in a violent romantic relationship in adulthood.

Focusing more specifically on child sexual abuse (CSA), it is established in the literature that individuals who have been sexually molested as children have an increased likelihood of being a perpetrator of adult intimate partner violence (Bassuck et al., 2006; Widom, 1989). Whitfield et al. (2003) found that children who were victims of physical or sexual abuse as children were significantly more likely than children who were not abused to become perpetrators and victims of family violence in adulthood. As adults, abused children often display violence towards their children (Straus et al., 1980; Widom, 1989). Murrell, Christoff, and Henning (2007) found that individuals who perpetrate intimate partner violence and who were abused as children were more likely to abuse their own children than batterers who were not abused. Men who not only witnessed domestic violence as children, but also were abused themselves, committed the most severe offenses of all batterers (Downs, Smyth, & Miller, 1996; Kalmuss, 1984; Murrell et al., 2007). In short, the focus of most investigators has been on how childhood victimization for CSA or other forms of family violence is related to adult behavioral outcomes in the familial context.

This line of research has expanded to include a broader range of criminal outcomes associated with child sexual abuse. A small but developing literature over the past decade and a half has addressed whether children who are CSA victims are more likely to become juvenile and adult offenders over time (Spano, Rivera, & Bolland, 2010; Swanson et al., 2003; Widom, 1995; Widom, 1996; Widom & Maxfield, 2001). This topic is the primary focus of our review. Although many studies find a link between being a victim of CSA and the propensity to become a juvenile or adult offender, most CSA victims do not grow up to be delinquents or criminals (Widom & Maxfield, 2001). Other researchers have found that CSA is more of a general risk factor for a range of criminal and deviant outcomes among victims (Putman, 2003;

Romans, Martin, & Mullen, 1997). This variation in outcomes may be associated with the nature of the abuse, the severity of the abuse, and the relationship between the victim and perpetrator (Beitchman et al., 1992; Bennett, Hughes, & Luke, 2000; Glasser, Kolvin, Campbell, Glasser, & Farrelly, 2001).

Thus, although there has been an increase in interest among sociologists, psychologists, criminologists, and family researchers regarding the criminal outcomes of CSA, little attempt has been made to synthesize the empirical findings from this research over the past two decades. Here we address this issue by reviewing the empirical literature on who is most likely to become a victim of child sexual abuse and by exploring whether victimization increases victims' propensity to commit crimes as juveniles or adults. We have identified 20 empirical studies that focus specifically on this issue. Additionally, to the extent that CSA increases criminal propensity, we explore which types of crimes victims are most likely to commit. We conclude with a critique of the current empirical literature and offer a call for more research on the criminal outcomes of CSA victims.

### 1.1. Theoretical framework

In studies of the relationship between child sexual abuse and criminal outcomes, investigators often use a distinctive theoretical framework. This framework draws extensively from social learning theories, and is often referred to as the “Cycle of Violence” or the “Intergenerational Transmission of Family Violence” (Corvo, 2006; Corvo & Carpenter, 2000; Felson & Lane, 2009; Kerley et al., 2010; Kernsmith, 2006; Mihalic & Elliott, 1997; Widom, 1995, 1996; Widom & Maxfield, 2001). Parallel research streams from criminologists, psychologists, and sociologists suggest this framework for understanding how child sexual abuse (or exposure to other forms of abuse) is linked to adult criminal outcomes. Sutherland (1939) contended that individuals learn criminal behaviors, much like other behaviors, through a process of socialization in inmate groups such as family and peer groups. Within these intimate groups, they learn both criminal attitudes (e.g., ways to neutralize guilt, ways to deny responsibility) and criminal actions (e.g., how to commit crimes, how to elude detection by police). Bandura (1977) asserted that individuals tend to model the behaviors of authority figures and others whom they consider influential. The likelihood of modeling behavior is increased if the observed behavior is perceived to create a desired outcome. Children exposed directly (e.g., experience of emotional, physical, or sexual abuse) or indirectly (e.g., witnessing or hearing a parent or relative being emotionally, physically, or sexually abused) to violence in the family of origin may develop norms about the suitability of violence to address specific circumstances. More recently, Akers (2009) extended Sutherland's work to highlight the importance of positive and negative reinforcements in the learning process. Children exposed to family violence learn not only the rationale and commission of violence, but if the violence is perceived to “solve problems,” it may be even more likely to be replicated as victims enter adolescence and adulthood.

According to this framework, a history of family abuse may predispose victims to violence in later years. Over time, a pro-abuse set of family norms may emerge that increases the likelihood that children exposed to violence may be at greater risk of becoming violent offenders as adults. Thus, individuals who have been victims of CSA should be more likely to commit offenses as juveniles and as adults than those who were not victims of CSA. Felson and Lane (2009) contend that individuals who are sexually abused as children have learned the behavior and corresponding justification, and will often replicate it as they become sexual perpetrators later in life. Burton, Miller, and Shill (2002) found that male delinquents learned their sexually aggressive behaviors from their own sexual victimization experiences in childhood. Although our goal here is not to assess the veracity of this theoretical framework, it is important to understand the approach taken by most investigators as they study how child sexual abuse is related to youthful and adult criminal behaviors.

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