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Child Maltreatment and Delinquency Onset Among African American Adolescent Males

James Herbert Williams¹, Richard A. Van Dorn², Charlotte Lyn Bright³, Melissa Jonson-Reid⁴, and Von E. Nebbitt⁵

¹University of Denver, Denver, Colorado ²University of South Florida, Tampa, Florida ³University of Maryland, Baltimore, Maryland ⁴Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri ⁵Howard University, Washington, DC

Abstract

Child welfare and criminology research have increasingly sought to better understand factors that increase the likelihood that abused and neglected children will become involved in the juvenile justice system. However, few studies have addressed this relationship among African American male adolescents. The current study examines the relationship between child maltreatment (i.e., neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and other/mixed abuse) and the likelihood of a delinquency petition using a sample of African American males ($N = 2,335$) born before 1990. Multivariable logistic regression models compared those with a delinquency-based juvenile justice petition to those without. Results indicate that African American males with a history of neglect, physical abuse, or other/mixed abuse were more likely to be involved in the juvenile justice system than those without any child maltreatment. Additionally, multiple maltreatment reports, a prior history of mental health treatment, victimization, and having a parent who did not complete high school also increased the likelihood of a delinquency petition. Implications for intervention and prevention are discussed.

Keywords

child welfare; criminal justice; poverty; inferential statistics; adolescents; African Americans

Introduction

There is persuasive evidence in both child welfare and criminology research of a causal relationship between child maltreatment (i.e., neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse) and delinquent behaviors (Garbarino & Plantz, 1986; Herrenkohl, Huang, Tajima, & Whitney, 2003; Howing, Wodarski, Kurtz, Gaudin, & Herbst, 1990; Malinosky-Rummell & Hansen, 1993; McCord, 1983; Smith & Thornberry, 1995; Widom, 1989). Although it is recognized that several factors account for the development and maintenance of delinquent behaviors, the primacy of child maltreatment in this calculus is well established (Hawkins et al., 1998; Williams, Ayers, Van Dorn, & Arthur, 2003). However, to date, no studies have addressed

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Corresponding Author: James Herbert Williams, University of Denver, 2148 S High Street, Denver, CO 80208.
james.herbert@du.edu.

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the relationship between child maltreatment and subsequent delinquency with an exclusively low-income African American sample.

This gap in the research is relevant as gender and racial differences in behavior and exposure to risk have been noted (Bright & Jonson-Reid, 2008; Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 2004; Moffitt, Caspi, Rutter, & Silva, 2001; Wall & Barth, 2005). Evidence of these differences can be seen in the fact that males constitute just over 70% of all youth arrests, and African Americans under age 18 account for 31% of all juvenile male arrests (Federal Bureau of Investigation, n.d.). African American males are also overrepresented in the proportion of cases heard in the juvenile justice system. Specifically, they represent 29% of all male cases yet constitute 16% of the U.S. population under age 18 (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). Compared to their overall proportion of the population, African Americans are also overrepresented as child maltreatment victims. Specifically, data indicate that 26% of African American children are maltreated (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006).

Background

The disproportionate number of African American males in the juvenile justice system is well documented. Reasons for these differences have been attributed to the association between race and poverty, as well as biased decision making within the juvenile justice system (Williams, Hovmand, & Bright, 2007). This same interrelationship between race and poverty has been implicated in African Americans' overrepresentation in the child welfare system; specifically, poorer minority children have an increased risk of entering the system (McDonald & Associates, 2004, 2005; Barth, 2005; Drake & Zuravin, 1998). Still, other reasons for African Americans' disproportionate involvement in these systems exist. For example, well-intentioned policies have, in effect, allowed for poor minority families to come under increased scrutiny (Lawrence-Webb, 1997; Williams et al., 2007). Additionally, disproportionate system involvement can be attributed to increased exposure to community violence among African American families (Rodenborg, 2004; Voisin, 2007; Williams, Ayers, Outlaw, Abbott, & Hawkins, 2001).

Other risk factors, although not necessarily specific to African Americans, are also related to system involvement. For example, the mental health service needs of parents and other caregivers have been shown to be predictive of parenting quality and family instability (Haskett & Willoughby, 2006), which in turn is predictive of a child's involvement in delinquent behavior. A large proportion of caregivers of youths involved with the juvenile justice and child welfare systems are deemed to be in need of mental health services (Nair, Schuler, Black, Kettinger, & Harrington, 2003; Phillips, Burns, Wagner, & Barth, 2004; Stouthamer-Loeber, Wei, Homish, & Loeber, 2002; Swenson, Brown, & Sheidow, 2003). Research also indicates that youths' mental health problems are a risk factor for both child maltreatment and delinquency (Jonson-Reid, Williams, & Webster, 2001; Swenson et al., 2003). A family history of high-risk behaviors (e.g., substance use) is also predictive of children's delinquent behavior (Bean et al., 2006; Williams et al., 2003). Substance-using parents are at increased risk of perpetrating both abuse and neglect, which also increases the probability of delinquent behaviors (Arellano, 1996; Hans, Bernstein, & Henson, 1999; Jaudes, Ekawo, & Van Voorhis, 1995; Young, 1997).

This study examined the relationship between child maltreatment and delinquency petitions in a sample of low-income African American adolescent males, a population at significant risk for interacting with both systems.

Method

Sample

The sampling frame for the parent study “Child Neglect: Service Paths and Young Adults Outcomes” was limited to children from families receiving Aid to Families With Dependent Children (AFDC) between the years 1991 and 1994 (Bright & Jonson-Reid, 2008; Hovmand, Jonson-Reid, & Drake, 2007; Jonson-Reid, Chance, & Drake, 2007; Jonson-Reid, Drake, Kim, Porterfield, & Han, 2004). AFDC was a public assistance program supporting needy families with children, which was later replaced by Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) in 1996. The parent study includes both children with a *first known report* of child abuse and neglect (CAN) in 1993 or 1994 ($n = 5,125$) and a matched (on birth year and region) comparison sample without CAN reports or other child welfare involvement through 1994 ($n = 5,125$). In this context, “first known report” means that neither the child nor any known family member (including any child residing in the home according to AFDC records) had a known prior report or child welfare service event. Unfortunately, due to the nature of the available data, some children may have had unsubstantiated reports prior to 1993 for which we have no record. Children dying within 5 days of the index event (for nonmaltreatment reasons) or birth were excluded from the sample. The subsample used in this study was limited to African American males born between 1982 and 1990 ($N = 2,332$). The age limitation was to ensure that all youths in the sample had passed through the high-risk period (i.e., they had reached their 16th birthday), which is when risk for delinquent behaviors peak and then begin to decline for a delinquency petition as of mid-year 2006 when the final download of juvenile court data were received (Farrington, 1986).

Data Sources

We used the following data sets: statewide *adult corrections entries*; statewide *birth records*; 1990 *U.S. census tract* information; statewide *child welfare* data (i.e., CAN reports including specific subtypes of maltreatment, substantiation status and relationship to perpetrator, Family Centered Services [FCS], Family Preservation Services [FPS], and Foster Care); statewide *death records*; statewide *income maintenance* data (AFDC and TANF); statewide *juvenile corrections entries*; statewide *Medicaid* data, including health hospitalization and inpatient and outpatient mental health treatment; metropolitan region *juvenile court* records; metropolitan region *law enforcement* community crime records; and metropolitan region *special education* eligibility records.

Data Preparation

All records were taken from electronic administrative data maintained by the agencies in the normal course of services. Some of the data sets shared a common state-level case identifier across agencies (i.e., child welfare, income maintenance, juvenile corrections, and Medicaid). Other data sets were matched according to identifying information, including the first four letters of first and last name, as well as date of birth. Match rates were hand checked and other identifying information was used in ambiguous cases (e.g., gender, middle initial). Addresses at the time of entry into the sample event were geo-coded using ArcGis 9 (Environmental System Research Institute [ESRI], 2004) and linked to census and community crime information. Although dates allow prospective analysis, all events and services in the study occurred prior to the receipt of the data. All identifiers were removed following linkage and are not present in the analytic data. Results are always reported at an aggregate level sufficient to prevent identification of individuals. Human subjects’ approval was obtained from the Washington University Human Subjects Committee as well as from agencies providing data.

Measures

Delinquency petition was coded into two mutually exclusive categories using data collected from record abstractions from statewide juvenile corrections and metropolitan region juvenile court records: (a) delinquency petition ($n = 871$)—any court petition for delinquent conduct, including violence (but excluding status offenses), prior to May 31, 2006 and (b) no history of delinquency petitions ($n = 1,464$).

Maltreatment was measured with four dummy variables indicating prior reports of (a) neglect, (b) physical abuse, (c) sexual abuse, or (d) other/mixed abuse. Youths in these four groups were compared to youths with no prior reports of maltreatment. Another variable assessing multiple maltreatment (>3) reports prior to any juvenile justice system contact was also included. Specifically, those youths with three or more maltreatment reports were compared to those with fewer than three reports.

Prior health, behavioral health, and special education services were assessed with three dichotomous variables. First, youths with mental health treatment in an educational or hospital setting or via Medicaid at least 6 months prior to their initial delinquency petition were compared to those with no such services or those with services within 6 months of their initial contact. Second, youths that entered special education services for reasons other than emotional disturbance prior to their initial delinquency petition were compared to those not in special education services. Third, youths that received hospital care for an assault, gun crime, or rape were compared to those who did not.

Low birth weight or other birth complications were indicated by (a) a birth weight between 1,500 and 2,500 g or (b) other complication/problems in infancy that served as a risk for subsequent developmental problems. Youths with an indication of either of these conditions were compared to those without the complications or birth problems.

Family factors that were examined included (a) the number of children (>4) in the household (dichotomized at the median), (b) whether a parent had graduated from high school prior to the first AFDC spell, (c) whether the caretaker exited AFDC prior to 1993 and never returned (with no known negative reason for the exit), (d) whether the parent had Medicaid drug treatment prior to 1993, and (e) whether the parent had Medicaid mental health treatment prior to 1993. All family measures were assessed via a dichotomous variable where those with the condition were compared to those without the same.

Finally, the census area in which the families lived was also included in all multivariable models. (Initially, these data were explored to assess the feasibility of conducting hierarchical logistic regression analyses with community-based factors, including crime rate, percentage of high school graduates, neighborhood family income, and unemployment rate; however, the variation in these Level 2 variables, as measured by the intraclass correlation coefficient, did not support this type of analysis. Still, to account for the clustering of youths and families within census areas and to control for potentially significant, yet unmeasured community-based variability, we viewed it as essential to include a control for census area.)

Analysis

Multivariable models were estimated with Statistical Analysis System (SAS) v.8 using mixed model logistic regression (Fleiss, Williams, & Dubro, 1986; Hosmer & Lemeshow, 2000; Snijders & Bosker, 1999) comparing those with a delinquency-based juvenile justice petition to those without the same. Census area was entered as a random effect. Odds ratios (ORs) produced by this technique compare the odds of the predicted outcome (delinquency

petition) to the odds of the alternative outcome (no delinquency petition), given the presence of the risk factor (e.g., maltreatment), controlling for census area.

Results

Sample description

This report analyzes a subsample of the full data set from the Child Neglect: Service Paths and Young Adults Outcomes Project. Data on juvenile court status and history of maltreatment were available for $N = 2,335$ African American adolescent males. Data used for the current report retained a high degree of similarity to the full data from the parent study. All individuals included in the current analysis were born between 1982 and 1990 (the median year of birth was 1987). Age at first maltreatment report varied between 2 and 17 years, with the median being 7 years.

Table 1 shows the frequency distributions resulting from a cross tabulation of youth and family characteristics with juvenile court status (results include a Bonferroni adjustment due to multiple comparisons). Of the 2,335 participants included in this analysis, 871 had delinquency petitions and 1,464 did not. Compared to participants who had no delinquency petition, those who did were significantly more likely to have been neglected or physically abused and to have had three or more reports of maltreatment, had prior mental health treatment, hospital care for assault, and special education services. They were also less likely to have had a parent graduate from high school or to have exited AFDC services and not returned.

Logistic regression analysis

Table 2 presents two multivariable logistic regression models that contain the relevant covariates described above. The first model includes child factors (i.e., maltreatment, services, birth complications) and shows that those with a history of neglect ($OR = 2.09$; $p < .001$), physical abuse ($OR = 2.13$; $p < .001$), or other/mixed abuse ($OR = 1.96$; $p < .01$) were more likely than those with no history of maltreatment to have experienced a delinquency-based petition. Youths with multiple maltreatment reports ($OR = 1.84$; $p < .001$), prior mental health treatment ($OR = 1.99$; $p < .001$), and hospital-based care for a physical assault ($OR = 3.26$; $p < .001$) were also significantly more likely to have had a delinquency petition.

The second model includes family factors in addition to child factors. The child covariates described above remain consistent with the inclusion of the family factors. The one family covariate that was significant indicated that those youths with a parent with a high school education were significantly less likely ($OR = 0.75$; $p < .01$) to have a juvenile justice court petition.

Discussion

This study represented an attempt to investigate the relationship between child maltreatment and delinquency for African American adolescent males. To further understand this relationship, this study investigated the predictive relationship between various individual and family measures and petitions for delinquency in a sample of low-income African American adolescent males. The overrepresentation of African American adolescent males in all aspects of the juvenile justice and child welfare systems provided the primary motivation for the exclusivity of the sample for this study.

The first facet of this study was to document the relationship between delinquency and child maltreatment among this sample of African American adolescent males. Of the 2,335

African American adolescent males included in this study, just over 37% had petitions for a delinquent offense. This study identified a strong relationship between child maltreatment and delinquent behavior. Specifically, those with a delinquency petition were between 20% and 33% more likely to have also had some type of maltreatment report than those who did not have a delinquency petition (save sexual abuse where the relationship was reversed; calculations based on information in Table 1). Finally, it is important to note when comparing those youths with delinquency petitions to those without, youths with delinquency involvement were significantly more likely to have experienced multiple incidences of child maltreatment. These findings are similar to previous research examining the relationship between child maltreatment and delinquent behavior (Salzinger, Rosario, & Feldman, 2007; Smith & Thornberry, 1995; Widom, 1989).

The second goal of this study was to investigate the predictive effect of various individual and family measures on the likelihood of having a delinquent petition. Several predictive factors of delinquent behavior emerged. In addition to delinquent youths being more likely to have experienced various forms of maltreatment (i.e., neglect, physical, other/mixed abuse) and to have had multiple maltreatment reports, they also had higher levels of prior mental health treatment, and hospital-based care for a physical assault, and special educational services. Furthermore, the parents of those with delinquency petitions were less likely to have completed high school.

When considering the results of the analyses, it is important to note that even though a relationship between child maltreatment and delinquent behaviors was identified, there are still limitations of this study. This study's use of administrative data has both advantages and disadvantages when investigating child maltreatment and delinquency. The majority of these data are primarily limited to reports by service providers. However, the data set used in this study provides a comprehensive range of individual and family factors for low-income African American adolescent males in the child welfare, juvenile justice, and income maintenance systems. The focus of this study was to understand the complexities of African American adolescent males in the child welfare system and the overlap with the juvenile justice system and other service sectors. Administrative data are preferable for this study. Using administrative data supports a longitudinal perspective across several service sectors and the predictability of various measures on delinquency petitions.

The challenge to using service provider data is the inherent biases that exist in these types of data sets. Racial biases within the child welfare and juvenile justice systems account for a significant percentage of the unexplained variance when investigating disparity and disproportionality in these systems. The contextual interaction of race within these systems support inequities and biased decision making. Race is an important variable for understanding how these systems respond to child maltreatment and delinquent behaviors. Although the sample was exclusively African American, the current study does not advance our understanding of why race matters in child welfare and criminal justice systems. We cannot account for the interaction of race and system response in these data. To infer racial bias within either system is clearly beyond the scope of these analyses. More rigorous studies are needed to better understand why race is a significant variable. It is also important to understand that petitions are one measure of delinquency. This study does not take into consideration other measures of delinquent behaviors that may indicate early onset or account for potential biases in the juvenile justice system that may support the overrepresentation of African American adolescent males.

Even with these limitations, it is clear that child maltreatment represents a significant disruption to caring and nurturing environments for low-income African American males. However, this nexus of maltreatment and delinquency risk provides researchers and

clinicians with a tremendous opportunity to investigate and intervene in the multiple pathways from early adverse childhood experiences to involvement in the juvenile justice system. The results of this study illustrate the complex relationships that young African American males in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems must navigate. Specifically, in comparison to youths with no delinquency petitions, those youths with delinquency petitions must endure a broad array of personal and environmental difficulties.

These findings may provide an understanding of how child maltreatment may affect the psychosocial functioning of adolescents, thereby creating challenges to adolescents' ability to regulate their behaviors (Nebbitt, Lombe, & Williams, 2008; Rogosch, Cicchetti, & Aber, 1995). These findings reflect the impact that child maltreatment, including continuous maltreatment, have on overall development. Risk factors that increase the likelihood of interacting with the child welfare system also have the potential to increase the probability that African American adolescent males will engage in delinquent behavior, thereby increasing the chances of adjudication of delinquency with a court petition.

It is also apparent that African American adolescent males with a delinquency petition have higher service needs than those without. This finding suggests that a targeted and empirically based intervention following their first involvement with the child welfare system is important in possibly deterring or delaying the onset of a delinquent career that may lead to a court petition. Finally, it is also important to disentangle how parent's educational achievement impacts child maltreatment and delinquent behavior. It is not readily apparent whether education achievement directly affects child maltreatment or is mediated through other factors (e.g., parenting skills, poverty, marital discord).

The findings from this study highlight a strong connection between the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. Previous studies have found that delinquent youths coming from the child welfare system are more likely to be younger (Ryan, Herz, Hernandez, & Marshall, 2007). Delinquency research also indicates that younger offenders are more likely to become serious violent offenders and high users of juvenile justice system resources (Burns et al., 2003; Snyder, 2001). To disrupt this trajectory, child welfare agencies must identify prevention and treatment strategies that address various contextual risk factors. There are practice challenges across various service delivery systems related to child maltreatment and juvenile delinquency for African American males. Treatment models may need to incorporate seamless strategies between child welfare and juvenile justice services. For example, the need to implement delinquency prevention programs in the child welfare system would seem to be a principal element in disrupting the relationship between child maltreatment and juvenile delinquency. Effectively disrupting this cycle is vital to containing overall programming and treatment costs. This is particularly relevant when one considers the high rates of recidivism among youths entering the juvenile justice system. Services and programs cannot be neglectful in recognizing all relevant conditions and antecedents of African American males who are maltreated as children and the possible consequences of this victimization.

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Table 1Profile of Sample by Juvenile Justice Petition: Individual and Family Characteristics ($N = 2,335$)

	Percentage With Characteristic		χ^2 Tests
	No Petition (<i>n</i> = 1,464)	Delinquent/Violent Petition (<i>n</i> = 871)	
Individual measures			
Type of maltreatment report			
None	46.99	24.34	***
Neglect	33.54	50.06	***
Physical abuse	14.00	20.44	***
Sexual abuse	2.25	1.15	
Other/mixed abuse	3.21	4.02	
3+ maltreatment reports prior to juvenile contact	17.21	35.94	***
Prior mental health treatment	5.74	15.73	***
Hospital care for assault	2.66	9.76	***
Special education prior to juvenile petition	24.25	35.71	***
Low birth weight or other birth complications	10.66	11.48	
Family measures			
Number of children in household (>4)	34.77	37.89	
Parent graduated from high school	60.52	50.06	***
Caretaker exited AFDC and never returned	9.49	4.59	***
Parent had drug treatment	2.39	4.94	
Parent had mental health treatment	1.43	2.41	

Note: Statistical significance:

 $p < .0001$ (Bonferroni adjusted).

AFDC = Aid to Families With Dependent Children.

Table 2

Factors Associated With Delinquent Juvenile Petition

	Model 1		Model 2	
	OR	(95% CI)	OR	(95% CI)
Maltreatment factors				
Type of maltreatment report				
None (reference)				
Neglect	2.04	(1.62–2.56)	1.92	(1.52–2.42)
Physical abuse	2.07	(1.57–2.72)	1.99	(1.51–2.62)
Sexual abuse	0.67	(0.31–1.44)	0.64	(0.30–1.37)
Other/mixed abuse	1.86	(1.15–3.02)	1.78	(1.10–2.90)
Multiple reports prior to juvenile contact Services	1.71	(1.36–2.13)	1.66	(1.32–2.08)
Mental health treatment	1.90	(1.38–2.61)	1.89	(1.38–2.60)
Hospital care for assault	3.29	(2.19–4.93)	3.20	(2.13–4.81)
Special education prior to juvenile petition	1.14	(0.93–1.40)	1.12	(0.91–1.38)
Birth complications				
Low birth weight/other complications	0.96	(0.72–1.27)	0.94	(0.71–1.24)
Family factors				
Number of children in household (>4)			0.93	(0.77–1.12)
Parent graduated from high school			0.75	(0.63–0.90)
Caretaker exited AFDC and never returned			0.72	(0.49–1.05)
Parent had drug treatment			1.59	(0.98–2.59)
Parent had mental health treatment			1.10	(0.57–2.14)

Note: AFDC = Aid to Families With Dependent Children; CI = confidence interval; OR = odds ratio.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

**** $p < .10$.