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Young Adult Violence: Factoring in the Childhood Experience of Neglect

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Abstract

Child neglect is categorized under the broad category of child maltreatment. Child maltreatment is a global issue that negatively impacts the life, health, and well-being of children under the age of 18 years of age. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines child maltreatment as all types of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect, negligence and commercialization of children, and other forms of exploitation (WHO, 2024).

Researchers have identified multiple negative outcomes including adult violence as an outcome of child maltreatment. However, fewer studies have focused on childhood neglect and adult violence. Using a sample of young adults incarcerated for violent offenses, the present research attempted to explore whether each subtype of childhood neglect (physical neglect, emotional neglect, and educational neglect) could be identified as a predictor of adult violence. The results indicated that there were not statistically significant associations between physical neglect and young adult violence and educational neglect and young adult violence. However, the research indicated that emotional neglect contributed significantly to the prediction of adult violence among the young adult participants.

Key Words: Child Maltreatment, childhood neglect, young adult violence, perpetration, victimization, trauma, Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES)

The rates of violent crimes have declined throughout the United States (Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI], 2024). Current data from the FBI confirm that the crime rate decreased by 10.3% in 2024. However, policy makers and practitioners have expressed increased concerns regarding violence among young adults. Violence related to victimization and perpetration among older adolescents and young adults aged 16-24 years of age has been particularly troublesome, especially as it relates to the disproportionate number of perpetrators of violence among this age group (FBI 2024) and the subsequent adverse effect that a history of violent offenses have on the lives of adolescents as they enter adulthood (Apel & Sweeten, 2009; MacDonald, Piquero, Valois & Zullig, 2005; Pinard, 2006). Similarly, young adults 18 – 24 years of age in the general population are disproportionately (40.9%) arrested for violent crimes (Office of Juvenile Justice & Delinquency Prevention [OJJDP], 2022).

Statement of the Problem

As a form of child maltreatment, outcomes of physical abuse have been associated with physically violent behaviors in adulthood (Bland et. al., 2018). In recent years, violence has continued to decline in the U.S., however, it still disproportionately impacts young adult victims and perpetrators of violence and is viewed as a major social problem among multiple demographics. This study was designed to build upon previous research related to young adult violence as a long-term consequence of childhood neglect. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to determine whether violence could be predicted by types of childhood neglect (physical, emotional, and educational).

Literature Review

Researchers in child welfare have been particularly interested in the identification of outcomes related to the all encompassing social problem of child maltreatment (Child Welfare League of America [CWLA], 2008; Children's Bureau, & DePanfilis, 2006; Debellis, 2005; Edwards, Shipman, & Brown, 2005; English). While researchers have focused on outcomes with respect to child maltreatment, which includes physical abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect there is limited research regarding outcomes of the latter type, child neglect. Berry, Charlson, and Dawson (2003) asserted that even though the consequences of child neglect are more long term than other forms of maltreatment, it has not sparked as much interest. Dubowitz et al. (2005) posited that there is a "neglect of neglect" (p.1).

Much of the literature focuses on adult violence as an outcome of child maltreatment. However, child neglect, the focus of the present study is more prevalent than other forms of child maltreatment and has more serious and/or deadly consequences. Neglect is defined as the failure of a caretaker to meet the physical, educational, medical, and emotional needs of a child according to the culture of a society (CWLA, 2008; 2022). The Child Welfare Information Gateway (CWIG, 2022) expounds on the definition by stating that "the deprivation is not due to the lack of financial means of their parent, guardian, or other custodian" (Ann. Code 16-2301). Researchers (Egeland et al., 2002; Farrington, 1998; Kosterman, Graham, Catalano, & Herrenkohl, 2001) have suggested that many young adults with histories of child maltreatment do not become perpetrators of violence. However, results from several empirical studies have shown that many individuals arrested, adjudicated, or incarcerated for violent offenses report histories of child maltreatment (Maurrigo & Gormley, 2001; Worley, Walsh, & Lewis, 2004). Dutton and Hart (1992) hypothesized that as a result of child maltreatment children develop personal characteristics which have an effect on interpersonal relationships.

Although researchers do not agree on which aspects of child maltreatment are related to young adult violence, there appears to be more consensus in the literature that negative family dynamics are primary contributors of violent behaviors. Kosterman et al. (2001) explored family dynamics in relation to violent offending. The researchers used a longitudinal sample of 808 youth from ages 10 to 21 years. The youth were interviewed on an annual basis beginning at the age of 10 through 16 years. Thereafter, they were interviewed at 18 and 21 years. The researchers identified several factors which resulted in persistent violent behaviors through adulthood. Factors identified were early antisocial influences such as the condoning of violence and low risk of punishment by parents, amoral beliefs, availability of marijuana, and antisocial behavior of friends. Researchers (Berry et al., 2003; Hawkins et al., 2000; Lang, Klinteberg & Alm, 2002) posited that multiple factors resulting from child maltreatment and dysfunctional families exacerbate trajectories to adult violence. Factors identified by these researchers included early onset violent offending before adolescence, juvenile delinquency, psychological problems, psychopathy, problems in interpersonal relationships, and lowered levels of educational achievement.

Similarly, Widom and Maxfield (2001) compared the arrest records of 908 abused and neglected children with the arrest records of 667 non-abused and non-neglected children. The results of their research indicated that childhood abuse and neglect increased the odds of delinquency and adult criminality by 29%. For some groups (Blacks and males who were neglected and abused), the odds of juvenile and adult criminality or arrests increased by almost two-thirds.

Contrary to studies which focused only on the general effects of child maltreatment and violence, Egeland, Yates, Appleyard, and Dulman (2002) isolated the effects of specific types of child maltreatment. These researchers determined that physical abuse in early childhood, not emotional neglect, caused many children to become alienated in preschool. As a result of their alienation, children developed an early response pattern which led them to externalize their problems in elementary school. Ultimately, they engaged in antisocial behaviors during adolescence because they were unable to accept responsibility for their own actions.

Bevan and Higgins (2002) also attempted to isolate the effects of physical abuse and neglect in their sample of 222 males who had been in long-term counseling for domestic violence. They employed social learning theory to explore how different types of child maltreatment were associated with adult violence. The standard multiple regression results did not support the social learning theory perspective that violence causes violence. Bevan and Higgins determined that childhood neglect, as opposed to physical abuse, was a unique predictor of physical violence against a spouse.

In a similar study, Smith, Ireland, and Thornberry (2005) found that childhood neglect had the most consistent outcome compared to physical abuse and sexual abuse. During late adolescence, childhood neglect increased the odds of violent crimes (OR=3.59, [CI]=1.61, 8.01) compared to physical abuse (OR=2.54, [CI]=1.17, 5.48) and sexual abuse.

The consequences of neglect are cumulative and result in chronic problems (DePanfilis & Dubowitz, 2005; Poria-Atzaba et al., 2004). Neglect is viewed as having more long-term consequences than other forms of maltreatment such as severe physical, cognitive, and social harm (Berry et al., 2003; English et al., 2005). Moreover, it can cause negative developmental consequences because the child experiences neglect as a stressor or intense anxiety (DeBellis, 2005). As a result of this stressor (child neglect), the child's body exhibits a stress response in the central nervous system. DeBellis also reported that repeated episodes of stress through child neglect subjects a child to posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and consequently has an effect on brain development. As a result of poor brain development, the child has poor academic achievement because of short attention span or inability to focus.

Additionally, Henry, Caspi, Moffitt, and Silva's (1996) research clearly demonstrated a trajectory of poor academic achievement and violence. Their study included 300 ninth through twelfth grade students whose records validated some type of maltreatment or a lack of maltreatment. The findings revealed that youths who were neglected were more likely than non-maltreated youths to exhibit socio-emotional difficulties and to be academically challenged and fail school. DePanfilis and Dubowitz (2005) posited that students who were unable to obtain social and academic skills during childhood were more likely to become adolescents who evidenced a lack of commitment to normal activities. Additionally, DePanfillis and Dubowitz reported that these academically challenged students were more likely to pivot to serious antisocial behavior and violence.

Knutson, DeGarmo, and Reid (2004) reported that poor parental supervision, a form of child neglect, has been identified as the single most important indicator of antisocial behavior. However, other researchers (Johnson et al., 1999;

Straus & Savage, 2006) postulated that neglect of a child's need for love and support may be the single most important risk for serious social and psychological problems in children. Moreover, they noted that such problems continue into adulthood where it is estimated that maltreated children are four times more likely to have a personality disorder.

Crawford and O'Dougherty-Wright (2007) conducted more specific research on adult outcomes of child neglect. In a sample of 1,296 college men and women, the researchers explored whether emotional abuse and emotional neglect were predictors of both victimization and perpetration of interpersonal aggression. They controlled for gender, income, parental alcoholism, and other child maltreatment experiences. The results indicated that emotional neglect and emotional abuse exerted long-term influence in adulthood and promoted interpersonal aggression. Additionally, the results indicated that interpersonal aggression resulted from psychopathology and dissociative symptoms of depression and anxiety.

Chapple, Tyler, and Bersani (2005) conducted more focused research on childhood neglect by following up with a sample of 942 individuals aged 14 – 21 years of age. They sought to assess the effect of the different types of neglect (educational, physical, and emotional), self-control, peer rejection, and demographic variables (gender, race, age, family structure, and poverty status) on violence. Overall, the researchers determined that there was significant support for the idea that child neglect, particularly physical neglect, increased the likelihood for violence later in life.

In another study involving the specific effects of child neglect, Straus and Savage (2006) found that an increase in childhood neglect was associated with an increased

propensity for dating violence. The researchers used a large sample of college students from 17 countries to determine the extent of childhood neglect in the childhood experiences of college students who were perpetrators of dating violence (N=6,900). Childhood neglect was measured by using the short-form of the Adult Recall version of the Multidimensional Neglectful Behavior Scale (MNBS) developed by Straus and Kantor (2005). Violence was measured by the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS2). Results from the study indicated odds ratios of 1.11 and 1.21 for neglect. An increase of one point on the neglect scale was associated with an 11% increase in the probability of dating partner violence and a 21% probability of increased injury.

Methodology

The sample for the present study consisted of 152 males and females, aged 18-24 years of age. The convenience sample was composed of individuals who were incarcerated at a mid-sized correctional facility in the U.S. The facility housed approximately 1,400 general population inmates aged 18 years to 70 years (90% male) who had been charged with multiple types of crimes. Of the 1400 inmates, 150 inmates who were diagnosed with a mental illness were not requested to participate in the research. Participants were limited to English-speaking adults. The sample was diverse with regard to gender and race/ethnicity.

Procedures

Data were collected for the study using an interview schedule. In order to ensure anonymity, participants' names were not included on the questionnaires. Each questionnaire was given a unique numeric code. Due to protocol at the facility that restricted access to pencils by inmates, the researcher and two trained research assistants individually read each survey question to each inmate and marked the inmate's response. The interview schedule for the study consisted of two components. The first component included items which obtained socio-demographic information about the participants. The second component included the childhood neglect scale.

The socio-demographic variables elicited information from the participants regarding their race/ethnicity, gender, age, marital status, and educational level. Participants were also queried about their geographic area of residence prior to incarceration. The Multidimensional Neglectful Behavior Scale (MNBS) was used to measure physical neglect, emotional neglect, and educational neglect. The MNBS scale is an easy-to-administer, retrospective, self-report measure of types of physical, emotional, and educational neglect.

Participants were asked whether they had been arrested and/or charged with one of the following offenses since age 18: simple assault/misdemeanor (violence without a weapon), aggravated assault (severe bodily harm with a weapon), and murder. This included both arrests and non-arrests for violence. During data analysis procedures, questions on violence were collapsed into one aggregated measure of violence.

Results

Of the participants surveyed, 21.7% had a high school diploma or GED, and 5.9% attended some type of vocational or technical school. With regard to geographic area that the participants lived in prior to their incarceration, the majority (86.8 %) had lived in an urban inner-city area compared to 13.2% who had lived in a rural/country geographic area prior to their incarceration.

Additional Descriptive Statistics of Major Variables

The results indicate that of the types of neglect, the physical neglect scores showed the greatest range (27-14) and educational neglect scores showed the least range (14-9). The mean scores for types of neglect also showed variation, with physical neglect showing the highest mean score ($M = 21.64$, $SD = 2.94$) compared to the lowest emotional neglect score ($M = 11.38$, $SD = 2.69$).

Physical Neglect and Young Adult Violence

The first hypothesis predicted that physical neglect would positively relate to young adult violence among incarcerated young adults. In this study, the values for the responses per item were summed to produce an overall physical neglect score for each participant. The values summed for the items yielded a maximal score of 27. As indicated in Table 5, a weak negative correlation was found ($r(151) = -.17$, $p < .05$), indicating a significant relationship between the two variables. However, it was a weak negative relationship, thus the hypothesis was not supported. Inmates who reported less neglect reported more violence.

Emotional Neglect and Young Adult Violence

The second hypothesis predicted that emotional neglect would positively relate to young adult violence among incarcerated young adults. In this study, the values for the responses per item were summed to produce an overall emotional neglect score for each participant. The values summed for the items yielded a maximal score of 18; a weak negative correlation was found ($r(151) = -.18$, $p < .05$), indicating a significant relationship between the two variables. However, it was a weak negative relationship, thus the hypothesis was not supported. Inmates who reported less emotional neglect reported more violence.

Educational Neglect and Young Adult Violence

The third hypothesis predicted that educational neglect was positively related to young adult violence among incarcerated young adults. In this study, the values for the responses per item were summed to produce an overall educational neglect score for each participant.

The values summed for the items yielded a maximal score of 14; a correlation was not found between the variables ($r(151) = -.01$, $p > .05$), indicating there was not a significant relationship between the two variables. Thus, the hypothesis was not supported.

Table 5 Correlation Coefficients of Adult Violence and Types of Neglect

Predictor Variable r p
Physical Neglect -.17 .042
Emotional Neglect -.18 .032
Educational Neglect -.01 .920
p = <.05

Summary of Results

The participants were disproportionately African American. Although the young adults in the sample were between the ages of 18-24 years, the age categories within the cohort were more equally distributed between participants in the two younger (18-19 years 28.3% and 20-21 years 28.9%) age groups and unequally distributed (22-23 years 34.2% and 24 years 8.6%). Another major, though not surprising, statistic indicated that 72.4 percent of the participants had dropped out of school. Finally, results indicated that the majority of participants were single (99.09%) and lived in an urban/inner city geographic area prior to their incarceration. A significant number (67.8%) of participants were reared without a father or male figure in the home.

Discussion

Researchers (Bevan & Higgins, 2002; Chapple, Tyler, & Bersani, 2004; Crawford & O'Dougherty-Wright; Knutson, DeGarmo, & Reid, 2004; Smith, Ireland, & Thornberry, 2005; Straus & Savage, 2006; Widom & Maxfield, 2001) findings support a positive association between physical neglect and violence and emotional neglect and violence. In contrast to previous research, this research did not find positive associations between these two variables and young adult violence. Current findings indicated that a lack of physical neglect and emotional neglect were negatively associated with violence. As physical neglect and emotional neglect decreased, violence increased.

Previous researchers (Smith, Ireland, & Thornberry, 2005; Straus & Savage, 2006; Widom & Maxfield, 2001) indicated that the more neglect (physical, emotional, and educational) experienced the greater the violence. Although two types of neglect (physical and emotional) had a negative association with violence, emotional neglect had a significant ($< .05$) negative weak association with violence. Specifically, the findings indicated that the less emotional neglect the participants experienced in their childhood, the greater the violence. Therefore, hypothesis two was rejected because the direction of the association was negative and did not support the research.

Again, these findings did not support other research (Crawford & O'Dougherty-Wright, 2007; Edwards, Shipman, & Brown, 2005). External to the interview, many of the participants were emphatic in stating that their mothers or caregivers (grandmothers) told them they loved them, or the participants responded in a manner which indicated there was not any emotional neglect. Similarly, relative to physical neglect, many participants were also emphatic in stating their mothers or another caregiver, usually a grandmother, had kept them clean. They also became more passionate and evidenced great pride when they emphasized that their clothes had been kept clean and there was not any physical neglect in other areas, such as keeping the house clean, or providing them with enough food to eat.

Their parents told them they “loved” them and showed their love through attention and various activities. Even though the directions of the associations between physical neglect and violence and emotional neglect and violence were not surprising based on comments made by many participants, they suggest underlying factors which are worthy of further exploration.

Although the direction of the association between educational neglect and young adult violence was positive, a significant association ($<.05$) was not found between educational neglect and young adult violence. Again, this is contrary to previous research which indicated that violence was highly correlated with academic achievement. It is noteworthy that a significant demographic characteristic of the sample indicated that the majority (72.4%) of the participants dropped out of school, many as early as sixth and seventh grades. This is a standard indication of educational neglect at the parental/family and community-level.

Researchers (Berry et al., 2003; Dubowitz et al., 2005) suggested that there is a gap in the literature specifically related to childhood neglect because it is difficult to define. The frame of reference with which this researcher used to identify “clean,” i.e., “kept the house clean,” “kept your clothes clean,” were relative terms. Therefore, the dichotomy or gray area of physical neglect or no physical neglect was subjective and left to each participant’s own interpretation. Without a baseline frame of reference, neglect may be difficult to identify (Berry et al., 2003; Dubowitz et al., 2005). Finally, this research did not operationalize child neglect to include the most extreme types of childhood physical neglect or emotional neglect.

A methodological limitation of the study was the use of participants’ recall of information and self-reports as the primary basis for providing responses to the written survey. Even though the methodological limitation of the study is plausible, other possible explanations include the participants’ embarrassment and shame, identification with the neglectful parent, cultural, family and self-pride, and other possible types of child maltreatment (physical or sexual abuse), or family dysfunction.

The majority of participants (67.8%) did not have a biological father or other adult male who was responsible for their care. Most participants repeatedly reported that they had never had any contact with their father or that their father was incarcerated. This appears to suggest physical neglect and emotional neglect by the biological father. The lack of a father figure in the home may have provided limited opportunities for male bonding. Anderson (1999) reported that when the father or another strong male figure is absent from the home, it leaves the young adult male susceptible to negative male influences in the street because they seek males from the streets for bonding. Anderson (1999) also noted that many single mothers are not equipped to teach young adult males, “the code of the street” and how to survive in a positive manner.

The majority of participants were extremely certain in their responses that there was not any educational neglect during their childhood. With the exception of having a book read to them or having been provided with homework assistance by an adult caretaker, the majority of respondents were adamant in stating that their mother, grandmother, or other caregiver had been supportive and strictly encouraged them to attend school.

While the participants’ self-reports indicated there was not any educational neglect, the fact that 72.4 percent of the participants dropped out of school, most reporting they dropped out in sixth or seventh grade, show a disconnect in reality and the participants’ perception of educational neglect. Multiple systems failed to meet the educational needs of those who dropped out of school, i.e., the parents, educational system, community, churches, other institutions, and other responsible and caring adults.

Limitations

With regard to types of childhood neglect, the research did not take into consideration the most extreme cases of childhood neglect. Additionally, gray areas for determining whether there was neglect or no neglect has been an area of concern in previous research regarding neglect. Consequently, this has contributed to limited empirical research involving childhood neglect (Dubowitz et al, 2005). The disproportionate representation in the sample related to gender and race/ethnicity prevented an exploration of the hypotheses based on gender, race, and ethnicity. Therefore, this is considered to be a limitation in the findings.

Implications

The discussion in this section will highlight the implications of the findings relative to social welfare policy, and social work practice, education, and research. Even though the implications of this research are significant, it is important to note that these implications are presented with caution since most of the hypotheses were not supported.

The findings from this research lend credence to the literature which suggests that researchers disagree regarding the causes of young adult violence. Additionally, the findings suggest that the causes of young adult violence are more complicated and cannot be determined through any one domain. A major goal of this research was to contribute to the body of knowledge regarding childhood neglect and young adult violence. This goal has been achieved because the findings relative to demographic information are supportive of other prior research (Anderson, 1999; Poria-Atzha, Pike, & Deckard-Deater, 2004). Findings from the research on demographic factors will contribute to the body of knowledge at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels. For example, the findings support previous research studies which provided information on demographics related to the disproportional arrests and incarceration of young African American males. And supports research related to the “cradle-to-prison-pipeline” facilitated by the Children’s Defense Fund.

A significant limitation of this research involved self-reported information from the participants which could not be confirmed. Findings from the research also suggest the need for more longitudinal research on child neglect and young adult violence.

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