

Child Maltreatment and Delinquency: Framing Issues of Causation and Consequence

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The 1980s witnessed a surge of interest in and research into the causes and consequences of child maltreatment. The 1990s were the setting for a similarly dramatic increase in attention to juvenile delinquency and juvenile violence. Throughout both decades, references were routinely made to the links between child maltreatment and subsequent juvenile delinquency. It is now commonly believed that maltreatment in childhood can be a risk factor for later juvenile misconduct, delinquency, and violence. Yet, despite this general belief, much remains to be understood about the actual associations between maltreatment and delinquency and about the processes underlying these associations. An understanding of these processes is absolutely imperative as psychologists strive to develop successful interventions to ameliorate the potential negative consequences of maltreatment and prevent juvenile delinquency. As an important step toward reaching this understanding, we developed this special issue, which is sponsored by the Section on Child Maltreatment of the American Psychological Association's Division on Child, Youth, and Family Services.

The articles in this special issue contain outstanding examples of recent research and theory linking the fields of child maltreatment and juvenile delinquency. The authors, all prominent social scientists, present new findings that push our field toward a broader conceptualization of causation and consequences of maltreatment and delinquency. The research employed innovative longitudinal designs and sampled some of the most vulnerable youth in our society. As a result, the authors' conclusions are more directly applicable than they might otherwise be to at-risk children who have actually experienced maltreatment or engaged in delinquency. We anticipate that this collection of articles will not only provide answers to old questions about the connections between maltreatment and delinquency but will also raise many new questions and prompt further research.

THE INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTIONS

In the first article, Egeland, Yates, Appleyard, and van Dulmen examine the mechanisms by which early childhood maltreatment contributes to later externalizing problems that are themselves related to delinquent behaviors. The authors report results from an ongoing well-known longitudinal study of high-risk families, focusing specifically on findings from a sample of young adults who experienced physical abuse or emotional neglect in early childhood. Egeland and colleagues conceptualize the consequences of early maltreatment in relation to the salient developmental processes that are affected at certain ages. In particular, they identify alienation and emotional dysregulation as two disrupted developmental processes from the preschool period. The authors' research reveals that these processes, particularly alienation, are mediators of relations between physical abuse and externalizing symptoms, although not between emotional neglect and externalizing symptoms. The authors stress the importance of taking developmental processes into account when studying the links between child maltreatment and delinquency as well as the need to examine how different forms of maltreatment may lead to different outcomes.

The second article provides a glimpse into findings of another ambitious longitudinal study, the Pittsburgh Youth Study. Stouthamer-Loeber, Wei, Homish, and Loeber identify demographic factors and family interaction variables that pose risks for both child maltreatment and persistent serious delinquency. Of particular interest is the evidence these researchers provide that maltreatment can explain serious delinquency, even after controlling for many factors, but that this relation is moderated by the family demographic factor of not living with both biological parents. This relation deserves close attention in future research and suggests strategies for intervening before children become involved in the legal system as perpetrators of crime.

In the third article, Tolan, Gorman-Smith, and Henry also present findings from an impressive longitudinal study of inner-city adolescents and their parents. The authors describe associations among family violence, partner abuse, and adolescent risk for delinquent behaviors. Specifically, the authors examine the importance of maternal victimization and perpetration of partner violence in relation to parenting and the development of violence in sons. Tolan and colleagues found that the relation between maternal-partner violence and child violence was mediated by harsh parental discipline and lack of parental monitoring. Even more interesting is the authors' finding that maternal perpetration – more than victimization – was related to poor parenting practices and subsequent child violence. These findings might help explain the link often found between parental domestic violence and juvenile delinquency. They also suggest that the relation between parental violence and delinquency might be due to the likelihood that parents who engage in violent behavior with their partners also use the negative parenting strategies associated with subsequent youth crime and violence.

Haugaard and Feerick, in the fourth article, provide a critical review of interventions for maltreated children at risk for subsequent delinquency. The researchers first emphasize the need to consider the type of maltreatment children experience, children's level of symptomatology following maltreatment, and other risk factors (e.g., poor family functioning, violence in the community) when attempting to identify appropriate interventions for maltreated youth. From a community psychology perspective, Haugaard and Feerick consider intervention research at three different but related levels: child, family, and community. The authors suggest that, by providing a broad range of interventions, it will be possible to ameliorate many of the potential negative consequences of childhood maltreatment, including delinquency.

We are delighted to have an integrative review and concluding commentary by Thomas Grisso. With compelling straightforwardness, Grisso considers the applied and theoretical significance of the four target articles. First, he reconciles the empirical findings with contradictory findings in the existing published literature. Second, he underscores the potential for the research to lead to improvements in psychologists' ability to identify youth at risk for delinquency and to intervene effectively in their lives before they become offenders. Third and finally, he wisely cautions that social scientists must be aware of the potential for their findings to be misunderstood and misused in the legal system. In particular, he cautions that mischaracterizing the links between maltreatment and delinquency as predictive in a practical legal sense could lead to perceptions that youth with past histories of child maltreatment are inevitably persistent offenders who should receive the harshest punishments. This, Grisso notes, would contribute to the final victimization of the victims of childhood maltreatment.

CONCLUSION

It is clear, then, that this special issue contributes a great deal of new knowledge to the fields of child maltreatment and juvenile delinquency. These thoughtful articles demonstrate the causal nature of the relation between early childhood maltreatment and subsequent juvenile delinquency and illustrate many variables that moderate and mediate that relation. We hope that this knowledge will facilitate the development of predictive models that can identify maltreated children who are at greatest risk for future violent and criminal behavior. This could lead to targeted interventions for children with the most to gain. In this way, the risk of at least one of the many potential negative consequences of child maltreatment can be reduced in some victimized children's lives.

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