



National Institute of Justice

Research Preview

Jeremy Travis, Director

April 1997

The Prevalence and Consequences of Child Victimization

Summary of a Research Study by Dean Kilpatrick, Ph.D., and Benjamin Saunders, Ph.D.

Preliminary findings from a study of 4,023 adolescents and their parents indicate a significant number of today's youthful population have been victims of sexual and physical abuse and have personally witnessed incidents of violence against others. For many, consequences of these experiences include Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and drug and alcohol abuse. The study is part of the National Survey of Adolescents, a household survey sponsored by the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) and conducted by the National Crime Victims Research and Treatment Center at the Medical University of South Carolina.

Extrapolating the findings of this study to the national adolescent population as a whole suggests that of the 22.3 million adolescents ages 12–17 in the United States today, approximately 1.8 million have been victims of a serious sexual assault, 3.9 million have been victims of a serious physical assault, and almost 9 million have witnessed serious violence. Nearly 2 million have suffered (and over 1 million still suffer) from PTSD, and about 3.4 million have been drug or alcohol abusers as well. Analysis of the survey information indicates a strong correlation between drug abuse and delinquency. Having been personally victimized and suffering from PTSD also seem to be strong predictors of delinquent behavior.

Research design

The findings are based on telephone interviews lasting on average a half hour with the random sample of 4,023 adolescents and preliminary 10-minute interviews with their parents or guardians. The researchers looked at several variables, including age, gender, race, and household income. They asked the adolescents about their personal experiences of sexual assault and physical

assault, violence they may have witnessed, their drug and alcohol use, their experience of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, and serious delinquency offenses they may have committed.

The sample was evenly divided between male and female participants and had demographic characteristics similar to those of the general population this age. Approximately 70 percent of the sampled youths were non-Hispanic whites, 14.7 percent were African Americans, 7.8 percent were of Hispanic origin, 3.5 percent were Native Americans, and 3.8 percent were members of other racial/ethnic groups. About 16 percent were in families with annual household incomes under \$20,000, 44 percent were from families whose income ranged between \$20,000 and \$50,000, and one-third were from ones whose income exceeded \$50,000; the remaining participants were from families who refused to divulge their household incomes.

Preliminary findings

Sexual assault. Sexual assault was defined as “unwanted but actual sexual contact,” thus leaving out unsuccessful attempts at contact or noncontact victimization, such as an exhibitionist display. As anticipated, more female than male adolescents had been sexually assaulted (13 percent of females in contrast to 3.4 percent of males). Of the females, 3.3 percent experienced unwanted penile penetration in contrast to 0.5 percent of the males. Similarly, 2.7 percent of the female adolescents but only 0.6 percent of the males experienced penetration with fingers or objects.

Physical assault. Behavior considered to be “physical assault” included being attacked or threatened with a weapon, badly hurt from a beating, or attacked without a weapon but with the intent to kill or seriously injure. Survey

respondents indicated that young males had significantly higher rates of physical assault than females (21.3 percent versus 13.4 percent).

Witnessing violence. This category measured lifetime experience of seeing someone shot with a gun, knifed, sexually assaulted, mugged, robbed, or threatened with a weapon. Witnessing violence portrayed in the movies or on television was excluded. Forty-three percent of male adolescents and 35 percent of female adolescents had witnessed some form of violence firsthand. Researchers excluded from their overall calculations the approximately 30 percent of adolescents who had directly observed someone being beaten up and badly hurt—an experience so common that had these figures been included, the prevalence of witnessing violence would have risen to 72 percent for the entire sample.

Delinquency. At least once in their lives, 12.3 percent of respondents had committed a delinquent offense. In the year previous to the interview, 14.9 percent of the adolescent males and 5.8 percent of the adolescent females had engaged in at least one form of delinquent behavior, some of which was very serious. For instance, more than 5 percent of males and 2.3 percent of females had committed assault with intent to kill or seriously injure.

Substance abuse. The lifetime serious drug use rate was 10.3 percent for the survey sample, but when alcohol use was factored in, the percentage rose to 53.9. The rate of past-year drug use was 8.9 percent. For past-year heavy alcohol use (i.e., using alcohol two or three times a month, getting drunk four or more times, or having five or more drinks in one sitting four or more times), the rate was 15.2 percent; the rate of past-year substance use (a combination of drug and alcohol abuse) was almost 20 percent.

Analyses of findings

As anticipated, analyses of the data revealed that youths from lower income groups experienced higher rates of sexual and physical assault than those from middle and higher income groups. In addition, Native Americans, African Americans, and Hispanics had higher rates than Caucasians and other racial and ethnic groups in all categories of victimization.

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. At some point in their lives, nearly 30 percent of sexual assault victims developed—and almost 20 percent still suffered from—PTSD. By comparison, 6.2 percent of adolescents who were not sexually assaulted (but might have been victimized in other ways) developed PTSD, and 3.6 percent still had it. A similar pattern emerged for victims of physical assault and those who had witnessed serious violence. Among adolescents who had been physically assaulted, 23.4 percent developed PTSD and 14.8 percent still suffered from it, while 10.8 percent of nonvictims of

physical assault developed—and 4.5 still had—PTSD. Among witnesses to violence, 15 percent developed PTSD, compared to 3.3 percent of surveyed youths who had not witnessed violence. PTSD was thus a significant correlate of victimization.

Predictors of delinquency

Although correlation studies that control for dependent variables are incomplete, preliminary analysis of multiple variables shows that neither age nor household income appears to predict past-year delinquency. This leads researchers to conclude that youths of any age from wealthier homes would have the same level of delinquency as those from lower income families—if they had the same experiences. The most significant contributor to delinquent behavior was found to be drug abuse, although personal victimization (except for sexual assault), heavy alcohol use, and PTSD also played strong roles. The fact that sexual assault, whose victims are primarily female, was not an important predictor of delinquency argues for developing separate models by gender.

Confirmation of the study's hypotheses of a correlation between victimization experiences, PTSD, and delinquency await completion of data analyses, but preliminary findings point to the significance of personal victimization as a risk factor for major mental health problems, abuse of drugs and alcohol as a means of coping with PTSD, and substance abuse as a precursor of delinquent behavior.

Researchers hope to conduct longitudinal research with this or another adolescent cohort to clarify the temporal sequence of these stages.

This summary is based on a presentation of an NIJ-sponsored study (NIJ grant number 93-IJ-CX-0023) by Dean Kilpatrick, Ph.D., professor and director of the National Crime Victims Research and Treatment Center at the Medical University of South Carolina, and Benjamin Saunders, Ph.D., associate professor and director of Family and Child Programs at the same university. As part of NIJ's Research in Progress Seminar Series, Drs. Kilpatrick and Saunders discussed their work with an audience of criminal justice researchers, professionals, and practitioners. A 60-minute VHS videotape, *Prevalence and Consequences of Child Victimization: Preliminary Results From the National Survey of Adolescents*, is available for \$19 (\$24 in Canada and other foreign countries). Ask for NCJ 157643. Use the order form on the next page to obtain this videotape and any of the other tapes now available in the series.

Points of view in this document do not necessarily reflect the official position of the U. S. Department of Justice.

NCJ 163057—Marcia Chaiken, Ph.D.,
Research Director of LINC, Alexandria,
VA: *Youth Afterschool Programs and the Role of
Law Enforcement.*

NCJ 163058—Eric Wish, Ph.D., Director,
Center for Substance Abuse Research,
University of Maryland, Dependence and

Drug Treatment Needs Among Adult
Arrestees.

NCJ 163059—Jeffrey Fagan, Ph.D.,
Professor, Columbia University, *Adolescent
Violence: A View From the Street.*

NCJ 163921—Patricia Tjaden, Ph.D.,
Senior Researcher, Center for Policy
Research, *The Crime of Stalking: How Big
Is the Problem?*

Quick Access to NIJ Publication News

For news about NIJ's most recent publications, including solicitations for grant applications, subscribe to JUSTINFO, the bimonthly newsletter sent to you via e-mail. Here's how:

- Send an e-mail to listproc@ncjrs.org
- Leave the subject line blank
- Type subscribe justinfo your name
(e.g., subscribe justinfo Jane Doe) in the body of the message

Or check out the "What's New" section at the Justice Information Center homepage:
<http://www.ncjrs.org>

U.S. Department of Justice
Office of Justice Programs
National Institute of Justice

Washington, D.C. 20531

Official Business
Penalty for Private Use \$300

BULK RATE
POSTAGE & FEES PAID
DOJ/NIJ
Permit No. G-91