



National Institute of Justice

Research Preview

Jeremy Travis, Director

April 1998

Early Childhood Victimization Among Incarcerated Adult Male Felons

Summary of a Study by Robin Weeks and Cathy Spatz Widom

A common belief held by many professionals in the criminal justice field is that the vast majority of incarcerated felons have been victims of physical abuse or neglect as children. A second widespread assumption is that childhood sexual abuse is associated with later criminal behavior, particularly sexual offending. However, relatively few studies have systematically examined this issue and among those that have, rates of abuse among juvenile and adult inmates range from a low of 9 percent to a high of 75 to 80 percent.

Using carefully developed methods for eliciting retrospective reports of childhood abuse and neglect, a new study of inmates in a New York prison found that 68 percent of the sample reported some form of childhood victimization and 23 percent reported experiencing multiple forms of abuse and neglect, including physical and sexual abuse. These findings provide support for the belief that the majority of incarcerated offenders have likely experienced some type of childhood abuse or neglect.

Studying childhood victimization among adults

Some of the difficulty in pinpointing the extent of childhood victimization in the backgrounds of incarcerated offenders is that there is little uniformity in measuring childhood abuse and neglect. Also, questions have been raised about the use of retrospective self-reports of earlier childhood victimization, including repression, conscious denial, or even exaggeration of experiences. To minimize these problems, this study used a series of questions developed and tested with a sample of known victims of childhood abuse and neglect. For the physical and sexual abuse items, the respondents were asked to report experiences that occurred during elementary school.

The subjects were 301 convicted male felons incarcerated in a New York State medium security facility. Inmates were randomly selected from a list of those recently incarcerated or transferred and were interviewed before assignment to the general prison population. This was the first or second State incarceration for 89 percent of the subjects. The racial/ethnic composition of the sample was African-American (56.5 percent), Hispanic (24.3 percent), white (17.6 percent), and other (1.7 percent). The average age of the subjects was 30 years. Official arrest records were used to determine whether the offender had a history of violent and/or sex offenses. About 70 percent (212) of the sample had an arrest for a violent felony and 13 percent (38) for a sex offense.

Self-reported childhood abuse and neglect

Overall, 68 percent of the incarcerated adult male felons reported some form of early childhood victimization before age 12, either physical abuse, sexual abuse, or neglect. The most common type of reported victimization was physical abuse. Using a measure of "very severe violence,"¹ the study found that about 35 percent of the sample reported severe childhood physical abuse. Sexual abuse and neglect were less commonly reported and often occurred in combination with other types of abuse. About 14 percent reported some form of childhood sexual abuse. Fewer than a quarter of the sample reported more than one type of abuse or neglect.

Previous research would suggest that violent offenders should be expected to report higher rates of childhood physical abuse. However, contrary to expectations, violent and nonviolent offenders reported similar rates of childhood physical abuse, even of very serious forms.

Compared to inmates who had not committed sex offenses, sex offenders were more likely to report sexual

experiences before age 12. An overall index of sexual abuse was constructed including the following items: whether respondent considered early sexual experiences to be abuse, reported sex with a person at least 10 years older when respondent was younger than 12, and reported forced sex experiences (“against will”) before age 12. On the basis of this measure, about 26 percent of sex offenders reported sexual abuse, compared to violent offenders (13 percent), nonviolent offenders (18 percent), and nonsex offenders (12 percent). Sex offenders, however, reported rates of physical abuse similar to other offenders.

Supporting previous research which showed that childhood neglect² is associated with later violence, this study found that violent offenders reported more childhood neglect (20 percent) than nonviolent offenders (6 percent). This study reinforces the need to pay more attention to neglected children.

Policy implications

Knowing the extent of childhood victimization in the background of incarcerated felons does not provide insight into whether these experiences led directly to later criminal activities. Research indicates that there are multiple risk factors for delinquency and adult criminal behavior, and previous studies show that not all abused and neglected children become delinquent or adult criminals.³ What remains unknown is the processes by which these early childhood experiences lead to criminal and violent behavior and the protective factors that move them away from such behavior. Finally, knowing the extent of childhood victimization may be important for policymakers and correctional personnel in choosing appropriate treatment services. Other research has shown that a history of childhood victimization has an

impact on the success of mental health treatment programs for offenders.

Notes

¹ The “very severe violence” subscale, taken from the work of Murray Straus, includes the following items: kick, bite, hit with a fist, beat up, burn or scald, threaten with a knife or gun, or use a knife or gun. Straus, M.A., “Family Patterns and Child Abuse in a Nationally Representative Sample,” *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 3(1979): 23–25.

² The definition of neglect used in the study included the following experiences while a young or very young child: being left alone while parents were shopping; hearing from others that they were not getting enough to eat, receiving medical care, or kept clean enough; and being cared for or fed by neighbors or relatives because no one was at home.

³ See Widom, C.S. *The Cycle of Violence*, Research in Brief, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, 1992, NCJ 136607. Maxfield, M.G. and C.S. Widom, “The Cycle of Violence: Revisited Six Years Later,” *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*, 150(1996): 390–395.

This Research Preview was based on a study by Robin Weeks and Cathy Spatz Widom, Ph.D., “Self Reports of Early Childhood Victimization Among Incarcerated Adult Male Felons,” to appear in the June 1998 issue of *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. The authors are with The University at Albany, State University of New York, School of Criminal Justice. This research has been supported in part by NIJ grants 86–IJ–CX–0033 and 89–IJ–CX–0007.

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FS 000204

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Washington, DC 20531

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