

The Cycle of Violence: Is There Evidence?

Abused and neglected children are more likely to be delinquent and to exhibit criminal and violent criminal behaviour as adults. This was one of the findings of a recent comparison of abused and neglected children and children with no history of abuse and neglect.

The cycle-of-violence hypothesis, or the notion of an intergenerational transmission of violence, holds that abused children become abusers, and victims of violence become violent offenders. However, a recent review of research found surprisingly little empirical evidence to support this hypothesis.

Despite widespread belief in the cycle of violence, problems of methodology in previous studies have made it difficult to draw conclusions about the long-term consequences of early childhood victimization. These problems include the lack of a control group against which the abused and neglected group could be compared. Another problem is the retrospective design of the studies, requiring the researcher to rely on delinquents' ability to remember details about their early childhood.

Improving on past work, this study included a relatively clear definition of abuse and neglect; a prospective design in which the development of children was followed rather than traced backward in time; a large sample group; a control group matched as closely as possible in age, sex, race and approximate social class background; and an assessment of the long-term consequences of abuse and neglect beyond adolescence and juvenile court and into adulthood.

From official records of a metropolitan area in the United States, the study identified a large sample of cases of child abuse and neglect from about 20 years ago, and established a matched control group of non-abused children. The objective was to determine the extent to which both groups subsequently engaged in delinquent, adult criminal and violent criminal behaviour.

All cases of physical and sexual abuse and neglect validated and substantiated by the county juvenile court and adult criminal courts from 1967 to 1971 were initially included. Of 2,623 cases, 908 were retained for the study.

The term "physical abuse" refers to cases in which an individual had "knowingly and willfully inflicted unnecessarily severe corporal punishment" or "unnecessary physical suffering" upon a child.

"Sexual abuse" refers to charges ranging from the relatively nonspecific ones of "assault and battery with intent to gratify sexual desires" to more specific and detailed charges.

"Neglect" refers to cases in which the court found a child to have no proper parental care or guardianship, or to be destitute, homeless or living in a physically dangerous environment.

Children for the control group were selected from county birth-record information and records of more than 100 elementary schools. They were matched as closely as possible with those in the abused and neglected group on age, sex, race and approximate family socio-economic status during the period under study. Altogether, the researchers were able to find matches for 73.7% (or 667) of the abused and

neglected children.

In both the control group and the abused and neglected group, there were about equal numbers of males and females and about twice as many whites as blacks. The mean age of subjects in both groups was approximately 26, with 85% between the ages of 20 and 30.

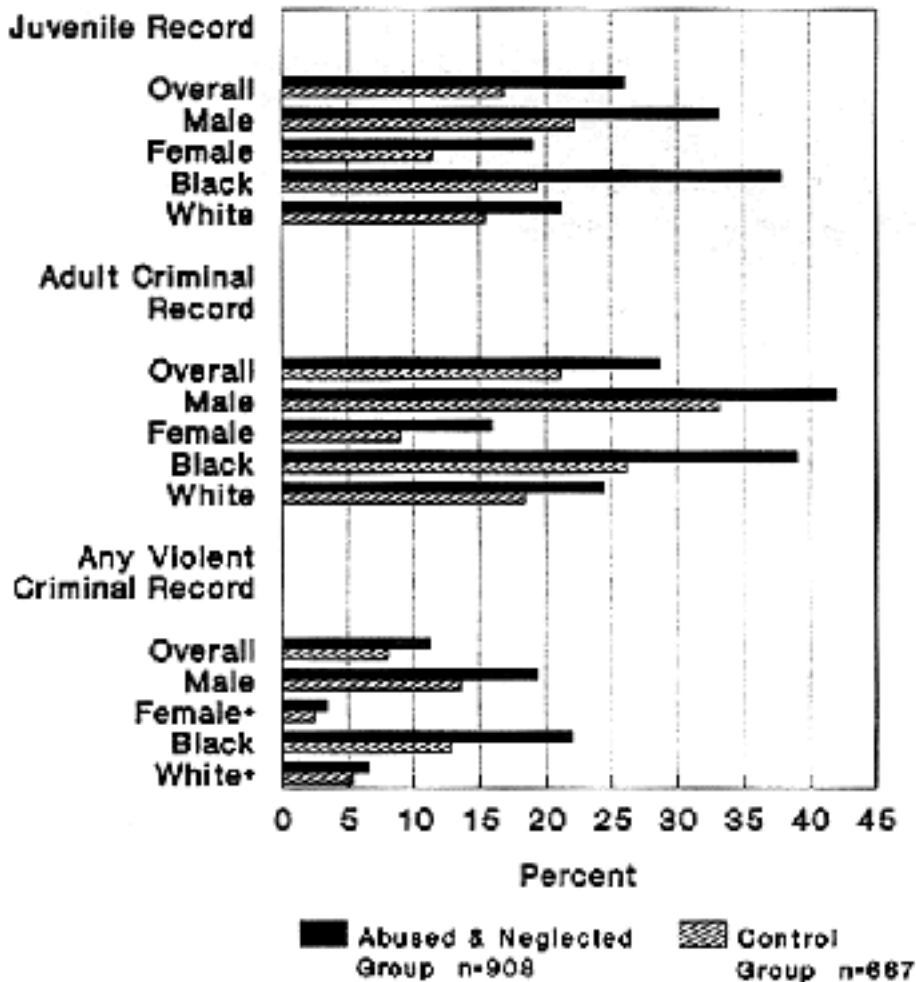
Official records were used to gather information about the children's delinquent behaviour, adult criminal behaviour and violent criminal behaviour.

Results

Generally, abused and neglected children were significantly more likely than their counterparts in the control group to be arrested for delinquency, adult criminality and violent criminal behaviour (see figure). Overall, abused and neglected children had more arrests as juveniles (26% versus 17%), as adults (29% versus 21%) and for any violent offence (11% versus 8%).

Figure 1

Extent of Involvement in Delinquency and Criminal Behaviour



*Differences between groups not statistically significant.

These differences were statistically significant for all groups (males and females, blacks and whites) and all types of antisocial behaviour, with two exceptions. The rate of violent criminal behaviour among women who had been abused and neglected as children was not significantly different from that of their control group. Nor did the factors of abuse or neglect among white male and female subjects significantly increase their risk of an arrest for violent criminal behaviour.

Overall, though, in comparison to the control group, abused and neglected children had a significantly greater average number of offences (2.43 versus 1.41), committed their first offence at a younger age (16.48 versus 17.29), and had a higher proportion of chronic offenders or individuals charged with five or more offences (17% versus 9%).

It seems that abused and neglected children differ from non-abused and non-neglected children on several but not all indices of delinquency, adult criminality and violent behaviour. In one area in particular, the two groups did not differ. Non-abused and non-neglected children were just as likely as abused and neglected individuals to continue criminal activity once they had begun. Of those with

juvenile records, roughly the same proportion of abused and neglected children as the control group went on to commit offences as adults (53% versus 50%). As well, of those who had committed violent offences as juveniles, about the same proportion went on to commit violence as adults (34.2% of the abused and neglected group and 36.8% of the control group).

Early childhood victimization does not appear to increase one's risk of continuing in a life of crime. However, it does seem to increase the probability of committing a criminal act in the first place and at a young age.

The study also examined whether individuals who were only physically abused as children were more violent than individuals victimized by other forms of abuse and neglect. As expected, victims of physical abuse, followed by victims of neglect, had the highest levels of arrest for violent criminal behaviour.

Of those who had only been physically abused, 15.8% had a record for a violent offence; of those who had been neglected, 12.5% had a record for a violent offence. This compares with 7.9% of the control group. It is interesting to note that those who suffered only sexual abuse as children had lower rates of arrest for a violent offence, at 5.6%, than any other group, including the control group.

Conclusion

In support of the cycle-of-violence hypothesis, these results indicate that abused and neglected children were more likely to become delinquents, adult criminals and violent criminals than children who had not been abused or neglected.

However, these results do not imply that every abused or neglected child will become a delinquent or a criminal. Although 26% of victims of child abuse and neglect had juvenile offences, 74% did not. Similarly, 11% had been arrested for a violent offence while 89% had not.

Cathy Spatz Widom, "The Cycle of Violence," *Science*, 244 (1989): 160-166.