

# The Link Between Childhood Trauma and Criminal Behavior Among Juvenile Offenders



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## Abstract

The present study aimed to examine the relationship between the type of criminal behavior that childhood trauma is linked to among juvenile offenders. The study utilized secondary data from a sample of N=1,354 juvenile offenders from the Pathways to Desistance study. The present study examined how childhood trauma impacts the criminal behavior of juveniles. The study findings suggest that there is a statistically significant relationship between witnessing and being a victim of trauma and criminal behavior in juveniles. On the other hand, a non-significant relationship was found between the number of ACEs and criminal behavior in juveniles. The study findings suggest that it is important to take into consideration childhood trauma in juvenile delinquents. Some strengths in this study include its sample size and the use of computer-based assisted interviews. Future research should consider a different sampling method like random sampling to avoid sampling bias and receive more accurate results.

## Introduction

### Significance of study

- The prevalence of childhood trauma is significant and can negatively impact a person's life. In a study conducted among prisoners, about 60% of them reported experiencing physical trauma, and about 15% reported sexual trauma when they were children
- In 2017 alone, there was about 2,500 reported arrest for kids between the ages of ten and seventeen
- This study is significant to social work because it will allow insight into how childhood trauma can lead to lifelong traumatic impacts that will lead to more violent criminal behavior

### Research Question

- What kind of criminal behavior is childhood trauma linked to among juvenile behavior?

### Hypothesis

- It is hypothesized that the more traumatic events experienced or exposed to as a child, the more violent their crimes in adolescent and adulthood will be.

## Literature Review

- About 30% of children in schools have experienced or will experience some form of exposure to violence
- Between 50% to 80% of men involved in the justice system have previous experiences of childhood trauma
- Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are those traumatic events that happen to a child while growing up. ACE's are linked to poor health, substance use, and low academic achievement
- The higher the ACE score is for a person, the more prone they are to committing a crime, and of those already charged with a crime, the chances of recidivism are also higher
- Studies suggest that the kind of trauma that the child is exposed to has a link to the kind of crimes they will most likely commit
- The exposure to trauma at a young age has shown to lead to the impulsivity of crimes in youth
- When comparing the kinds of crimes and impulsivity, the data revealed that emotional abuse was linked to more property crimes, and physical abuse was linked to any kind of crime
- A traumatic experience can shape the course of life for some, for example, boys who have been molested as kids are roughly 50 times more prone to engage in intimate partner violence during their adolescent years

## Methods

### Research Design

- The current study is a secondary analysis of data from the Research on Pathways to Desistance study, which gathered information from November 2000 to April 2010
- The original study was a two-site longitudinal cohort study that gathered information through qualitative techniques via interviews starting at a baseline in 2000 and ending with a 96 month follow up in 2010.
- The current study utilizes data gathered during the baseline interviews
- Data was gathered through computer assisted interviews

### Sampling Method

- The sample was recruited using non-probability purposive sampling from two different sites: Philadelphia County, PA and Maricopa County (Phoenix)
- Of the participants, 700 were recruited from Philadelphia County and 654 were recruited from Maricopa County
- In total, the study consisted of 1,354 serious juvenile offenders between the ages of 14 and 18 when their crime was committed.
- The study consisted of 1,170 males and 184 females
- Of the total participants, 274 participants were White, 561 were Black, 454 were Hispanic, and 65 were classified as other
- Some of the crimes that made these juveniles eligible for participation included felony offenses, misdemeanors weapons offenses, and misdemeanors sexual assaults.

### Measures

- Independent Variable-** The independent variable for this study was trauma, which was calculated using Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), Victim score, and Witness score
- Dependent Variable** – The dependent variable for this study was violent criminal behavior. The study looked at 16 crimes at categorized them under either violent or non-violent crimes.

## Results

### Man-Whitney U-Test

- The results indicated a statistically significant relationship between someone ACE scores and type of criminal behavior ( $U = 86339.000, p = .037$ )
- The results indicated a statistically significant relationship between witness score and type of criminal behavior ( $U = 309878.500, P \text{ value} = .000$ )
- The results indicated a statistically significant relationship between victim score and criminal behavior ( $U = 310304.500, p < .001$ )

### Logistic Regression

- The overall model was significant in predicting violent criminal behavior ( $\chi^2 = 223.385, df=6, p = <.001$ , with Nagelkerke  $R^2 = .32$ )
- Victim score and witness score were significantly related to violent criminal behavior ( $p < .001$ )
- The total number of ACE's was not significantly related to violent criminal behavior ( $p = .78$ )

Table 4

Logistic Regression Analysis for Violent Criminal Behavior (N = 828)

	B	SE	Sig.	Exp(B)
Subjects Ethnicity (ref=white)				
Black	.053	.232	.817	1.055
Hispanic	.238	.224	.288	1.269
Other	-.081	.416	.847	.923
Victim Score	.572	.079	.000	1.772
Witness Score	.336	.054	.000	1.400
Number of Total ACE's	-.024	.089	.788	.976
Constant	-1.470	.236	.000	.230
-2 Log Likelihood	866.388			
X <sup>2</sup> (6)	223.385		< .001	
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>	.323			

## Discussion

### Key Findings

- The first key finding was that being a victim of violence was a strong predictor of violent criminal behavior in juveniles.
- The second finding concluded that being a witness of violence is also linked to violent criminal behavior in adolescence and adulthood.
- Inconsistent with the study hypothesis, there was no significant relationship between the number of total ACEs and the likelihood that a person will engage in violent criminal behavior in adolescence and adulthood

### Strengths

- Information was gathered through computer assisted interviews
- Data was gathered using two sites, Philadelphia County, PA and Maricopa County (Phoenix) AZ
- Large sample size, 1,354 total participants
- Use of different inferential analyses, Mann-Whitney U-Test, and Logistic Regression

### Limitations

- The participants were selected upon non-probability purposive sampling instead of random sampling.
- The study consisted of 1,354 participants, of which 1,170 were males, and 184 were females, meaning there was less representations of women
- Another limitation that this study included is that an original ACE's questionnaire includes ten different ACE's, however, this study only included five ACE's
- Though the original study was a longitudinal study, the data that was used for this study only included data from the baseline of the original study

### Implications for Practice, Policy, and Research

- This study is significant to social work because it will allow insight into how childhood trauma can lead to lifelong traumatic impacts that will lead to more violent criminal behavior
- Given that this study has provided evidence that childhood trauma may lead to violent crimes in juveniles, it is important for the field of social work to put in place interventions that will help guide juveniles who have experienced childhood trauma away from violence
- The implications for practice is that childhood trauma is not overlooked in juvenile offenders
- This study may shape the way mental health policy is drafted and may help those who have been victims of violence
- This study can provide support to fund trauma informed mental health services within the justice system to prevent incarcerated juveniles from committing more crimes

### Future Research

- Future researcher should take a look at how different ethnic groups and minorities are impacted by childhood trauma
- Future research should also be more inclusive of females in their studies.
- For research purposes, mental health treatment should also be considered when collecting data to prevent trauma from having to recount the experiences

### Conclusion

- In conclusion, the present study provides important information for the understanding of trauma in relation to criminal behavior among juveniles
- The present study supported the hypothesis that an individual who experiences childhood trauma is more likely to grow up and commit violent crimes in adolescence and in adulthood
- With enough resources and research, interventions can be put in place to prevent juveniles from living a long life involved in the justice system