

# The Relationship Between Physical Abuse and Neglect with Delinquent Behaviors Among Juveniles

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## Abstract

Maltreatment in childhood has previously been linked to delinquent behaviors. Despite research that suggests an association between childhood maltreatment and delinquency, less is understood about the types of delinquent behaviors children and adolescents engage in. To address this gap, this study examined the influence of whether having a substantiated childhood physical abuse and neglect report affected the frequency and type of offense an individual would engage in. Using data from the Missouri Juvenile Court Case Records, 1994, this study examined the likelihood that a child who had experienced physical abuse or neglect would engage in delinquent behaviors. The analytic sample included 76,741 male and female juveniles who were 18 years old or younger. A chi-square test revealed that a prior physical abuse or neglect report did not significantly affect juveniles engaging in delinquent behaviors. Juveniles with or without a prior physical abuse or neglect report were equally likely to commit law violations; however, those without a prior physical abuse or neglect report were more likely to commit a status offense. No significant difference was found for the type of offense juveniles with or without a prior physical abuse or neglect report engaged in. A Mann-Whitney *U* test revealed that age was a significant factor in determining the frequency of delinquent behaviors committed, with older juveniles committing more law violations and status offenses. Gender and race/ethnicity also played a critical role in the type of offenses committed, with males and minority racial and ethnic groups committing more serious offenses. These findings fill the knowledge gaps in recognizing the impact maltreatment has on specific gender and racial and ethnic groups in relation to criminal offenses.

## Introduction

### Significance of the Study

- In 2019, nearly 700,000 children were abused in the United States (U.S.) (Child Abuse Statistics, 2020). In 2018, an estimated 678,000 children were victims of abuse and neglect (National Children's Alliance [NCA], 2020).
- In 2020, studies found that approximately 14% of all men in prison and 36% of women in prison in the U.S. were abused as children, twice the general population's frequency (NCA, 2020).
- Children who experience childhood abuse and neglect are approximately nine times more likely to become involved in criminal activity. As many as two-thirds of the population in treatment for drug abuse reported being abused or neglected as children (Child Abuse Statistics, 2020).

### Purpose of Research

The current study aims to create knowledge about childhood maltreatment with the onset of adverse effects such as delinquent behavior. The present study will seek to understand the relationship between traumatic childhood events such as physical abuse and neglect and delinquent behaviors of children and adolescents within the U.S.

### Research Questions

- What is the relationship between childhood physical abuse and neglect on delinquency among youth in the U.S.?
- What are the effects of demographic characteristics of a child or adolescent with or without physical abuse and neglect on delinquent behaviors?

### Hypotheses

- Children and adolescents who experienced childhood physical abuse or neglect would have higher rates of delinquency.
- Racial and ethnic minority and male identified children and adolescents would have higher rates of delinquency.

## Literature Review

### Conceptual Framework: Life Course Perspective

The life course perspective is a multilevel approach that simultaneously aims to understand the relevant contextual influences and the co-occurring individual, familial, and social determinants of one's life (Elder, 1994).

This perspective considers high-risk environments that could exacerbate delinquent behaviors such as trauma, substance use, and poverty. The life course perspective provides a foundation to understand the factors influencing the developmental trajectory for maltreated children and how they cope with the abuse.

### Childhood Maltreatment and Delinquency:

Children who were victims of physical maltreatment or abuse tend to have higher rates of externalizing behavioral problems. Research adds that substantiated maltreatment against children within the child welfare system has, on average, 47% higher delinquency rates relative to children having no documented incidents of abuse or neglect (Ryan & Testa, 2004).

### Childhood Maltreatment with Serious and Non-Serious Offenses:

Maltreated individuals are 4.22 times more likely to use drugs and 2.59 times more likely to engage in street crime versus never maltreated individuals (Ireland et al., 2002). Children who had a substantiated maltreatment report within a child welfare agency, it is estimated that at least 1 out of 9 individuals can be adjudicated for a violent offense (Mersky & Reynolds, 2007).

### Gaps and Limitations

- The measurement of delinquent behaviors is often generalized to a broad category of crime.
- Within past literature, the types of crime measured in the research studies were often not extensive.

## Methodology

### Research Design and Data Collections:

- The current study is a secondary analysis of the Missouri Juvenile Court Case Records, 1994.
- A juvenile justice officer from the Division of Youth Services collected information on all the juvenile referrals referred to the juvenile court from any of the 115 counties in Missouri.

### Sampling Method:

- The original data sample consisted of 77,467 juvenile referrals, ages 1-26 years old, referred to a juvenile court within the 115 counties in Missouri.
- The following criteria were utilized to determine inclusion and exclusion criteria for participants: a) juvenile referred to court for a delinquency offense, status offense, abuse or neglect, disposition review, permanency planning review, b) court investigation and/or intervention lasting 30 minutes or more.
- For this study, the subsample the researcher focused on included juvenile referrals who were 18 years old or younger which included 76,741 juvenile referrals.

### Measures:

- The independent variable **physical abuse and neglect** was measured based on the presence: 1 = Yes abuse/neglect or absence: 0 = No abuse/neglect for the juvenile.
- The dependent variable was delinquent behaviors. This was measured by the variables **a) law violations**: Never or 1 or higher, **b) status offenses**: Never or 1 or higher, and **c) type of offense**: Non-serious and Serious offense.
- The demographic variables the researcher examined included **age**: 18 years or younger, **gender**: Female/Male, and **race/ethnicity**: White, Black, Hispanic, American Indian, Oriental, and Other.

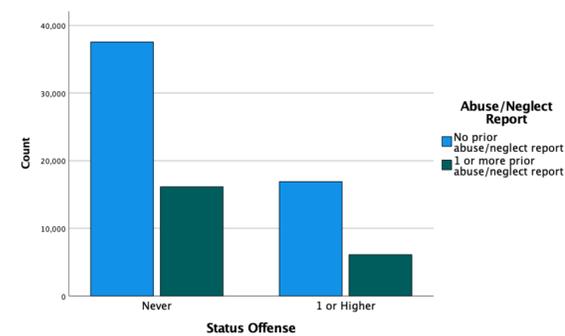
### Statistical Analysis:

- The Statistical Package for Social Sciences Version 27 was utilized for this study's descriptive and inferential analysis. A chi-square test and Mann-Whitney *U* test was used to examine the relationship among the variables of interest.

## Results

### Prior Abuse/Neglect and Delinquent Behaviors

- A **significant association was found** between the prior abuse/neglect report with the status offenses ( $\chi^2(1) = 76,729, p < 0.001$ ). The juvenile referrals with no prior abuse/neglect report were more likely to engage in one or more status offenses.
- An **insignificant association was found** between the prior abuse/neglect report with the law violations ( $\chi^2(1) = 76,739, p = .369$ ). The juvenile referrals with and without a prior abuse/neglect report were equally likely to engage in one or more law violations.



### Age and Delinquent Behaviors

- A **significant association was found** among the older juveniles who were more likely to engage in one or more law violations and status offenses than juveniles who were younger. Juveniles who never committed a law violation were significantly younger in age (*Mean rank* = 32,341.82) and juveniles who never committed a status offense were significantly younger in age (*Mean rank* = 36,386.65).

### Gender and Delinquent Behaviors

- Males were significantly more likely** to engage in one or more law violations ( $\chi^2(1)5206.43, p < 0.01$ ), whereas females were more represented in the one or more status offense category ( $\chi^2(1)1505.05, p < 0.01$ ).
- Females were significantly more likely** to engage in non-serious offenses, whereas males were more represented in the serious offense category ( $\chi^2(1) = 1824.01, p < 0.01$ ).

Delinquent Behaviors	Gender			
	Male		Female	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
<b>Law Violation**</b>				
Never	18569	35.8	15822	63.5
1 or higher	33251	64.2	9096	36.5
<b>Status Offense**</b>				
Never	38578	74.5	15134	60.7
1 or higher	13237	25.5	9779	39.3
<b>Type of Offense**</b>				
Non-Serious	27868	61.8	14199	79.6
Serious	17230	38.2	3644	20.4

\*\**p* < 0.01

### Race/Ethnicity and Delinquent Behaviors

- Juveniles whose race and ethnicity was identified as **Black were slightly more represented** in the one or more law violations category ( $\chi^2(5) = 674.07, p < 0.01$ ).
- Juveniles whose race and ethnicity was identified as Hispanic were more represented in the serious offense category ( $\chi^2(5) = 412.58, p < 0.01$ ).

## Discussion

### Significance of the Study

The inferential analysis revealed both significant and insignificant results related to the relationship between physical abuse and neglect and engaging in delinquent behaviors. The results demonstrated a **significant association** among juveniles without a substantiated prior abuse/neglect report and delinquency. Juveniles without a prior abuse/neglect report were slightly more likely to engage in one or more status offenses. The juvenile's age, gender, and race/ethnicity were significant in determining the severity and the frequency of delinquent behaviors. The results also demonstrated an **insignificant association** among juveniles with or without a prior abuse/neglect report and law violation offenses. Juveniles who had a substantiated prior abuse/neglect report and those who did not were equally likely to engage in zero and one or more law violations. The type of offense the juvenile with or without prior abuse/neglect engaged in was insignificant.

### Implications for Research and Practice

- Current literature points to an increased risk for delinquent behavior as an individual gets older. Social workers can be instrumental in developing policies that promote rehabilitative programs among juvenile offenders at the macro level.
- Current literature highlights the negative impacts of maltreatment on an individual's psychological wellbeing, positive relationships, and emotional regulation (Kim et al., 2009). At a mezzo level, social workers can be crucial in developing community programs that educate parents about the adverse effects of maltreatment.
- Identification of a racial and ethnic minority group was associated with higher rates of law violations and serious offenses. In the therapeutic or juvenile justice system settings, social workers can be instrumental in using trauma-informed practices to enhance juvenile offenders' overall wellbeing.

### Strengths and Limitations

#### Strength

- The researcher measured delinquency based on misdemeanors and law violations. Previous literature measured delinquency as a broad category that encompassed multiple forms of delinquent behaviors. Measuring delinquency based on non-serious and serious offenses contributes to understanding what types of delinquent behaviors juveniles engage in.

#### Limitations

- The study was based on juveniles from Missouri. The lack of inclusion for juveniles throughout the United States limits the current study results' generalizability and is important for future research.
- The study variable prior abuse/neglect was measured based on whether the abuse or neglect rose to court involvement and was found to be substantiated. This type of measurement prevented the participants who did experience any form of physical abuse or neglect from reporting their experience.
- The study tracked the participants over one year and did not follow the participants for longer. This limited the understanding of the impact of physical abuse and neglect with delinquent acts over time.

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