



Parenting Stress and Intergenerational Child Abuse Transmission Potential Amongst Female Offenders



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ABSTRACT

Child abuse is a serious and consequential public health issue. Research suggests that experiencing abuse in childhood heightens parenting stress and increases the risk for child abuse perpetuation. Women involved in the criminal justice system tend to experience high rates of maltreatment during childhood. Previous research has examined the relationship amongst female offender's child abuse history, parenting stress, and child abuse potential separately. However, no studies have examined the association between all three factors simultaneously with justice-involved women. The present study addressed this research gap using a sample of female offenders (N = 215) who have a child (or children). The participant's history of physical and sexual abuse measured by a simple "yes" or "no" question did not show a significant correlation with a potential for child abuse. However, the more intensive measure analyzing participant's childhood abuse history showed a positive relationship between a history of child abuse and child abuse potential. Additionally, a positive association was found between experiencing abuse in childhood and parenting stress. These findings contribute to the existing literature by providing additional support for the intergenerational transmission of child abuse hypothesis substantiated in previous studies. It highlights the risks for negative outcomes for both justice-involved women who have been abused and their children. Social workers can decrease the risk for intergenerational child abuse perpetuation amongst female offenders through targeted assessment, advocacy, and interventions.

INTRODUCTION

Significance of Study

No previous research has examined parenting stress and intergenerational child abuse transmission amongst female offenders. Since female offenders and their children are vulnerable populations, the current study addresses a critical research gap.

Purpose

To examine the relationship between maternal child abuse history, parenting stress, and child abuse potential amongst justice-involved women.

Research Questions

- Does having a history of child abuse contribute to parenting stress?
- Does having a history of child abuse increase the likelihood for child abuse perpetuation?

Hypothesis

- A history of child abuse will be positively associated with parenting stress.
- A history of child abuse will increase the likelihood of being investigated for child abuse.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Child Abuse History

On average, female offenders have experienced more abuse in childhood than individuals in the general population.

Intergenerational Transmission of Child Abuse

- Intergenerational transmission of child abuse occurs when parents who were abused in childhood subsequently neglect or abuse their own children.
- Though not all individuals who experience abuse in childhood go on to abuse their own children, a multitude of studies suggest that experiencing abuse in childhood increases the risk of child abuse perpetuation (Appleyard et al., 2011; Assink et al., 2018; Bartlett et al., 2017; Berlin et al., 2011; Thornberry et al., 2012; Yang et al., 2018).

Parenting Stress

- Research suggests parenting stress both derives from experiencing maltreatment in childhood (Pereira et al. 2012; Steele et al., 2016) and heightens the probability of child abuse perpetuation (Belsky, 1984; Miragoli et al., 2018)
- Several studies have found a positive association between a mother's history of child maltreatment or adverse childhood experiences and elevated parenting stress (Lange et al., 2019a; Pereira et al., 2012; Steele et al., 2016). No studies have analyzed the aforementioned factors amongst female offenders.

Social Learning Theory

Children learn to engage in behaviors that are modeled and reinforced by salient individuals (Bandura, 1971). Thus, individuals who are abused by their caregivers during childhood internalize and imitate abusive behaviors in parenthood.

Research and Knowledge Gap

- The majority of studies examining intergenerational child abuse patterns amongst women have used community-based samples.
- No previous studies have examined the association between child abuse history, parenting stress, and child abuse potential amongst female offenders.

METHODS

Research Design

- The current study is a secondary data analysis of the Probation/ Parole Officer Interactions with Women Offenders project.
- The parent study utilized a longitudinal design and mixed methods (self-report surveys and interviews) to collect data on female offenders' histories, needs, and outcomes. Data was collected for two years.

Sample

- Female offenders who had a felony, a history of substance use, and had been on probation or parole for at least three months.
- The current study utilized a subsample of 215 female offenders (53.4% of the original sample) who had a child (or children) aged 18 or younger. (Mean age= 33; 47. 5% White, 34.8% Black, 16.3% Multiracial and Hispanic, 2% unclear ethnicities) .

Measures

Child Abuse History

- Measured through 2 self-report measures:
 - Two "yes" or "no" questions about sexual and physical abuse experienced in childhood
 - A 19-item questionnaire that assessed methods and frequency of abuse experienced in childhood, scored on a 3-point Likert scale.

Parenting Stress

- Measured through a 12-item self-report questionnaire scored on a 3-point Likert scale

Child Abuse Risk

- Measured through a self-report "yes" or "no" question that asked if participants were ever investigated for abuse or neglect of a child by police, children's services, or the school system

RESULTS

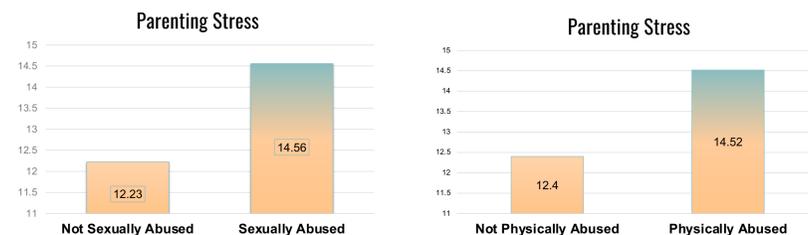
Parenting Stress

Independent samples t-tests Results

- The mean parenting stress of the physically abused participants ($M = 14.52, SD = 5.68$) was significantly higher than the mean parenting stress of the non-physically abused participants ($M = 12.40, SD = 5.86$)
- The mean parenting stress of the sexually abused participants ($M = 14.56, SD = 5.73$) was significantly higher than the mean parenting stress of the non-sexually abused participants ($M = 12.23, SD = 5.79$).

Spearman's rho Analysis

- A positive and statistically significant association was found between participant's childhood abuse experience and parenting stress, $r_s(195) = .305, p < .001$.



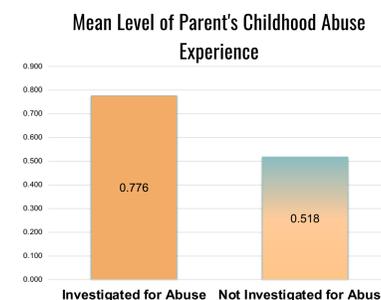
Childhood Abuse Experience

Chi Square Test

- Based on two chi-square tests, there was no significant relationship between the participant's history of physical abuse and sexual abuse in childhood and being investigated for child abuse ($\chi^2(1) = .901, p = .342$).

Independent Samples t-test

- The mean abuse experience of the participants who report that they have been investigated for child abuse ($M = .776, SD = .619$) was significantly higher than the mean abuse experience of the participants who report that they have not been investigated for child abuse ($M = .518, SD = .522$).



CONCLUSION

Summary of Findings

- Individuals who experienced more abuse in childhood were more likely to report they had been investigated for abusing their own offspring.
- Individuals who experienced more abuse in childhood had higher levels of parenting stress.
- The results support the original hypotheses that experiencing abuse in childhood increases the risk of heightened parenting stress and child abuse perpetuation amongst female offenders.



Implications and Future Directions

- Social work interventions should focus on decreasing stressors, identifying supports, and providing resources for female offenders and their children.
- Mandating targeted interventions and case management for mothers within the criminal justice system could help decrease the risk of intergenerational child abuse perpetuation for this vulnerable population.
- Future research should focus on identifying specific factors that cause parenting stress, interventions that alleviate parenting stress, and interventions that decrease the impact of abusive childhood experiences amongst female offenders.



Strengths and Limitations

- This study's limitations include: utilization of a cross-sectional design, relatively small sample size, and retrospective self-report measures for child abuse experience and child abuse potential.
- This study's strengths include: addressing a gap in the existing scientific literature, validating the need to provide intensive assessment and support to female offenders who have survived abusive childhoods, and contributing to the existing literature that identifies parenting stress and child abuse history as risk factors for intergenerational child abuse transmission.

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