



Examining the Relationship Between Gender, Childhood Maltreatment, and Internalizing and Externalizing Behavioral Problems Among Transitional Foster Youth

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Abstract

Childhood maltreatment is a significant social problem that harms the lives and functioning of many youth every day. Due to this issue, the present study aimed to examine the effect of child maltreatment on internalizing and externalizing behavioral problems among male and female transitional foster youth. Secondary data analysis was conducted using the data from a survey provided during an interview to a sample of transitional foster youth ($N=1,195$) who participated in the Multisite Evaluation of Foster Youth Programs (Chafee Independent Living Evaluation Project), 2001-2010, conducted by Mark Courtney and his colleagues. This study utilized a cross-sectional design and conducted four multiple linear regression analyses. Results indicate a significant positive relationship between childhood maltreatment and internalizing and externalizing behavioral problems among male and female transitional foster youth. The findings demonstrate the harmful impacts of childhood maltreatment amongst transitional foster youth and display the need for trauma-informed and preventative services to youth who experience maltreatment, including services that continue into adulthood.

Introduction

Significance of Study

- During 2019, approximately 3,746,000 reports were made regarding concerns of child maltreatment.
- Child maltreatment experiences are related to an increase in internalizing behavioral problems such as mental illness as well as externalizing behavioral problems such as substance abuse and violence.

Purpose of Research

This study aims to examine (1) The effect of child maltreatment on internalizing and externalizing behavioral problems among transitional foster youth and, (2) The differences between males and females in their experiences of these behavioral problems.

Research Questions

- What is the effect of child maltreatment on internalizing and externalizing behavioral problems among transitional foster youth?
- Are there differences between males and females in their experiences of these behavioral problems?

Research Hypotheses

1. Child maltreatment experiences will increase the likelihood of having internalizing and externalizing behavioral problems among transitional foster youth.
2. Females will be more likely to experience internalizing behavioral problems, whereas males will be more likely to experience externalizing behavioral problems.

Literature Review

- Various studies have shown that child maltreatment experiences resulted in a higher risk for developing various mental illnesses in adulthood, primarily seen through a diagnosis of depression (Kaufman et al., 2000).
- Victims of childhood maltreatment are at a greater risk of developing externalizing behavioral problems such as aggression, bullying, and delinquency.
- **Ecological Systems Theory:** Individuals are impacted by the many surrounding experiences in their environment, which therefore impacts their behaviors (Jonson-Reid, 1998).
- Lack of research looking at the lives of transitional foster youth and their experiences of child maltreatment, behavioral challenges, and whether these challenges carry into adulthood.
- Lack of research among transitional foster youth, specifically observing gender differences within this population.

Methods

Research Design and Data Collection Procedures

- The current study is a secondary analysis of the data from the Multisite Evaluation of Foster Youth Programs (Chafee Independent Living Evaluation Project).
- The Multisite Evaluation of Foster Youth Programs examined the various programs utilized within the John Chafee Foster Care Independence Program and their effectiveness in the lives of transitional foster youth.

Sample and Sampling Method

- Approximately 1,400 teenage participants were selected throughout various counties in the U.S. by their caseworkers or the court. Data was collected through an individual interview survey conducted most often in the participant's home.
- The current study included a sample of teenage transitional foster youth who had experienced childhood maltreatment ($N = 1,195$). The sample consisted of males ($n=407$) and females ($n=531$).

Measures

Child Maltreatment

- Measured by the MEFYP Victimization questionnaire.
- Participants were asked whether they have been victims of child maltreatment and responded to specific questions with nominal word scoring responses (1=Yes, 0=No, -2=DK (don't know), -1=RF (refuse to answer)).

Achenbach Youth Self Report

Internalizing

Anxious/Depressed (13 items)
Withdrawn/Depressed (7 items)
Somatic Complaints (10 items)

Externalizing

Rule-breaking Behavior (15 items)
Aggressive Behavior (17 items)

Results

Analysis of Female Transitional Foster Youth

- A series of multiple regression analyses tested the hypothesized relationship between childhood maltreatment and internalizing and externalizing behavioral problems. Sexual abuse and neglect were significantly and positively correlated with internalizing behavioral problems. Sexual abuse was also significantly and positively related to externalizing behavioral problems. Physical abuse was not significantly related to either behavioral problem.

Table 3
Results of Multiple Regression Analyses Predicting Internalizing and Externalizing Behavioral Problems Among Females

Variable	ANOVA	R ²	B	SE	Beta	t	Sig.
Internalizing Behavioral Problems							
F(4, 649) = 18.60, 0.10 p < .001							
Constant							
Childhood Sexual Abuse		3.80	0.74	0.21	5.16	<.001	
Childhood Physical Abuse		0.01	0.26	—	0.04	0.97	
Childhood Neglect		0.91	0.24	0.18	3.83	<.001	
Age		-0.13	0.28	-0.01	-0.46	0.64	
Externalizing Behavioral Problems							
F(4, 649) = 16.04, 0.09 p < .001							
Constant							
Childhood Sexual Abuse		3.13	0.66	0.19	4.74	<.001	
Childhood Physical Abuse		0.62	0.23	-0.13	2.70	—	
Childhood Neglect		0.27	0.21	0.06	1.27	0.21	
Age		0.48	0.25	-0.07	-1.91	0.06	

Analysis of Male Transitional Foster Youth

- Sexual abuse was significantly and positively related to both internalizing and externalizing behavioral problems. Physical abuse was significantly and positively related to both internalizing and externalizing behavioral problems. No significant relationship between neglect and internalizing or externalizing behavioral problems.

Table 4
Results of Multiple Regression Analyses Predicting Internalizing and Externalizing Behavioral Problems Among Males

Variable	ANOVA	R ²	B	SE	Beta	t	Sig.
Internalizing Behavioral Problems							
F(4, 497) = 9.04, p < .001							
Constant							
Childhood Sexual Abuse		2.03	0.97	0.94	2.09	0.037	
Childhood Physical Abuse		0.09	0.27	0.19	1.37	<.001	
Childhood Neglect		0.31	0.27	0.60	1.13	0.26	
Age		-0.11	0.26	-0.19	-0.43	0.67	
Externalizing Behavioral Problems							
F(4, 494) = 5.92, 0.05 p < .001							
Constant							
Childhood Sexual Abuse		2.20	1.01	0.30	2.18	0.03	
Childhood Physical Abuse		0.57	0.28	0.11	2.05	0.04	
Childhood Neglect		0.29	0.29	0.06	1.02	0.31	
Age		0.30	0.27	0.03	1.13	0.26	

Conclusion

Interpretation of Findings

- The significant positive relationship between child maltreatment experiences and internalizing and externalizing behavioral problems is consistent with findings in recent literature (McWey et al., 2010; Rousson et al., 2020).
- The current idea that externalizing behavioral problems are reported more among males than females is consistent with the study findings as males reported more externalizing behavioral problems, especially related to sexual and physical abuse, whereas females reported externalizing behavioral problems solely in relation to sexual abuse (McWey et al., 2010).
- The findings that males reported more externalizing behavioral problems in relation to physical and sexual abuse was consistent with current research (Petrenko et al., 2012).

Strengths and Limitations

- Strengths include: Evidence regarding the relationship between childhood maltreatment and reports of internalizing and externalizing behavioral problems among transitional foster youth. It provides significant findings regarding transitional foster youth to fill the gap among this population, as well as information regarding gender differences.
- Limitations include: A small sample size and geographic location may have affected the findings, which therefore cannot be generalized.

Implications for Research and Practice

- Social workers and practitioners can now provide more preventative and protective measures to better serve transitional foster youth.
- Practitioners can screen for these behavioral problems among transitional foster youth of all ages and both genders.
- Policies can be made to provide better trauma-informed screening to provide preventative supports to all youth in care as well as provide trauma-informed training to all individuals serving foster youth.
- Future research must further explore the lives of transitional foster youth and their experiences of childhood maltreatment, specifically looking at differences between males and females in their experiences throughout their lifetime.

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