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Child Abuse, Gender, and the Cycle of Violence

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Abstract

This study is a secondary data analysis comparing 877 subjects and 877 controls, focusing on childhood victimization and adult crime correlations. Subjects were individuals found to have been abused or neglected in caseloads of a large urban county in the Northwest United States for 17 years. Controls were matched to subjects based on socioeconomic factors and ethnicity. We find that subjects are more likely to be charged with a violent crime as an adult than are controls. The percentage of subjects charged with a violent crime is 8.8%, compared to 0.8% of the control group. The second hypothesis -- subjects of emotional, physical, or sexual abuse are more likely to commit violent crimes as an adult than are subjects who have only been victims of neglect or controls -- is also supported: 8.7% of subjects who were emotionally, physically, or sexually abused were charged with a violent crime as an adult, compared to 2.9% of the group that was not subject to abuse. The third hypothesis tested subjects whose abuse was perpetrated by a member of the same gender are more likely to commit a violent crime as an adult than those subjects whose abuse was not perpetrated by the same gender. It should be noted that the differences found by gender are not statistically significant. Implications of this study for understanding the cycle of violence are discussed.

Introduction

Every year in the United States, there are 2.9 million reported child abuse cases. Unfortunately for researchers, this number is often inaccurate due to the amount of underreporting due to fearful children and unsupportive parents. In addition, some reported cases are unsubstantiated suspicion. Child welfare advocates argue that suspected causes for child abuse are low education levels, low socioeconomic status, a parent involved in the child welfare system, and becoming involved with intimate partner violence. Both the gender of the perpetrator and victim are suspected of playing an important role in outcomes for child victims. However, this may not be the entire story. This study suggests that the cycle of violence viewed by sociologists and social workers may be more complex than simply modeling behavior or

feeling gendered trauma. The reciprocation of violence also may depend on the type of abuse experienced by the victim.

Literature Review

The literature surrounding child abuse does not adequately address whether or not the gender of the perpetrator affects the child's ability to cope and successfully develop into adulthood. However, the most important causal factor for an adult abuser is believed to be having experienced abuse as a child, hence the child abuse cycle. In recent years, the literature has focused on female offenders, their difference from male offenders, and the prominence of female offenders in child sexual abuse (CSA) crimes. Men, however, are more likely to commit CSA crimes, especially crimes that involve force and more violent sexual acts. The literature is also inconclusive on the benefits of medical intervention and therapy enrollment on successful child recovery from sexual abuse. Studies have mentioned that quick medical intervention allows for children to be treated and enrolled in trauma therapy to process the abuse and how these programs can be beneficial for children. However, the sociological and social work studies do not offer casual evidence to these claims, nor do they examine how these benefits aid recovering children. Nonetheless, there is reason to suspect that the gender of the perpetrator affects child outcomes, as well as the utilization of medical intervention and therapy services.

Although women are also found guilty of child abuse, their charges usually fall within the category of neglect rather than sexual abuse. Hassan et al. (2015) found that men made up 96.8% of CSA cases. The literature suggests that women made up anywhere from 1% to 21% of CSA cases nationwide (Burgess-Proctor, Comartin, & Kubiak, 2017; Peter, 2009). They also found that men are more likely to connect children with the idea of sex and be diagnosed as pedophiles than women, who were far less likely to make this connection.

Men are more likely to abuse children they are not biologically related to, especially step-children, nieces/nephews, or family friends (Burgess-Proctor, Comartin, & Kubiak, 2017). Men are known to groom young children into a trusting relationship, making it more difficult for children to recognize the behavior and report it to their parents. Women were found to abuse their biological children. However, this is related more so to neglect and emotional abuse. Women found guilty of sexual abuse often did so in the presence of another male perpetrator.

The literature has found that gender plays a role in child victimization. Girls have overwhelmingly been found more likely to be sexually abused (Burgess-Proctor, Comartin, & Kubiak, 2017; Hassan et al., 2015; McPherson, Scribano, & Stevens, 2012; Peter, 2009). Hassan, Gary, Killion, Lewin, and Totten (2015) found that boys are more likely to be sexually abused before the age of 6.5, and their likelihood decreases as they enter adolescence. The opposite was true for girls, who were likely to be abused before the age of 15. However, their likelihood increases after this point, as does the range of reported sexual acts. After the age of 15, girls report the use of digital penetration, oral sex, and sodomy in addition to penile-vaginal penetration. However, boys who men abused are less likely to report the abuse due to fear of homophobic comments or weakness.

The literature has concluded that so long as there is little risk of retraumatization, medical intervention and therapy enrollment offer positive outcomes for child abuse victims. Aparicio (2017) interviewed teenage mothers who stated that therapy was an essential tool for establishing communication and working through stress and trauma. They argued that therapy was a necessary tool in breaking the cycle of child abuse, especially for teenage mothers. In 2015, Zamir and Lavee found that women who were abused as children and able to recount the events and emotions of the abuse accurately were associated with positive adult development and

success. Despite this, a study done by McPherson, Scribano, and Stevens (2021) found that only 39% of sampled children who were referred to trauma treatment completed the program. This same study found that 87.1% of abused children felt safe after medical intervention, and 89.8% stated that they felt no desire to harm themselves or someone else physically. In this sample, 63% of cases were reported within 24 hours of the abuse, and 57% sought medical intervention within 12 hours of reporting. The literature also does not focus on how gender could affect outcomes for children abused by males versus females, regardless of the data available for gender differences in child victimization. Currently, there are only surface-level inquiries about these factors.

Several other factors contribute to the cycle of child abuse that the literature has discussed. A significant indicator of child abuse is parental childhood involvement in child protective services. McPherson, Scribano and Stevens found that 42% had parental involvement in CPS within the sample of cases studied. Burgess-Proctor, Comartin, and Kubiak found in their 2017 study that of perpetrators convicted of CSA crimes, 76.9% of women and 64% of men had a "long history" of CPS involvement as children. Aparicio found that teen mothers in foster care were 2 or 3 times more likely to be reported to child protective services and that 39% of children born to teenage mothers in foster care had at least one CPS investigation. Hassan et al. (2015) argue that abuse causes lasting effects on a child's emotional, social, and cognitive development that lead to them becoming criminal offenders in adulthood.

Researchers have found that most child abuse cases are perpetrated by a former child abuse victim, who often have not received adequate treatment. According to the 2017 study by Burgess-Proctor and colleagues, Forty-four percent of perpetrators showed severe mental illness symptoms. This study will investigate whether the gender of the perpetrator and victim increases

the likelihood of the victim becoming an offender in adulthood and general exploration of the cycle of abuse. The hypotheses tested include -- 1. Subjects are more likely to commit violent crimes as an adult than are controls, 2. Subjects of emotional, physical, or sexual abuse are more likely to commit violence as an adult than are subjects who have only been victims of neglect or controls, and 3. Subjects whose abuse was perpetrated by a member of the same gender are more likely to commit violence as an adult than those subjects whose abuse was perpetrated by the opposite gender.

Methods

For this study, we use data from the project titled “Childhood Victimization and Delinquency, Adult Criminality, and Violent Criminal Behavior in a Large Urban County in the Northwest United States, 1980–1997” (English and Widom 2003). This was the only longitudinal dataset on child abuse we could find that included the gender of the perpetrator(s) and whether the subject committed violence as an adult. In addition, this dataset included a control group that was matched to the individuals in the test group on age, gender, ethnicity, and approximate socioeconomic status. The test group consisted of children for whom dependency petitions were filed between 1980 and 1984, which means that the allegations of abuse were determined to be substantiated by human services. The final sample consisted of 877 dependency subjects, and 877 controls pulled from other records.

Because we are primarily interested in examining the effect of gender relations on the cycle of violence, the dependent variable in this study is whether the subject is convicted of a violent crime as an adult. This was the closest proxy for the internalization of violent behavior we could find in a dataset that also included the gender of the perpetrator. Independent variables include gender of the subject, abuse status, and perpetrators' gender. Abuse status refers to

whether the subject was found to have been abused emotionally, physically or sexually, versus neglect only, versus no finding of abuse. Perpetrators' gender includes female-only, male-only, and both. The gender of up to two perpetrators was recorded for each case of abuse, and we combined those that had one female abuser with two female abusers, and so on, to create this variable. To examine the intersection of the gender of the perpetrator(s) and the gender of the subject, we made the variable "Gender Combination" for those subjects subjected to emotional, physical, or sexual abuse, excluding those who were neglected only, yielding eight different possibilities: Male Child and Male Perpetrator, Male Child and Female Perpetrator, Female Child and Female Perpetrator, Female Child and Male Perpetrator, Perpetrators of Different Genders, No Abuse or Neglect, Other Abuse Classification, and Neglect Only. The Other Abuse Classification included subjects who were found to have been abused in a way other than those previously listed, which included abandonment, educational maltreatment, or moral maltreatment. These categories were further collapsed for specific analyses.

Cross-tabulations with chi-square statistics were used to test the hypotheses. The most significant limitation of our analysis is the small number of cases charged with a violent crime as an adult ($n=84$). However, because the sample consisted of subjects who were matched on variables that were influential on violent crime, such as socioeconomic status, further statistical control was deemed unnecessary. Descriptive statistics are provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Subjects and Controls

	<i>CPS Subjects</i> <i>n (%)</i>	<i>Controls</i> <i>n (%)</i>	<i>Total</i> <i>n (%)</i>
Gender			
<i>Male</i>	415 (47.3%)	415 (47.3%)	830 (47.3%)
<i>Female</i>	462 (52.7%)	462 (52.7%)	924 (52.7%)
Ethnicity			
<i>Native American</i>	51 (5.8%)	51 (5.8%)	102 (5.8%)
<i>Black</i>	194 (22.1%)	194 (22.1%)	388 (22.1%)
<i>Asian American</i>	4 (0.5%)	4 (0.5%)	8 (0.5%)
<i>American Pacific Islander</i>	11 (1.3%)	11 (1.3%)	22 (1.3%)
<i>White</i>	617 (70.4%)	617 (70.4%)	1234 (70.4%)
Violent Crime as Adult			
<i>Yes</i>	77 (8.8%)	7 (0.8%)	84 (4.8%)
<i>No</i>	800 (91.2%)	870 (99.2%)	1670 (95.2%)
Perp Gender			
Both F	88 (10.0%)	0 (0.0%)	88 (5.0%)
Both M	64 (7.3%)	0 (0.0%)	64 (3.6%)
F Only	101 (11.5%)	0 (0.0%)	101 (5.8%)
M Only	120 (13.7%)	0 (0.0%)	120 (6.8%)
F & M	159 (18.1%)	0 (0.0%)	159 (9.1%)
Abuse and Neglect			
Neglect Only	118 (13.5%)	0 (0.0%)	118 (6.7%)
Emotional, Physical, Sexual	576 (65.7%)	0 (0.0%)	576 (32.8%)
	<i>CPS Subjects</i>	<i>Controls</i>	<i>Total</i>
Variable	Mean (standard deviation)	Mean (standard deviation)	
Residential Median Income	20,822 (5924)	20,836 (5876)	20,829 (5898)

Results

Table 2 corresponds to Hypothesis 1: Subjects are more likely to commit violent crimes as an adult than are controls. The null hypothesis is rejected. Not only were subjects more likely to be charged with a violent crime as an adult than were controls, but we see a difference for those who suffered active abuse. Hypothesis 2, subjects of emotional, physical, or sexual abuse are more likely to commit violence as an adult than are subjects who have only been victims of neglect or controls, is also supported by the results. See Table 3. Children who experienced physical, emotional, or sexual abuse are approximately three times more likely to be charged with a violent crime in adulthood than children who did not experience such abuse. However, the data also shows that most abused children are not charged with committing violent crimes as adults. Of the 576 children recorded as experiencing abuse, only 50 were charged as adults. This percentage is greater than children who were not abused—but were charged with violent crimes as adults (8.7% compared to 2.9% respectively), and the difference is statistically significant at the .001 level. The category of non-abused does include individuals who were identified as having suffered from neglect but not from any emotional, physical, or sexual abuse, in addition to controls who were never child protective services cases at all.

Table 2: Violent Crime Convictions by Subjects and Controls

	<i>Subject</i>	<i>Control</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>No Violent Crime</i>	800 (91.2%)	870 (99.2%)	1670 (95.2%)
<i>Violent Crime</i>	77 (8.8%)	7 (0.8%)	84 (4.8%)
<i>Total</i>	877 (100.0%)	877 (100.0%)	1754 (100.0%)

$\alpha = <.001, \chi^2 = 61.267$

Table 3: Violent Crime as Adult by Physical, Emotional, or Sexual Abuse

	<i>Not Abused</i>	<i>Abused</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>No Violent Crime</i>	1144 (97.1%)	526 (91.3%)	1670 (95.2%)
<i>Violent Crime</i>	34 (2.9%)	50 (8.7%)	84 (4.8%)
<i>Total</i>	1178 (100.0%)	576 (100.0%)	1754 (100.0%)

$\alpha = <.001, \chi^2 = 28.484$

The following few tables relate to Hypothesis 3: Subjects whose abuse was perpetrated by a member of the same gender are more likely to commit violence as an adult than those subjects whose abuse was perpetrated by the opposite gender. The null hypothesis is retained, however. None of the differences by gender of the perpetrator are statistically significant.

Table 4: Violent Crime by Gender Combination for Male Children

	<i>Male Child/Male Perp</i>	<i>Male Child/Female Perp</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>No Violent Crime</i>	52 (81.3%)	99 (82.5%)	151 (82.1%)
<i>Violent Crime</i>	12 (18.8%)	21 (17.5%)	33 (17.9%)
<i>Total</i>	64 (100.0%)	120 (100.0%)	184 (100.0%)

$\alpha = 0.833, \chi^2 = 0.044$

Table 5: Violent Crime by Gender Combination for Female Children

	<i>Female Child/Female Perp</i>	<i>Female Child/Male Perp</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>No Violent Crime</i>	84 (95.5%)	97 (96.0%)	181 (95.8%)
<i>Violent Crime</i>	4 (4.5%)	4 (4.0%)	8 (4.2%)
<i>Total</i>	88 (100.0%)	101 (100.0%)	189 (100.0%)

$\alpha = 0.842, \chi^2 = 0.040$

In examining the gender of the perpetrator, we found interesting discrepancies in terms of the type of abuse or neglect the child suffered. For nonsexual abuse, women acting alone account for 57% of abuse. Women perpetrated fifty percent of physical abuse 75% of neglect without additional abuse. For these categories, men perpetrated 43% of the physical abuse cases and only 13% of the neglect cases. There are few counts for perpetrators of both genders, which account for 6% of physical abuse, and 11% of neglect. For sexual abuse only, 70% is perpetrated by men and 23% by women. We also ran a cross-tabulation of adult violence by victim gender and type of abuse. This table shows a difference in effects by victim gender. Physical abuse for girl victims correlated with a higher chance of being convicted of a violent crime as an adult than other forms of abuse. Physical abuse for boys, however, did not reflect this finding. The cross-tabulation also indicates that victims of sexual abuse are less likely to be convicted of a violent crime as an adult when compared to victims of other types of abuse and children who were not abused.

Table 6: Any Violent Crime as an Adult by Physical, Emotional, or Sexual Abuse

		<i>Not Abused</i>	<i>Abused</i>	<i>Total</i>	
<i>Any Violent Crime</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Count</i>	1144	526	1670
		<i>% within Physical, Emotional or Sexual Abuse</i>	97.1%	91.3%	95.2%
	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Count</i>	34	50	84
		<i>% within Physical, Emotional or Sexual Abuse</i>	2.9%	8.7%	4.8%
<i>Total</i>	<i>Count</i>	1178	576	1754	
	<i>% within Physical, Emotional or Sexual Abuse</i>	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

Table 7: Any Violent Crime as an Adult by Gender, Physical Abuse vs Other

<i>Gender of Victim</i>			<i>Physical Abuse</i>	<i>Other</i>	<i>Total</i>	
<i>Female</i>	<i>Any Violent Crime as Adult</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Count</i>	31	407	438
			<i>% within physical abuse vs other</i>	91.2%	97.8%	97.3%
			<i>% of Total</i>	6.9%	90.4%	97.3%
		<i>Yes</i>	<i>Count</i>	3	9	12
			<i>% within physical abuse vs other</i>	8.8%	2.2%	2.7%
			<i>% of Total</i>	0.7%	2.0%	2.7%
	<i>Total</i>	<i>Count</i>	34	416	450	
		<i>% within physical abuse vs other</i>	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	
		<i>% of Total</i>	7.6%	92.4%	100.0%	
<i>Male</i>	<i>Any Violent Crime as Adult</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Count</i>	36	311	347
			<i>% within physical abuse vs other</i>	85.7%	84.5%	84.6%
			<i>% of Total</i>	8.8%	75.9%	84.6%
		<i>Yes</i>	<i>Count</i>	6	57	63
			<i>% within physical abuse vs other</i>	14.3%	15.5%	15.4%
			<i>% of Total</i>	1.5%	13.9%	15.4%
	<i>Total</i>	<i>Count</i>	42	368	410	
		<i>% within physical abuse vs other</i>	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	
		<i>% of Total</i>	10.2%	89.8%	100.0%	
<i>Total</i>	<i>Any Violent Crime as Adult</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Count</i>	67	718	785
			<i>% within physical abuse vs other</i>	88.2%	91.6%	91.3%
			<i>% of Total</i>	7.8%	83.5%	91.3%
		<i>Yes</i>	<i>Count</i>	9	66	75
			<i>% within physical abuse vs other</i>	11.8%	8.4%	8.7%
			<i>% of Total</i>	1.0%	7.7%	8.7%
	<i>Total</i>	<i>Count</i>	76	784	860	
		<i>% within physical abuse vs other</i>	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	
		<i>% of Total</i>	8.8%	91.2%	100.0%	

Table 8: Presence of Sexual Abuse by Gender

		<i>Perpetrator Gender</i>			<i>Total</i>	
		<i>Female</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Not Applicable</i>		
<i>Presence of Sexual Abuse</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>Count</i>	380	148	136	664
		<i>% within sexual abuse yes/no</i>	57.2%	22.3%	20.5%	100.0%
		<i>% within perp gender</i>	88.6%	50.0%	90.7%	75.9%
		<i>% of Total</i>	43.4%	16.9%	15.5%	75.9%
	<i>1</i>	<i>Count</i>	49	148	14	211
		<i>% within sexual abuse yes/no</i>	23.2%	70.1%	6.6%	100.0%
	<i>% within perp gender</i>	11.4%	50.0%	9.3%	24.1%	
	<i>% of Total</i>	5.6%	16.9%	1.6%	24.1%	
<i>Total</i>		<i>Count</i>	429	296	150	875
		<i>% within sexual abuse yes/no</i>	49.0%	33.8%	17.1%	100.0%
		<i>% within perp gender</i>	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
		<i>% of Total</i>	49.0%	33.8%	17.1%	100.0%

Discussion

There is some evidence indicating that the cycle of violence is affected by gender; however, the results of this study were unexpected, as only two of the three hypotheses were supported. Hypothesis one was supported in that subjects who were abused or neglected were more likely than controls to be convicted of a violent crime as an adult. It should be noted that most abused children were not found to be convicted of a violent crime. Only 50 of the 576 reported abused children were charged as adults. However, this percentage is higher than the controls. Victims who experienced physical, emotional, or sexual abuse were especially likely to

be charged with a violent crime. This study also supported the second hypothesis. Subjects who reported experiencing physical, emotional, or sexual abuse were three times more likely than controls to be charged with a violent offense. The third hypothesis was rejected as gender does not play a significant role in the abuse outcomes for subjects. It does, however, play a role in the types of abuse the different genders perpetrate. More active abuse (i.e., physical, emotional, or sexual abuse) increases the likelihood of being charged with a violent crime than in cases of only neglect. While cases of neglect call for swift and decisive action on the part of the authorities, given the fatal consequences of not addressing neglect, cases of active abuse should involve long-term care of the victim.

Women are more likely to be found guilty of neglect than men, possibly due to their primary caregiver role for children in their household. Often, these cases are of single mothers who do not intentionally neglect their children. In this case, the utilization of services could significantly improve the outcome for the subjects. Men can easily escape childrearing obligations, while women are stuck taking care of children and providing for their families. When women are found guilty of child maltreatment (be it abuse or neglect), it is often viewed as less acceptable than men, as women are expected to play a nurturing role in their children's lives. This study also found that boy subjects are less affected by physical violence than girl subjects. Girls who experience physical violence are the most likely to be charged with violent crimes in adulthood. Boys may not be as affected due to the desensitization to violence which mass media presents to them, or the idealized notion of hypermasculinity. Both of which are ingrained in boys' socialization from a young age. The lower likelihood of violent crime for sexual abuse victims than for nonsexual physical and/or emotional abuse may be due to a greater probability of therapeutic intervention or how violence against the self is internalized in cases of sexual

victimization. Future research is needed to confirm and examine this finding further. Having an abuser of the same sex does not influence the likelihood of being charged with a violent crime as an adult. This suggests that children are not simply internalizing or accepting abusive behavior modeled to them as normal in straightforwardly gendered ways. Nonetheless, males are more likely to be charged with violent crimes than females.

This study was fairly limited, as is common with a secondary analysis study. One major limitation was finding a data set that contained most of the variables we were searching for and looking at these variables over an extended period. The sample size from this data set is relatively small. However, we were able to find statistically significant relationships as the abuse category is broken into subcategories such as types of abuse and neglect, the number of subjects decreases. The sample size for sexual abuse is minimal. The data set was extremely useful in having controls that matched the subjects' ethnicity and socioeconomic background, two variables that quickly could become confounding due to the nature of this study.

Gender may play a different role in the effects of child abuse. Further research is required to understand these dynamics better. However, surface-level gender comparisons offer little correlation. Findings suggest that the cycle of abuse is not as simple as modeling behavior and passively following a life of violence. While arguably the essential players in many children's lives, parents are not the only socializers. We all play a role in the gendered socialization of violence, and the amount of normalized violence children are exposed to from a young age.

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