

A prospective, longitudinal study of risk factors for the early onset of delinquency among maltreated youth

Translating research to practice may be difficult, yet a better understanding of current research is necessary to ensure child welfare workers engage in best practices when working with children and families. The Minn-Link Discussion Guide is designed to help facilitate thoughtful discussions about the information presented in the research brief in order to inform practice and enhance discussion surrounding meaningful issues.

In this issue, we explored risks for the early involvement of maltreated youth in the juvenile justice system. In particular, we were interested in the proportion of maltreated youth crossing over to the juvenile justice system by age 14 and factors that predict their involvement in delinquency. Overall, approximately 7% of maltreated 3rd graders became involved in the juvenile justice system over the 6-year study period. Findings indicated that gender (male), belonging to particular racial minority groups (Black, Native American, and Hispanic), diagnoses of emotional/behavioral disabilities, receiving an out-of-school suspension, and experiencing more than three previous maltreatment incidents were significant predictors of delinquency for maltreated youth.

Discussion on Practice Implications

1. This study identified factors that place maltreated youth at highest risk for early involvement in the juvenile justice system. The risk factors include gender (male), belonging to particular racial minority groups (Black, Native American, and Hispanic), diagnoses of emotional/behavioral disabilities, receiving an out-of-school suspension, and experiencing more than three previous maltreatment incidents. Are these findings consistent with your experience with those youth? How would you interpret these findings given your practice context?
2. Are there additional risk factors you think that are important to explaining why maltreated youth become involved in delinquency, especially at relatively young ages? Are there any protective factors you have observed that can interrupt the pathways from maltreatment to delinquency?
3. What are the most important programs and policies you would like to see put into place in order to prevent maltreated youth from becoming involved in the juvenile justice system?

Discussion on Agency- & System-Level Changes

1. Existing interventions tend to focus on maltreated youth after they became involved in the juvenile justice system. Given the additional risks posed by juvenile justice system involvement to the development of these already vulnerable youth, such as exposure to delinquent peers and stigmatization, it is important to develop preventive interventions that identify maltreated youth at highest risk for delinquency. The services can be directed towards these youth to better meet their developmental needs. What preventive interventions do you have in your jurisdiction? What resources, policies, or shifts in practice might help you develop or improve preventive interventions for those youth?
2. Identifying maltreated youth who become involved with the juvenile justice system can be challenging. It requires integrated information systems and strong communication between child welfare and juvenile justice systems. What would collaborative actions between the systems look like for the immediate identification of maltreated youth who are involved in the juvenile justice system in your jurisdiction?
3. Maltreated youth are a diverse group of individuals with varying strengths, challenges and interests. In addition, youth with maltreatment histories are vulnerable to stigmatization, e.g., due to their out-of-home placements and/or family challenges such as substance abuse, poverty. The authors suggest that preventive interventions be individualized and non-stigmatizing. To what extent might programs in your jurisdictions unintentionally stigmatize crossover youth? How might stigmatization of those youth be minimized?