

Life Course Effects of Trauma for Adolescent Offenders

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Summary Research indicates that girls' present unique challenges to the juvenile justice system, stemming in part from the fact that the system was originally organized to respond to the needs of boys. As the issue of female delinquency has gained increased national attention, developments in research, theory, and appropriate programming have slowly followed. This presentation will show the complexity of female offenders and demonstrate why a more comprehensive continuum of care is needed to address their needs. Data presented will include retrospective data from women under criminal justice supervision including family background, parenting history, sexual/physical abuse histories, drug use, criminal histories, and mental health issues. Elements of gender-responsive services are also overviewed.

Review of prior/other current research on your topic: Critical events impacting the lives of girls and women under criminal justice supervision are consistent in the literature and include childhood trauma and abuse, mental illness, economic and social marginality, homelessness, and destructive relationships. In fact, when childhood abuse and household dysfunction are considered, women with such histories become involved with drugs and crime significantly earlier than boys with similar histories and girls without such histories.

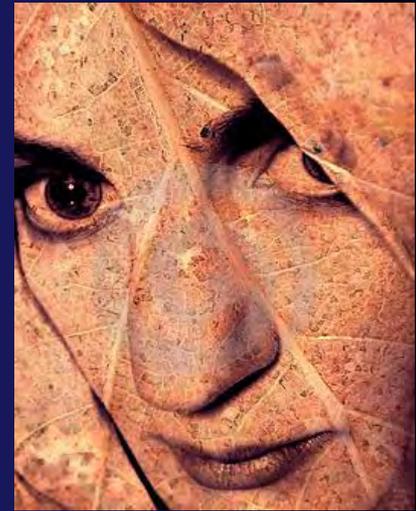
Data/methods: Extensive retrospective interview data were collected from over 4,800 women under criminal justice supervision (in prison, on parole/probation, or under community supervision).

Findings: Results from the face to face interviews indicated that women in the criminal justice system came from highly dysfunctional families with histories of mental illness, suicide, violence, and substance use. When trajectories of substance use and crime were assessed among the women, their patterns primarily revolved around interpersonal relationships starting in adolescence. The distributions of demographics from these samples consistently revealed histories of abuse and trauma, mental and physical health problems, relational conflicts, and economic marginality. These findings are directly relevant to the treatment needs of substance-using girls and the design of criminal justice and treatment interventions. The consistent finding that women offenders report a high prevalence of childhood abuse led the investigators to further assess the long-term impact of such trauma. The results of the expanded analyses showed that greater exposure to childhood traumatic events significantly increased the likelihood of mental and physical health-related outcomes in adolescence and adulthood.

Discussion/Policy Implications: All youth-serving systems—juvenile justice, child welfare, mental health, education, and communities need to collaborate to create gender-responsive programs for females involved with or at risk of involvement in the juvenile justice system. The finding that many behavioral problems among women offenders may have their origins in childhood events indicates the need for early prevention and intervention initiatives for girls. Nurse home-visits for at-risk mothers and children, and adolescent treatment programs for girls focused on trauma and abuse could help reduce the incidence of child abuse across this country, as well as the lifelong impact as a result of such abuse. Decreasing the number of females entering the juvenile justice system is a worthwhile goal. However, a single system approach is not enough. Multi-agency collaborations with a united vision are needed to enable young women to develop productively and successfully.

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Life Course Effects of Trauma for Female Juvenile Offenders



*“Victimization...physical, sexual, and emotional
is the first step along females’ pathways into the juvenile
justice system.”*

-Journal of the OJJDP Investing in Girls: A 21st Century Strategy

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Integrated Substance Abuse Programs



Girls Differ From Boys

As Women Differ From Men

- Many are status offenders or have minor offenses (running away or truancy)
 - High rates of physical and sexual abuse
 - Multiple physical and mental health needs (cutting, burning, eating disorders, suicide ideation)
 - May be pregnant or parenting
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- Household dysfunction (domestic violence, drugs)
 - Racially and culturally diverse
 - Struggle academically or have dropped out
 - *Resilient*

Retrospective Analyses of Women in Prison

Literature indicates, 60 - 90% of female prisoners report histories of trauma and abuse in childhood

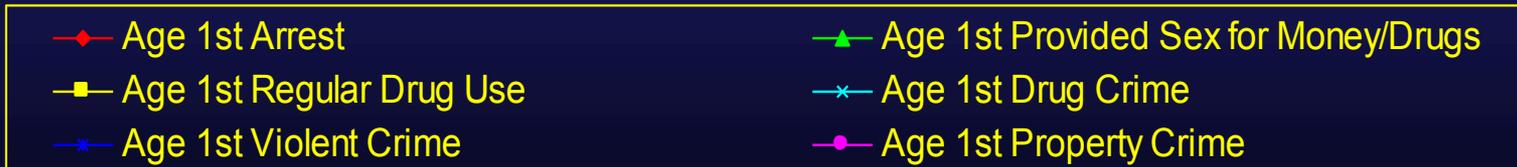
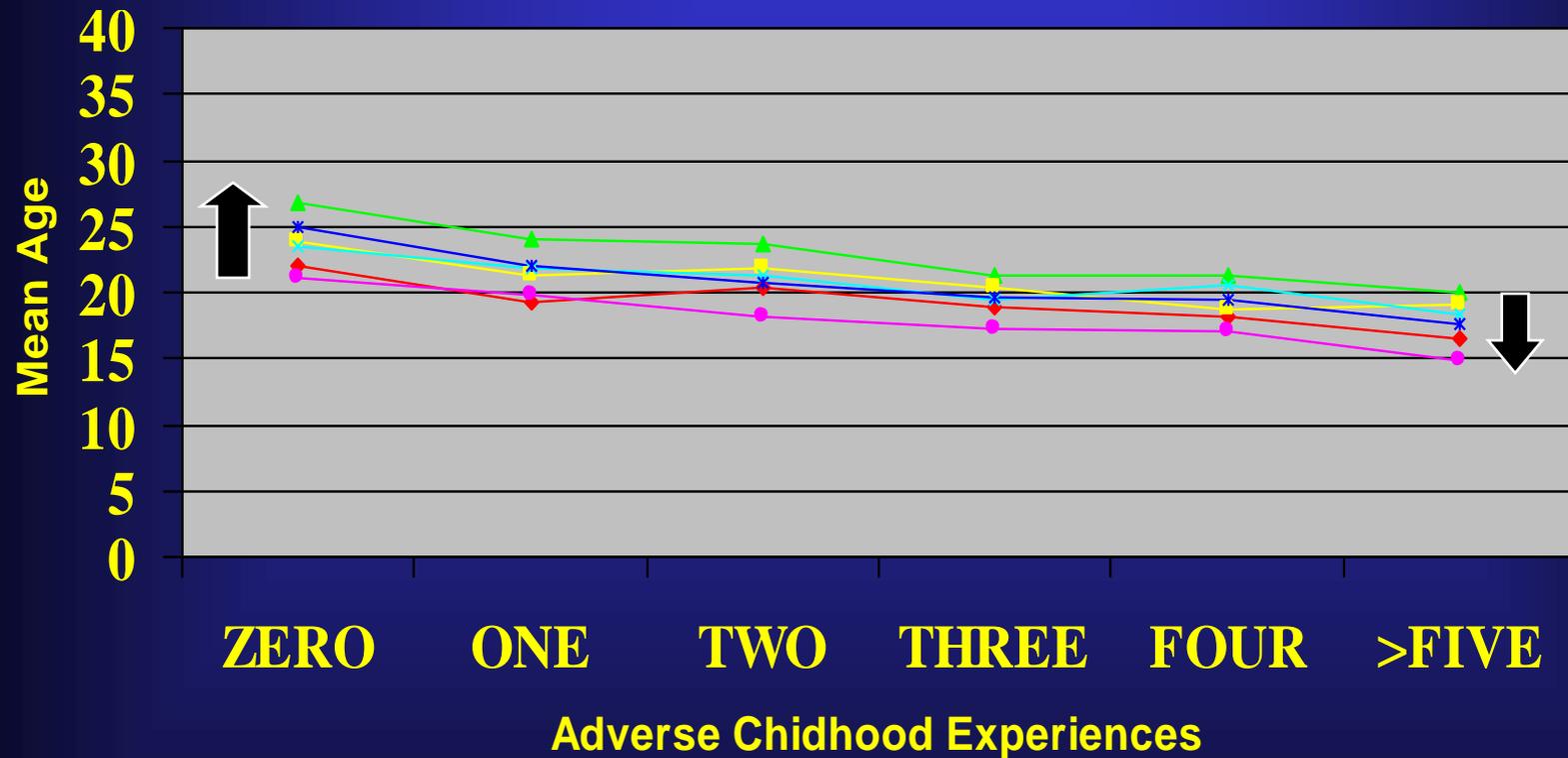
- Sexual/Physical abuse by someone known to them
- Sexual/Physical abuse by stranger
- Emotional abuse and neglect

The risk of physical and sexual abuse continues to be higher for females than for males throughout the lifespan

- Early ages, boys and girls are equally likely to be abused
- Abuse for girls continues throughout adolescence and as an adult
- Abuse for girls is predominantly from interpersonal relationships

✓70-90% of girls in juvenile justice system have a history of victimization (emotional, physical, and/or sexual abuse)

Greater Exposure to Abuse Leads to Earlier Involvement in Drugs & Crime (N=491)



Childhood Trauma Linked with Poor Mental/Physical Health

Histories of childhood trauma often linked to:

- Personality Disorders, Depression, PTSD, Panic Disorders, Eating Disorders
- Anemia, hepatitis, toxemia, hypertension, diabetes, & asthma
- Gynecological problems, eating disorders
- Substance abuse disorders



Theoretical Developments: The Relational Model

- Recognizes the different ways in which women and men develop psychologically.
- Recognizes that healthy connections with other people are fundamental to women's psychological well-being.
- *Gender-Responsiveness* – guided by relational model
- *Trauma-Informed Services* – acknowledge violence/abuse against females

Existing Research is Sparse



- No evidenced-based programs exist for girls
- Treatment services that address girl's specific needs may improve:
 - ❑ retention
 - ❑ Long-term outcomes
 - ❑ cost-benefits (breaking the intergenerational cycle of abuse)
- Research is in very early stages and in need of rigorous exploration and replication

Key Recommendations

- ❖ Interagency Collaborations
 - Social service partners
 - Child protective services
 - Juvenile Justice System
 - Community partners
- ❖ Early prevention/intervention
- ❖ Gender-Responsive/Trauma- Informed Services
- ❖ Collaboration with research institutions