

The long-term consequences of child abuse and neglect in men

Abstract

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Research indicates that the annual incidence of child maltreatment is around 10% and that more than one-quarter of children have, at least indirectly, experienced some form of violence.

Prospective studies find that in high-income countries like the United States there are moderate correlations between childhood maltreatment and low educational achievement, low skilled employment, depression, suicide attempts, and alcohol problems, as well as strong correlations with obesity, behavior problems in childhood and adolescence, and criminal behavior. Despite the high costs of child abuse and neglect—both direct and indirect—and decades of research and public health, justice, and social service investment in prevention and intervention, child maltreatment persists and affects large numbers of children each year.

While there is an established body of research examining the causes and long-term consequences of childhood abuse and neglect, there remains a gap in understanding the unique consequences of childhood abuse and neglect for boys and men. This gap is surprising given that the base rates of specific behaviors and outcomes are known to differ in men and women. Even the most basic outcome variables which might be of interest in considering the long-term consequences of child abuse and neglect—e.g., alcohol and drug use and abuse, criminal activity, psychopathology, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), obesity, physical health outcomes, and cognitive function—are known to have different base rates in men and women. Despite this, the causes of sex differences, particularly in psychopathology, are poorly understood.

The current study investigates the long-term consequences of child abuse and neglect in men. In particular, the study examines outcomes in the following domains: mental health and internalizing and externalizing psychopathology; criminal arrest; romantic, platonic, and sexual

relationships; self-esteem; locus of control; and educational achievement. A review of empirical findings on the male gender role and long-term consequences of child abuse and neglect specifically in men and boys is followed by testing of several hypotheses related to the potential interaction between child abuse and neglect outcomes and male sex. The analysis uses data from Widom's specialized cohort design study in which abused and neglected children were matched with non-abused and non-neglected children and followed prospectively into adulthood. The study examines the men from the follow-up sample of individuals interviewed from 1989 through 1995 (N = 614). The overall sample included 338 men in the abuse and neglect group matched with 276 controls with a mean age of 29 years.

Key findings indicate that men with a history of abuse and neglect have at least as great a risk in young adulthood for internalizing behavior as externalizing behavior, are at increased risk for poor educational attainment, have lower self-esteem, and report lower satisfaction with romantic relationships. The findings are broken down not only by group (abuse and neglect versus control), but by type of abuse and neglect, which is a significant predictor for some outcomes. Implications of the findings are discussed and future directions identified.

Keywords: child abuse and neglect, consequences, male, gender, masculinity