

A Review on Relationship of Childhood Trauma with Offending Behaviour

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Researches indicate interlink between traumatic experiences in childhood and offending behaviour in later stages of life. Further findings revealed that there was high significance of a specific type of trauma leading to criminality in convicted adults. Childhood trauma can be one of the major contributing factors in offending behaviour among prison population. This review report is conducted to analyze and understand the impact of childhood trauma on an individual. Systematic review of the different researches conducted on the association of childhood trauma with offending behaviour revealed that those who were victims of childhood trauma were convicted for different crimes in adulthood. Possible explanations for the obtained results will be discussed in the light of available supportive literature.

Keywords: *childhood trauma, offending behaviour*

Childhood trauma, which includes abuse and neglect is an important social issue and has long-term impact on the victims. Several research studies have shown an interlink between childhood trauma and offending behaviour. Childhood trauma can be physical, emotional, sexual abuse, neglect, exposure to domestic violence and so on. These traumas, when observed with the environment the child was raised in, and the background of the family play a vital role. Studies have shown that those who were victims of abuse and who witnessed domestic violence, went on to become the perpetrator and were at high risk of offending in their later stages of adulthood (Miley, L. N et al, 2020).

The systematic review will begin by defining childhood trauma and various types of traumas, reviewing different articles related to trauma and its relation to offending behaviour, methods used in various articles, discussion and limitations. The main objectives of this review article are to understand the impact of various childhood maltreatment through previous empirical studies.

Definition

According to American Psychological Association, trauma is defined as an emotional response to a disturbing or life-threatening event such as accident, abuse or rape. Trauma can have a long-term reaction in an individual's life. By the age of six, it is reported that more than two thirds of children have experienced trauma.

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These traumatic events can have a lasting effect in a person's personality and life. A traumatic event includes physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, emotional abuse, witnessing domestic violence, accidents, violence, suicides and many other events. These traumas can have a negative impact on an individual's life which can affect their interpersonal relationships, peer engagement and can also engage in violence in later stages of life. In a study conducted by Boswell (1996) revealed that about 75% of the respondents were victims of child abuse themselves.

Types of maltreatment

Physical, emotional and sexual abuse, neglect is some of the types of childhood trauma. A study conducted in 13 states in India, reported that 53% of children were victims of child sexual abuse, 69% of them were reported to be victims of physical abuse out of which 89% overall perpetrators were parents. Various research studies state that childhood maltreatment doubles the chances of a child engaging in criminal activity or offending. Victims of these trauma either get involved in illegal activity, become anti-social or have criminal records from a young age.

Most recent research studies have focused on childhood trauma and its relation to criminal behaviour, considering various types of traumas like physical, emotional, sexual abuse and which of these have most impacted on an individual's trauma and their development of personality which led to criminal behaviour. Research studies revealed that prison inmates when interviewed with the questionnaires and in-person, there was high prevalence of previous convictions, childhood trauma and exposure to adverse family experiences (Altintas, M., & Bilici, M. 2018).

With reference to secondary data, studies were conducted to reason out the causes which could have led to involvement in illegal activities and serve prison time. During the process of the study, it was found that the inmates had either

witnessed domestic violence or adverse childhood maltreatment (Herrenkohl et al, 2016). According to the "Cycle of violence", victims of childhood maltreatment/abuse, are prone to indulge in violence at later stage of life (Maxfield & Widom, 1990).

Since child abuse is detrimental experience in the vulnerable population such as in a child, it can have vast impact, for instance like it may lead to personality development, depression, antisocial behaviour (Toth & Cicchetti, 2013). Victims of child abuse, neglect or any other type of traumatic experience are more prone to discordant personal and peer relations, difficulty in emotion regulation and presence of psychopathic traits throughout their lives (Cicchetti & Toth, 1995). Studies have also shown that childhood trauma, parental conflict, and family dysfunction can have a major impact in the development of problematic behaviours in later life aggression, antisocial behaviour, imitation of deviant partners and so on.

Theories

According to the social factors of crime, children who grow up in violent families usually learn the same knowledge as adults. In "cycle of violence," it is stated that victims of child abuse and who have experienced traumatic experiences are predisposed to violence in adulthood, hence passing the violence to the next generation. Empirical studies state that effects of childhood trauma can lead to not only psychological problems, it also impacts the structure and functions of the brain. The neurobiological effects may be one of the reasons for adaptive mechanisms for surviving in a dangerous environment.

Renn. P (2002) considered attachment theory as a central theme in his study and explained about how it was one of the possible causes of offending behaviour. It was described that childhood traumatic experiences with unwilling separation of a child from a parent created distress to a great extent when placed in an

unfamiliar setting. In one of his case studies, when the subject's traumatic experiences triggered negative emotions in him. He was convicted for different felonies and also misused drugs. He had unstable and violent relationships with women due to his separation from his family and followed by traumatic experience.

Current aims and objectives

The present review aims at understanding how various types of childhood maltreatment can have an impact on an individual's growth and could be one of the reasons to offend in adulthood. As it reviews different studies discuss about how each type of trauma influences a persons' personality development. The overall objective of this review is to identify studies which discuss about incarcerated inmates being a victim of maltreatment. This review also discusses about possible causes, to reason out other theories which could be another possible cause for a victim of childhood maltreatment and offending.

Method

Guidelines and procedures were followed to write this review paper, which was provided by Prisma guidelines for systematic review (2020).

Data sources

Electronic database search was used to identify the related articles for the review. Since related articles were not found, PMC, NCBI and PsychINFO was used to identify research article. Key words like *childhood trauma, childhood maltreatment, offending behaviour and criminal behaviour* were included in the search. During the process, the search was restricted to English language articles, the articles which consisted of secondary data was also included in this review.

Exclusion/inclusion criteria

The terminologies were defined to understand the concept clearly. Thus, childhood trauma can be defined as an experience of an event by a child that is emotionally or physically painful,

which results in an unpleasant impact. There are different types of traumatic experiences and each have their own impact on an individual. The studies focus on incarcerated prison inmates who have a history of childhood maltreatment and who were charged for different offences.

Population

Most studies concentrate on the male prison population with history of previous convictions. Therefore, the first inclusion criteria were the male prison population with history of childhood abuse/maltreatment. Studies which consisted of subjects having mental illness, juveniles and females were excluded.

Study type

Studies which assessed different types of maltreatment/abuse, cross-sectional studies, review studies, quantitative or qualitative studies were included in this review. Studies with unreliable data resources e.g. blogs, media reports were excluded for the study.

Study selection

Searching for related studies in databases identified about 4578 articles (PubMed- 71, NCBI- 4503, NCJRS-2, Sage pub-2). This included articles which were not relevant for the review and out of context and were excluded from the criteria which was around 4564. The remaining articles were examined thoroughly which met the inclusion criteria. Some of the studies which were excluded consisted of variables which were not included in the inclusion criteria for the study thus being removed.

Quality assessment and data extraction

The selected articles were assessed based on: 1. Initial screening of the articles (e.g. aims, objectives, sample description), 2. Risk of selection bias, 3. Reliability, measurement bias. The selected articles were assessed for relevant variables and sample population.

Data was extracted as follows: general information (methodology, study characteristics), results (outcomes, characteristics of each sub-

type of trauma) and limitations.

Results

Details of the samples used in the articles are mentioned in table 1. All the abstracts were reviewed to find the relevant articles related to the study. The same was discussed with the supervisor and was included in this article. A total of 17 studies were included which met the criteria. The studies consisted of participants from prisons and databases. The selected articles consisted of Interviews with the participants, questionnaires were incorporated and the childhood history of the participants were recorded. The secondary data was obtained through the database of the system from health and various other related departments, containing the history of physical, sexual abuse, neglect, violence, adverse family experiences and soon.

Although exact number of participants included in all the 16 articles cannot be calculated, this review identified that there was a significant relationship between childhood maltreatment/trauma and engaging in criminal behaviour in later life. The majority of the subjects in these studies reported to have been victims of abuse of certain type and have had history of previous convictions. The studies selected focused on convicted prison male inmates as participants. Four studies were conducted using secondary database (Rivera, B & Widom, C.S 1990, Currie, J & Tekin, K. 2012, Herrenkohl, Et al. 2016 and Papalia, N et al 2018) and one studies which was included in this review is theoretical study (Falshaw, L 2005).

Descriptive data synthesis

The data organized to identify specific type of abuse/trauma interlinked to the offence and criminal behaviour appeared qualitative in two or more studies. Studies explained that specific type of abuse/trauma and severity of the same led to the individual committing an offence. One of the types of abuse/traumas which was found common in few articles was sexual abuse and

physical abuse, being a victim of these two types of maltreatment, the perpetrators went on to become sexual offenders themselves.

Sub-types of maltreatment

Sexual abuse

As one of the sub types of childhood maltreatment, sexual abused victim was reported to become sexual offenders themselves. One of the examples of sexual abuse victim who turned into a serial killer/sexual offender is Pedro Lopez. He was evicted from home after getting caught by his mother for fondling his younger sister. He was sexually abused and raped by an older man who provided shelter for him. He ran away from orphanage because he was molested by a male. After getting arrested later in life for petty crimes, he was again raped in prison. Lopez preyed on young girls and claimed that he killed three girls in a week. Taking Bowlby's attachment theory into consideration, it is explained in his theory that loss or emotional distress and isolation/abandonment can later lead to poor attachment and sexual offending.

Physical abuse

Physically abused children grow up to become violent individuals engaging in different violent offences. Witnessing violence at home, abusive parents, aggressively disciplining children can develop them into violent perpetrator. Teague, R et al (2008) study shows that physically abused children was convicted with serious violent offences later in adulthood.

Discussion

Childhood trauma/abuse and its relation with criminal behaviour's literature has extensive database. Progress in this research area is considerably slow in India. The main findings of this thesis are to reason out and understand the underlying link between childhood trauma and criminal behaviour. Childhood maltreatment is further categorized into various sub-types like physical, sexual and emotional abuse, neglect, violence and witnessing parental conflict. These

have different impacts on the victims of the trauma. A study conducted by Reavis, J. A., et al, (2013) explored the effects of childhood abuse and how it impacts adult criminality. The results revealed that sexual offenders were victims of child abuse themselves. It is rather difficult to narrow it down to one specific reason why they go on to become sexoffenders

Based on the empirical studies, evidence points out that there is a significant relationship between childhood trauma and criminal behaviour. Over the past few years, various questionnaires were developed and revised to assess the severity and type of trauma. Each study measures and focuses on a certain aspect but at the end the study outcomes reveal that there is a significant difference between the both with other variables. The literature regarding this issue has is very limited or no evidence available regarding the relationship between childhood trauma and criminal behaviour in India. For the current thesis, the literature was gathered from across the globe. Few studies were based on the secondary data collected from the health department. The data collected from the database suggested that those who were incarcerated had a history of being victims of abuse, belonging from a dysfunctional family and parental conflict. Along with that, there was also a history of being involved in criminal activity and had a record of the same.

One study conducted an in-depth interview with 11 adult male prison inmates, in Queensland, Australia, results revealed that participants of the study reported experiencing trauma in their childhood. The trauma included sexual abuse by a family member, death of a loved one, sexual assault, and bullying. This exposure to continuous trauma resulted in brain snap or losing it resulted in them committing an offence Honorato, B., et al. (2016).

The authors have presented theories explaining about the relationship between

childhood trauma and criminal behaviour. In a study by Valentine Sperber, J. (2020), the author has defined and compared between the various types of traumas and abuse with the offending behaviour. The study also revealed that, among the incarcerated ones, around 20% of them were victims of abuse during their childhood. Dargis, M., Newman, J., & Koenigs, M. (2016) described about how the severity of childhood maltreatment was closely related to psychopathic traits, the relationship of maltreatment and psychopathy was severely high with physical abuse and antisocial aspects. They also found an interlink between sexual abuse and conduct disorder. Through their study it can be concluded that there was a strong relationship between childhood maltreatment and antisocial characteristics which can later develop into engaging in criminal behaviour.

Additionally, it was reported that Physical abuse and sexual abuse were narrowed down, which had the most severe impact on the individual who engaged in violent offences and was also convicted of crimes which were petty before going to the prison for serious offences. Childhood trauma/maltreatment and offending behaviour have a significant relationship. Along with that, the family environment, relationship and attachment with the parents, child upbringing, peer relationship, substance abuse in adolescence play a major role in contributing to the development of criminal behavior.

An example of physical abuse victim who turned into a murderer and was also an addict is Richard Barry Randolph. He grew up in an unstable home and he was adopted when he was 5 months old. His mother was emotionally unstable and his father physically abused him and violently disciplined him. He was marijuana and crack addict and was discharged from the army. He later went on to become a murderer and was sentenced to death for his crime. Hence, it could be explained that physical abuse during

childhood and growing up in an unstable environment could be his trigger to indulging in drugs and criminal offence.

Long term effects of childhood trauma could have psychological impact on the individual. It could lead to post-traumatic stress disorder, attachment and social difficulties, decreased executive functioning and poor mental and emotional health. Few research studies have also observed individuals developing PTSD or mental disorders (Karatzias, T et al, 2018).

There is sufficient evidence which suggests that childhood trauma is closely interlinked with offending and criminal behaviour with other environmental factors.

Implications

The application of the present review was to examine and analyze the data to support the aim i. e. there is a significant relationship between childhood trauma with offending behaviour. Dargis et al. (2016) also examined the association of childhood trauma with psychopathic traits which implied that childhood maltreatment is one of the major causal factors in contributing to the criminal behaviour.

Limitations

The limitations of this review are that, since only male population was selected and one of the inclusion criteria as the male convictions are more in number when compared to female convictions. Another limitation is that juveniles and history of psychiatric and mental disorders were excluded for this review. It was also observed that there was limited or no resources available when it came to Indian population. Additionally, there may have been different study articles which could have been included but due to specific inclusion criteria it was not included.

Conclusion

It was observed that when assessed and interviewed with the male prison inmates, they were victims of specific kind of childhood maltreatment. It was also noted that specific kind of childhood maltreatment led the person to engage in criminal behaviour. Physical abuse and sexual abuse were more prominent among most of the prison population. Though there is a necessity to conduct more research study among Indian prison population to see if there is a significant relationship among the two aspects along with variables like parental attachment and childhood upbringing.

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