

# Impacts of trauma on adolescent delinquency



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## Introduction

This analysis aimed to focus on trauma and its effects on delinquency in adolescents, particularly surrounding the diagnosis of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

The goals of the juvenile justice system are to rehabilitate and hold young offenders accountable while also helping them gain and develop skills that will help them be productive, change their behaviors, and succeed.

Adolescence is a time when the body is going through many changes and everything seems to be in flux. It is also a period of construction for the brain, and this is the time when the architecture for the brain is being built. Healthy brain development requires the youth be shielded from any trauma, while also building positive supports. Many of the youth involved in the juvenile justice system have reported some type of trauma or adverse experience prior to their involvement in the system. By learning about trauma, and its impact on juvenile delinquency we can make a better impact on the war on crime, as well as create community structures, economic supports, and provide the young offenders with appropriate treatment. (Steiner, Garcia & Matthews, 1997). This analysis is important to the field of social work, because it adds to the ongoing conversation about how to understand and be more effective when youth become involved in the juvenile justice system. Ideally by becoming trauma informed the juvenile justice system can implement therapeutic and targeted interventions that focus on highlighting the youth's strengths and examining any vulnerabilities, with the goal of developing a written service delivery, placement, support, or supervision plan that is tailored toward the youth and

the family. Moreover, the study of trauma allows juvenile justice providers to change the way a youthful offender is viewed from perpetrator to victim as delinquent acts may be a direct or indirect reflection of past victimization. Much of the highlighted literature that I will discuss is guided by the correlation between trauma and delinquency in adolescent offenders. There are two outstanding themes in this literature review. First theme is that adverse life events and immediate environment are factors contributing to delinquency as one transitions from childhood through adolescence to adulthood. The second theme is the distinct relationship between trauma and delinquency.

### History of Juvenile Justice Systems

The juvenile justice system is costly, each year 2.2 million juveniles are arrested. And an estimated 100,000 youth are detained (Bilchik, 1999). In the early years of the juvenile justice system before the establishment of a juvenile court system, adolescent offenders were viewed as little adults, often receiving the same punishments as older lawbreakers (Pasko, 2010). The first juvenile court was founded in 1899 in Illinois. The focus of the court was on the offender, and not the offense, rehabilitation, and not punishment. By the 1970's congress passed the Juvenile Justice Delinquency Act which allowed for added sanctions and accountability to juvenile offenders. By the late 1980's and 1990's juvenile crime was on the rise, and due to the negative public perception juveniles could be tried as adults in certain cases. ("Reform School of Massachusetts", 1849; "Juvenile Justice Legislative History and Current Legislative Issues", 2012).

### Factors Contributing to Delinquency in Adolescents

The causes of juvenile delinquency are a field that many scholars have built their research on. Despite the assortment of underlying reasons leading up to delinquency, they all have similar underlying themes. These themes include the adolescent's family, the school, the peer group, and the neighborhood. (Moffit, 1993), argued that adolescents offend due to peer influence and not being able to achieve status or money due to their ages. Moffit goes on to state that they stop offending around the age of 20 because peer influence is no longer a factor, and they can now obtain what they want by legal means. (Steinberg, 2009), argues that peer influence is a major deciding factor in decision making for adolescents. The need to fit in, and desire for peer approval affects their decisions even without coercion. This may be why adolescents are more likely to commit crimes in groups when compared to adults. Many adolescent offenders do not recidivate this suggests that their bad choices are direct factors specific to their developmental stage (Thompson, 2012). Other studies demonstrate that adolescents who have multiple exposures to violence or victimization are at a higher risk for delinquent behaviors as well as mental health problems (Kerig, Chaplo, Bennett & Modrowski, 2016; Putnam, 2006; Buffington, Dierkhising & Marsh, 2010). (Ryan & Testa 2005; Ford et. Al, 2000), argued that a child's caregiver relationship has a large impact on delinquency. Children who experience maltreatment at the hands of a caregiver are at an increased risk of engaging in delinquent behaviors. Data suggests that victims of maltreatment average 47% higher delinquency in comparison to children who have not. Neighborhoods are a large factor in juvenile

delinquency. Exposure to violence in neighborhoods puts adolescents at a greater risk of later engaging in violence. According to (Nofziger & Kurtz, 2005), Nearly all inner-city adolescents have reported they have experienced violence in their homes, or communities. Findings in a study done by (Nofziger & Kurtz, 2005), supported a link between violence exposure, and delinquency.

### The Relationship Between Trauma and Delinquency

A traumatic experience is an event that threatens someone's life, safety, or wellbeing. This can include but is not limited to direct or indirect contact with an event. Abuse, neglect, sexual molestation, poverty, and witnessing violence are well-known risk factors for the development of trauma (Steiner, Garcia & Matthews 1997 pg. 357). An important condition is that this traumatic event overwhelms the person's ability to cope, and elicits intense feelings like fear, helplessness, hopelessness, and despair (Buffington, Dierkhising & Marsh, 2010). Literature suggests there is a correlation between PTSD, and other trauma exposure with delinquency. Children who experience trauma are at an increased risk of engaging in delinquent behaviors. As many as one in two children in the community have experienced or witnessed some type of trauma (Ford et al., 2000; Ryan & Testa, 2005). Rates of PTSD in juvenile justice involved youth are estimated between 3%-50% (Wolpaw & Ford, 2004), making it comparable to the PTSD rates (12%-20%), of soldiers returning from deployment in Iraq (Roehr, 2007; Buffington, Dierkhising & Marsh, 2010). Moreover, (Ruchkin et al. 2002), found that 25% of adolescent delinquents met DSM-III PTSD criteria and 42% fulfilled partial PTSD criteria which is also comparable to those found in the

population of Vietnam Veterans (Amatya & Barzman 2012 pg. 1).

Furthermore, (Buffington, Dierkhising & Marsh 2010), argue that children who have experienced a traumatic event also experience hypervigilance, meaning they are constantly scanning the environment for threats.

Adolescents who experience hypervigilance often have difficulty sleeping and managing their emotions, and because they often see people in their environment as threats they are more likely to react in aggressive or defensive ways. A study done by (Steiner, Garcia & Matthews1997), concluded that incarcerated adolescent offenders from the California Youth Authority showed higher rates of PTSD than other populations due to backgrounds of trauma. Those that suffered from PTSD reported having distress, defensiveness, less restraint, anxiety, depression, lower impulse control, and aggression. PTSD in adolescence is not a disorder that is quiet or easily maintained without intervention. the violence and chaos experienced by the adolescent through trauma may manifest itself as outward acts of aggression, delinquency, and conduct disorder (Amatya & Barzman 2012).

### Conclusion

The juvenile justice system has been tasked with rehabilitating youthful offenders while meeting the public's expectation to maintain communities free of crime. There is empirical data that suggests a correlation between traumatic events and delinquency. Adolescents who have experienced trauma and have lost their ability to cope are at a higher risk of offending than those who have not. Adolescents display symptoms of PTSD different than their adult counterparts. Often displaying symptoms as forms of aggression, and violence which can explain why more adolescents involved

in the juvenile justice system have reported a traumatic experience throughout their lives. As social workers and juvenile justice personal it is important to understand this concept as seeing the juvenile as a victim that has previously been victimized and not as an offender may allow the juvenile the help they need without further traumatizing them within the justice system.

Assess the quality and cultural relevance of evidence Summarize the quality of the evidence base. (Do we know a lot with a high level of certainty, know some things but not others, know very little about this topic at all?) Are there any gaps in our knowledge or understanding pertaining to your topic? How culturally-informed is the research? What groups have been studied (and not studied)? Are possible cultural variations considered and studied? Draw on course material to assist you with this aspect of your critique. What cultural considerations may need to be taken into account? (1-2 pages)

### Assessment

As stated previously one of the main themes in the literature suggests that adolescents who offend are typically victims of some type of traumatization whether its from their direct social environment, family or neighborhood.

Although there is overwhelming evidence that suggests a correlation between PTSD and juvenile delinquency there is little to no research on whether the link between PTSD and juvenile delinquency varies across crucial stages of human development. No studies explored neurobiological, hormonal or genetic factors that may increase risks in within each gender.

None of the studies state whether the juveniles who have witnessed violence witnesses it as innocent bystanders or they were involved in the violence.

### Ecological theory

For years juvenile delinquency has been a social problem that has plagued our nation. With such a large child welfare system that exhausts many resources it is not clear what type of impact it is making in the communities affected by the delinquencies. With delinquencies causing detrimental affects to the communities as well as the youthful offender it is important as social workers to look at this social problem through a different lens.

The literature supports social workers to apply several theories however an ecological conceptualization suggests that delinquency is determined by the dynamics between an individual and their key social systems such as communities, schools, peers, and families. (Moffit 1993; Bronfenbrenner, 1977). (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), introduces an ecological model that shows us how the social ecosystems influence human development through their impact on events. Additionally, Bronfenbrenner proposes that a person's social ecosystem is created by several different layers. At the center of his model is the individual system which is comprised of genetics, personal, and interpersonal factors. The first layer of social influence is called the microsystem ; the developing adolescent interacts with a few different microsystems, including the family, the school, the peer group, and the neighborhood. Which are the main factors discussed in the literature that contribute to delinquency.

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