

Behaviors linked to adult crime differ between abused boys and girls, study finds

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The signs that an abused child might later commit crimes might not be obvious—that boisterous playground behavior from a third-grade boy, for example, or the 10-year-old girl who seems a little anxious or withdrawn.

But new research from the University of Washington suggests that troubling behaviors exhibited by abused children can be predictors of later criminal activity, and that those indicators differ between boys and girls.

The study, published Aug. 11 in the *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, found that elementary-aged boys who show "externalizing" behaviors such as arguing, disobedience and fighting are more likely to commit crimes as adults, but girls who similarly acted out were not. Instead, it found elementary-aged girls who exhibited signs of "internalizing" behaviors such as being depressed or withdrawn were more likely to commit crimes as adults, while boys who showed the same characteristics were less likely to.

The link between [child abuse](#) and crime, and abuse and problem behavior among children, has been documented in numerous studies. But less is known about how gender relates to [problem behaviors](#) among abused children and whether the likelihood of crime linked to those behaviors might vary between boys and girls.

In particular, the connection between internalized behavior and crime

has been largely unexamined, said co-author Todd Herrenkohl, a UW social work professor.

"There's this sense that kids who are depressed and withdrawn and tend to isolate themselves from other people aren't necessarily at risk for engaging in criminal behavior later on," Herrenkohl said.

Children who are abused, particularly girls, are at risk of becoming repeat victims of violence throughout their lives. Herrenkohl said abused girls who repeatedly internalize their feelings may eventually reach a threshold at which their repressed emotions turn outward and aggressive—perhaps pushing them to the point of criminal behavior.

Child abuse can be also predictive of relationship violence, Herrenkohl said, and women who were abused early in life may fall into relationships in which violence or criminal behavior is the norm.

"A woman who has been abused may end up partnering with somebody who is involved in criminal behavior, and that reinforcement in the context of that relationship might drive her to manifest other types of behaviors that wouldn't necessarily have come to the fore," he said.

The findings, lead author Hyunzee Jung said, underscore the risk that problem signs in abused girls could be overlooked.

"People might think that they're just quiet girls and not causing any problems. Those internalizing behaviors really need to be paid attention to," said Jung, a research scientist at the UW-based Social Development Research Group.

While previous studies have found that abused boys and girls exhibit different problem behaviors, the UW study found that abuse is linked to both externalizing and internalizing behaviors at elementary school age,

regardless of gender. And while other research has pointed to adolescent problem behavior as a predictor of later crime, the UW study found no such connection. Instead, the research concludes that problem behavior in abused children of elementary school age was a stronger determinant of longer-term [criminal behavior](#).

"We tend to think that adolescents who are involved in delinquent behavior have a higher risk for adult crime. And in some cases, that's true, but we really need to go back and look at what their childhoods were like," Jung said.

The findings stem from a longitudinal study that started in 1976 and tracked abused children in two Pennsylvania counties from as young as 18 months to around age 18, in three separate assessments. The children's parents were asked about their children's [behavior](#) and about the physical and emotional disciplining strategies they used, which ranged from threatening to send the child away to slapping and kicking. The children were also surveyed in adolescence about their own behaviors.

In 2010, the UW researchers tracked down about 80 percent of the study's original participants, then 36 years old on average, and asked whether they had committed any crimes in the previous year.

Slightly more than one-quarter said they had; the most common offenses were hitting someone or threatening to do so, and stealing money or other items from family members. The researchers then compared the self-reported crime data to the earlier reports of abuse and related problem behaviors to reach their conclusions.

Herrenkohl said the findings, and the mixed results from prior studies, underscore the need for additional research to unravel the complex trajectory from problem behaviors in abused children to adult crime,

particularly as they differ between genders. Deeper knowledge of that path could lead to more targeted and effective interventions, he said.

"We need to find ways of identifying these kids and wrapping services around them and their families so that we're reducing the likelihood that their behaviors are going to worsen over time," he said.

Provided by University of Washington

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