

# Childhood adversity shapes adolescent delinquency, fatherhood

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Girls who experienced four or more ACEs by age five, during the most sensitive period of brain development, were 36% more likely to participate in delinquent behavior Credit: BYU Photo

About 61% of Americans have had at least one adverse childhood experience (ACE), experts' formal term for a traumatic childhood event.

ACEs—which may include abuse, neglect and severe household dysfunction—often lead to psychological and social struggles that reach into adulthood, making ACEs a major public health challenge. But the long-term consequences of ACEs are just beginning to be understood in detail. To fill in the picture, two recent BYU studies analyzed how ACEs shape adolescents' delinquent behaviors as well as fathers' parenting approaches.

## **ACEs linked to girls'—but not boys'—delinquent behavior**

Although the role of adversity in adolescent delinquency has long been examined in the field of criminology, only in the past decade have criminologists referred to these events as ACEs and seriously considered how early ACEs predict a person's delinquency, according to BYU sociology professors Hayley Pierce and Melissa S. Jones.

In their study of that relationship, published in the *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, Pierce and Jones showed that ACEs do have a significant effect on teenagers' criminal behavior—at least for girls. Girls who experienced four or more ACEs by age five, during the most sensitive period of brain development, were 36% more likely to participate in delinquent behavior. Boys' delinquent behavior, on the other hand, appeared unrelated to early ACEs, although boys have an overall higher rate of delinquency.

"These results run counter to previous research suggesting that girls are far more likely than boys to internalize trauma through developing an eating disorder or other self-harming behaviors," said Jones. "What we

find here is the opposite: girls are externalizing trauma through delinquent acts."

Pierce and Jones drew their data from the longitudinal Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing study. The survey examined childhood adversity and adolescent behavior over a 15-year period for approximately 5,000 children, with a high proportion born to poor, single-parent or minority families in the U.S.

"Our analysis points toward the need for gendered strategies in working with children with ACEs because the different ways boys and girls are socialized shape how they process trauma," Jones said.

The study should also promote compassion and understanding for adolescents who act out, the researchers emphasized.

"One of the most important things I teach in my juvenile delinquency class is that delinquency is a symptom of an underlying problem," said Jones. "If an adolescent is getting arrested, there's often something else going on in the child's life, such as problems at home."

"When adolescents engage in delinquency, it's important first to ask, 'Okay, what got you here?' and work from that knowledge," Pierce added.



Fathers who had experienced at least three ACEs were more likely to use harsh disciplinary techniques. Credit: BYU Photo

### **ACEs predict less warmth, more harsh discipline in fathers**

Even though ACEs may not be linked to teen boys' delinquency, having ACEs earlier in life does apparently impact how men parent.

Most existing research on ACEs and parenting focuses on mothers and looks exclusively at abuse. Curious about ACEs' effects on fathers and the wider range of ACEs that may influence more day-to-day aspects of parenting, BYU sociologist Kevin Shafer and Scott Easton of Boston College decided to examine parenting patterns in men with past ACEs.



In a study published in the Journal of Marriage and Family, they found that fathers who had experienced at least three ACEs were more likely to use harsh disciplinary techniques. Compared to the mothers with ACEs from previous studies, these men were also less likely to exhibit positive parenting characteristics, such as giving affection to their kids, providing care for young children and being emotionally supportive. The more ACEs a father had, the greater their effect on his parenting.

ACEs likely influence fathering partly because ACEs are associated with poor mental health, including depression, anxiety or anger management problems. Mental health challenges in turn influence how men parent their children.

"While on the face of it that sounds bad, it's weirdly also a good thing because even though ACEs happened in the past and can't be changed, you can get treatment for mental health issues in the present," said Shafer. "When men get that help, they can blunt the impact of their ACEs on how they parent their kids, and that improves their kids' outcomes. So their own childhood isn't destiny."

The study analyzed data from the 2015-16 U.S. Survey of Contemporary Fatherhood, which queried over 2,000 fathers about their adverse childhood experiences, degree of psychological distress and parenting habits.

The connection between ACEs and negative fathering techniques is especially indicative of the "untreated trauma" suffered by many men, which Shafer believes is "one of the biggest public health issues we have."

"We have a lot of individuals walking around with ACEs going untreated, and our study shows that has a wide-ranging impact on people in their lives," said Shafer. A big part of the solution would be a

"comprehensive public mental health strategy" for fathers, which may include better incorporating fathers into the childbirth experience and early pediatric care, as well as regularly screening fathers for mental health, he concluded.

**More information:** Hayley Pierce et al, Gender Differences in the Accumulation, Timing, and Duration of Childhood Adverse Experiences and Youth Delinquency in Fragile Families, *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* (2021). [DOI: 10.1177/00224278211003227](https://doi.org/10.1177/00224278211003227)

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