

Abuse and neglect put kids on fast track to crime

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Researchers examining the effect bad childhoods have on youth criminals say some types of experience have a greater effect on criminality than others.

Dr. Wendy Li is an Associate Professor of Psychology at James Cook University.

She was part of a team that examined research into the link between [adverse childhood experiences](#) and youth crime.

"Adverse childhood experiences are potentially traumatic events experienced before a child reaches 18 years of age. These [traumatic events](#) consist of household dysfunction and various forms of abuse and neglect," Dr. Li said.

"Exposure to childhood maltreatment in juvenile delinquents is reported to increase the likelihood of future criminal behavior by approximately 50%."

The researchers analyzed 31 studies involving a combined total of more than 420,000 youth offenders aged between 10 and 19 years.

"We found that nearly 40% of youth offenders were exposed to more than one adverse childhood experience," Dr. Li said.

"More than half experienced [domestic violence](#) (52.3 %), nearly half experienced incarceration of a household member (47.3 %), and 42.7% had experienced [emotional abuse](#)—the child receiving little or no support from the family and/or not feeling close to any family members."

Other types of adverse childhood experiences—such as drug or [alcohol abuse](#) by [family members](#), parents separating, or a lack of food—were present for many offenders, but less prevalent.

"We found that exposure to more than one adverse childhood experience was associated with nearly a one hundred percent increase in the odds of

youth recidivism (reoffending). Exposures to childhood neglect and physical abuse were associated with a 45% and 47% increase respectively in the odds of youth recidivism," Dr. Li said.

The researchers found positive childhood experiences, strong social bonds, and increasing the empathy of offenders lowered youth recidivism.

Child welfare placement, emotional and behavioral problems, drug use, [mental health problems](#), and negative emotionality made things worse.

"As far as we know there has been no other systematic review of the mechanisms underlying the relationships between adverse childhood experiences and youth recidivism," Dr. Li said.

"This new work could help service providers to further focus their assistance to youth. A wide range of evidence-based prevention and intervention strategies to strengthen the protective factors and weaken the risk factors would also be useful."

The study is published in the journal *Child Abuse & Neglect*.

More information: Belinda Astridge et al, A systematic review and meta-analysis on adverse childhood experiences: Prevalence in youth offenders and their effects on youth recidivism, *Child Abuse & Neglect* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.chiabu.2023.106055](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2023.106055)

Provided by James Cook University

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