

Effects of Child Abuse on Crime Rates

Research Synthesis: [The Real Root Causes of Violent Crime: The Breakdown of Marriage, Family, and Community](#)

1. Child Rejection

Jill Leslie Rosenbaum, professor of criminology at California State University, writes: "Research consistently has shown that those youth whose bond to their parents is weak are more likely to be delinquent. [Y]outh who are more attached to their parents have greater direct and indirect controls placed on their behavior."

As a child's emotional attachment to his parents ensures a well-adjusted adult, so parental rejection of the child has powerful opposite effects. Ronald Simons, professor of sociology at Iowa State University, summarizes the research findings: "Rejected children tend to distrust and attribute malevolent motives to others, with the result being a defensive, if not aggressive, approach to peer interactions.... Such [rejecting] parents not only fail to model and reinforce prosocial behavior, they actually provide training in aggressive noncompliant behavior."

Rejection by the family, which is the child's first and fundamental "community," sets the stage for another social tragedy. Rejected children tend gradually to drop out of normal community life. Professor Simons continues: "Parental rejection... increased the probability of a youth's involvement in a deviant peer group, reliance upon an avoidant coping style, and use of substances." Many other studies in the professional literature replicate these findings.

2. Parental Abuse or Neglect

The professional literature is replete with findings of a connection between future delinquency and criminal behavior and the abuse and neglect visited upon children by their parents. This abuse can be physical, emotional, or sexual. "Overwhelmingly," observes Patricia Koski, "studies conducted since 1964 have found a positive correlation between parent-child aggression-violence-abuse-physical punishment and aggression on the part of the child." Or, as summarized by Cathy Spatz Widom, professor of Criminal Justice and Psychology at Indiana University, Bloomington, "Violence begets violence."

Studies of the official records of abused children and arrested offenders put this connection in the range of 14 percent to 26 percent. But the connection triples to a range of 50 percent to 70 percent once researchers go beyond official reports of investigated cases of child abuse to reports of abuse by the delinquents themselves.

Significantly, West Coast Crips and Bloods gang members almost without exception grew up in dangerous family environments. Typically, they left home to escape the violence or drifted away because they were abandoned or neglected by their parents. Consequently, these young men have developed a defensive world view characterized by a feeling of vulnerability and a need to protect oneself, a belief that no one can be trusted, a need to maintain social distance, a willingness to use violence and intimidation to repel others, an attraction to similarly defensive people, and an

expectation that no one will come to their aid. Young women delinquents who run away from home are also frequently victims of sexual abuse.

The close connection between child abuse and violent crime is highlighted also in a 1988 study of the 14 juveniles then condemned to death in the United States: 12 had been brutally abused, and 5 had been sodomized by relatives.

3. Impact on Boys versus Girls

Child sexual or physical abuse alone can outweigh many other factors in contributing to violent crime but affects boys and girls differently. Abuse visited upon girls is more likely to result in depression (the inversion of anger) or psychiatric hospitalization than in the more outwardly directed hostility of abused males. According to Cathy Spatz Widom, "Early childhood victimization has demonstrable long-term consequences for delinquency, adult criminality, and violent behavior.... The experience of child abuse and neglect has a substantial impact even on individuals with otherwise little likelihood of engaging in officially recorded criminal behavior."

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