

Relationship Between Childhood Traumas and Criminal Behaviors

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Abstract: This paper reviewed several papers discussing the relationship between childhood trauma and criminal behaviors. The definition and categorization of traumas and crimes, the commonness of child abuse, the sequential behaviors of criminals, and the psychological and environmental factors of crimes will be covered in this paper. The limitation and strengths of the reviewed studies are contained. This paper aims to investigate the causes of criminal behaviors by analyzing childhood traumas from different aspects. Physical, sexual, psychological, neglect, and other abuses from the community and family in childhood years occur more commonly in the criminal population, compared to the general public, and affect later criminal behaviors in type and amount. Society should raise awareness of child abuse to diminish the number of crimes.

Keywords: child abuse, childhood trauma, criminal behaviors

1. Introduction

Children are the most vulnerable and susceptible group of people in society. Children are unjaded jade when they are born, so how they were carved in their early years plays an essential role in their future behaviors. Some children are educated and protected well, whereas others are abused, insulted, or endured various traumas. The latter's life sometimes comes to a sticky end: hospital or prison. When they grow up, their behaviors will be marked by the tangible or intangible wounds from the childhood events they find traumatic, leading to mental illness, mental dysfunctionality, or crimes.

Thanks to the reinforcement of media technology and the enhancement of publishing, people have more chances to sneak the criminals' experiences before they become "famous." Detailed news reports, documentaries, or biographies give the general public opportunities to be conscious of criminals' childhood, and people find their childhood often unpleasant and even horrible. While the notification of criminals' early experiences is increasing in public, many criminology scholars have dug into this field and harvested much. The prevalent and convincing theory is that there is a correlation between childhood traumas and later criminal behaviors. Whoever Fights Monsters, written by FBI operative and author Robert Ressler, claimed that all [of the mass killers] had experienced child abuse in a ray of forms, including aggression, neglect, or humiliation [1].

Due to the rising attention to children's rights and simple, good wishes for peaceful lives, it's indispensable to figure out the relationship between childhood traumas and criminal behaviours so then there can be helpful and practical approaches to avoid tragedies from happening again or conservatively saying, to diminish similar calamities.

This paper will review several papers talking about the topic of childhood trauma and criminal behaviors. The definition and categorization of traumas and crimes, the commonness of child abuse, the sequential behaviors of criminals, the psychological and environmental factors of crimes, etc., will be covered in this paper.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Connotation

2.1.1. Definition and Categorization of Abuse

Abuse is using something for the incorrect goal in a negative or morally wrong way. The fundamental definition is vague, so to better investigate, a more thorough categorization and more elaborate definitions of every type of abuse are necessary. The definitions of all types of abuse below are from the Virginia Department of Social Services [2]. Still, not all the cases can be considered by it since criminal cases are complicated, which are included in “other”. In addition, there’s a high possibility of being abused in different ways simultaneously, which is counted as an abuse combination. Every definition here applies to children, who are human beings from birth until they are adults or reach 18 years old. There are five types of abuse: physical abuse, sexual abuse, psychological abuse, neglect, and other.

Physical abuse is defined as any bodily injury that is caused on purpose. For example, Lorenzo Fayne was punished by his mother by beating his head as a kid. Then, he became a child rapist and killer.

Sexual abuse is defined as any inappropriate sexual activity, practice or instruction. Sexual crimes are illegal acts, including incest, rape, fondling, indecent exposure, prostitution, or exploiting of a child in any pornographic visual material. Sexual abuse for children can be extended because it is possible to meet the level of a crime and is probable to be unhealthy for children regarding their age and growth. For example, until he was 13, Bobby Joe Long was not allowed to sleep alone. Instead, he must sleep in the same bed as his mother. More badly, he was forced to witness the process of intercourse between his mother and other men. As a result, he developed into a serial killer.

Psychological abuse is any behaviour, including intentionally ridiculing by creating offensive nicknames, laughing at someone for their unpleasant history, or discriminating against others for their genders, races, classes, financial ability, or sexuality, that can result in psychological harm. Carol Edward Cole was a serial killer. In his childhood, he was made fun of by his peers because his name was lack of masculinity. Moreover, his mother forced him to wear girls’ outfits and deliver tea to the neighbour.

The failure or refusal to provide adequate care, mental support, or food is neglect. It could also mean not providing enough oversight. For instance, it is claimed that serial killer Carlton Gary was made to consume trash cans because his mother occasionally forgot to feed him.

Other cases cannot be fit into any categories above, such as threatening to cause a physical injury, abandoning a child, and drug addiction during pregnancy [2]. Due to their specificity and complexity, it isn't easy to quantify them, but they are worth investigating.

2.1.2. Definition and Categorization of Crimes

To better quantify and compare, this paper only specifies the typology of serial killers. Serial killers can be divided into four types (according to what they did to victims): lust/rape, power, financial gain, or anger.

Lust/rape murderers are defined as performing unlawful sexual activity or practice on the victim. Sexual activities include the actual intercourse with (the corpse) of the victim, cutting the victim's sexual organs, or sexual assault without penetration. Those killers are motivated by sexual desires.

Power murderers are defined as the ones committing crimes for the gratification of controlling the victims, which makes them feel powerful and fulfils their ego.

Financial gain murderers are defined as the ones aiming at victims' property. They sometimes have financial struggles like having a huge debt and needing money urgently or insatiably.

Anger murderers are defined as the ones who are incited by depression or anxiety. They experience or imagine the injustice or malice against them and commit crimes to lead off negative emotions or revenge.

2.2. Child Abuse and Future Crimes

2.2.1. The Percentage of Being Abused as a Child

Heather Mitchell and Michael G. Aamodt from Radford University compared the child abuse percentage of serial killers to the general population [3]. They picked 50 serial killers brought up and educated in the US and analyzed their childhood by referring to Appendix A in Michael Newton's (2000) The Encyclopedia of Serial Killers.

Table 1: Comparison of serial killers to the general population.

Type of Abuse	General Population	Serial killer population
Physical	6%	36%
Sexual Psychological	3%	26%
Neglect	18%	18%
Other	6%	N/A
No Abuse Reported	70%	32%

The study's findings indicate that serial killers are more likely to be abused as children than the general population. Specifically, the research suggests that neglect is the only form of abuse that is not more prevalent in serial killers than in the general population, with both groups experiencing neglect at 18 percent. This raises questions about the impact of neglect on future criminal behavior, and whether it can be considered a form of abuse that does not contribute to violent tendencies.

Further study is needed because Heather Mitchell and Michael G. Aamodt only analyzed 50 serial killers, which means that the sample is insignificant and the result can be misrepresentative.

2.2.2. The Effect of Childhood' Environment or Neighbourhood

Valentina Nikulina et al. studied the relationship between neighbourhood environment and arrest. They used the data from a future design project, which collected cases drawn from juvenile and adult criminal courts in a particular area in the US from 1967 to 1971. The study shows that nearly half (48.90%) of the tracked children who suffered neglect and 36.00% of those who lived under poverty have been arrested as adults.

Comparing abused and non-victimized children show that neglect and poverty are significant [4].

The result of this study conflicts with the result of the first study. The possible reason behind the disagreement may be the sample difference. A study by Valentina Nikulina et al. has geographical and temporal limits since their data is from a particular area of a particular period.

2.2.3. The Effect of Family

Kenji Abe analyzed many serial murder cases via internet research. Through his tables where the environmental backgrounds, which focus on the parents of criminals are listed, intentional/unintentional neglect, lack of regular communication, and flawed education – such as being highly strict or overprotective are some backgrounds several serial killers share.

Parents are the core component of a family, so their condition cannot be ignored. According to Abe's research, a table is formed below [5].

Table 2: Parents' condition of 13 serial killers when they were under 18.

Incident	Number	Percentage
Divorce or remarriage	8	61.5%
Death	5	38.5%
Adoption	2	15.4%

Note: "Divorce or remarriage" contains: 1. legal, common divorce; 2. one parent abandoned the family; 3. one parent died, and the other remarried. The last condition overlaps with death. "Adoption" includes parents sending the kid to the grandparents.

Despite its detailed description of each case, this research has its limitation. All the cases are from the internet or lay literature, so the information lacks credibility. In addition, the sample size is small. However, it's turned out that generally, serial killers had harrowing childhood experiences, with unpleasant parents' education in particular.

2.2.4. Behaviour Sequences

A. Marino et al. investigated the cause-and-effect relationships between early experiences and later criminal killings. A method called Behavior Sequence Analysis (BSA) is used. The analysis signifies that some behaviour matches happen at a high chance. The research's sample is 233 male serial killers with available early experiences.

The unexpected finding suggests an apparent discrepancy between the type of abuse the serial killer has encountered and their later typology [6]. For instance, power-typology murders are likelier to be committed by assailants who have suffered sexual abuse.

BSA is an excellent method to analyze criminals' life progressions and social interactions. It allows researchers to harvest quantified results and focus on specified cases.

2.2.5. Effects of Childhood Traumas on Neurological Changes in the Brain and Their Relationship with Crime

Childhood traumas will induce effects on hormones and neurotransmitters, including increased baseline cortisol. High-level cortisol is considered neurotoxicity, which kills or hinders the growth of neurons in stress-sensitive areas and then damages the brain structure and function. Ling et al. found that abnormal brain structure and function are closely related to criminal behaviour, especially the prefrontal cortex, amygdala and striatum [7].

The prefrontal cortex (PFC) controls advanced cognitive functions, such as decision-making, attention, emotion, impulse control and moral reasoning. Teicher et al. found that people who experienced childhood traumas have a smaller, thinner prefrontal cortex. In addition, some studies have found structural defects and functional impairment of PFC in criminal individuals, mainly in the anterior cingulate gyrus, dorsal prefrontal lobe and orbitofrontal cortex [8]. Thus, childhood traumas lead to reduced PFC capacity and damage to its function, and the dysfunction of PFC is closely related to crime.

As part of the limbic system, the amygdala generates, recognizes, and regulates (negative) emotions and controls learning and memory. Childhood trauma can quickly impact the amygdala, causing it to become sensitive and stunted [9]. An unhealthy amygdala may overreact to emotions and aggression, potentially leading to criminal behaviour.

The striatum is a vital brain region associated with reward and emotional processing [7]. Previous studies have shown that childhood trauma can affect the shape of the striatum. Although the effects of childhood trauma on striatum function are not fully understood, it is generally agreed that such trauma weakens the striatum's expected reward response [10]. Since the striatum is involved in reward and emotional processing, it can be regarded as one of the brain mechanisms behind criminal behaviour.

In conclusion, childhood traumas can lead to decreased brain capacity and damage critical areas such as the prefrontal cortex, amygdala and striatum. The abnormal structure and function of brain regions are closely related to crime. However, no neurobiological research has confirmed that childhood trauma is the neuropathological basis of crime.

3. Solution and Prevention

Since child abuse negatively influences criminal conditions, society should raise awareness of child abuse to reduce the number of crimes. There are two potential solutions: law and publicity.

Law is a group of rules made and implemented by institutions of social organization or official government. Some countries lack laws or institutions that can implement the laws efficiently, whereas some have adequate legislation concerning child abuse. In the US, the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) receives funds yearly for 60 programs that direct children, youth, and families. However, when ACF executes laws protecting children from abusive parents, the impact of separating from biological parents cannot be neglected, so additional psychological therapies are necessary.

In addition, more institutions that keep children from abuse or the harmful effect of abuse are recommended. For example, it's helpful to establish psychological consulting rooms in schools or communities. The staff of consulting rooms can comfort child victims of abusive acts and help them to reach for legal aid. With accessible social institutions, children will be less likely to endure abuse.

Law is an indispensable foundation of ethics in any society, but it has limitations. One major limitation is that it only comes into play after the abuse has already occurred, making it a reactive measure rather than a proactive one. Therefore, it is essential to emphasize the importance of publicity in preventing child abuse. Publicity is a powerful tool that can be utilized in many ways to raise awareness and promote understanding of this serious issue. For instance, charity events, posters, promotion videos, public speeches, and other activities can all effectively increase awareness of child abuse. Governments can take the lead in promoting these activities, but it is equally essential for the general public to get involved and organize similar initiatives. With greater awareness and understanding of the laws and the damaging impacts of child abuse, people will be better equipped to recognize and prevent it. This is especially important for adults, who will be more likely to take steps to avoid abusing children. At the same time, children will also become more informed about their rights and be empowered to seek help if they are ever victimized.

4. Conclusion

It is of utmost importance to thoroughly comprehend the intricate relationship between childhood traumas and criminal behavior to prevent the occurrence of tragedies in the future. Numerous criminology scholars have established the correlation between the two, and this paper delves into a few of them to provide a comprehensive review of the topic. The paper covers various aspects of childhood trauma and criminal behavior, including definitions, the frequency of child abuse, the

sequential behaviors of criminals, psychological and environmental factors of crimes, and some neurological causes. Childhood trauma is explained as child abuse here, which is further categorized into physical abuse, sexual abuse, psychological abuse, neglect, and other forms of abuse.

Crimes are divided into four categories: lust/rape, power, financial gain, or anger, based on the actions of the criminals towards their victims. The typology demonstrates the behavior sequence. A study shows the discrepancy between the type of abuse the serial killer has experienced and the type of crime the serial killer later commits.

It has been discovered that abuse is more common in serial murderers than in the general population after examining several papers on various subjects related to childhood trauma and crimes. Neglect and poverty are significant environmental factors that contribute to criminal behavior, and unpleasant family conditions are often the breeding ground for crimes. It is important to note that the studies mentioned above mainly focus on serial or mass killers.

Furthermore, this paper cites some papers that indicate the effects of childhood trauma on brain structure and function, which can potentially lead to criminal behavior. Specifically, the increase in cortisol causes neurotoxicity, and the damage and dysfunction of the prefrontal cortex, amygdala and striatum lead to abnormal emotion recognition, moral reasoning, etc.

By understanding the various factors contributing to criminal behavior, we can take steps towards a safer and more just society. At last, this paper gives some suggestions for diminishing child abuse and potential crimes.

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