Childhood Antecedents of Incarceration and Criminal Justice Involvement Among Homeless Veterans


Researchers assessed whether family instability, childhood conduct disorder, and childhood abuse were correlated with criminal justice involvement or incarceration in a sample of homeless Veterans. Childhood conduct disorder was associated with both criminal justice involvement and incarceration. Family instability and childhood abuse were not associated with either outcome.

**Key Findings:**

- 40% of Veterans had experienced child abuse.
- Veterans reported being incarcerated for an average of 9.3 months in their lifetime.
- Veterans were incarcerated for an average of 1.6 nights during their first year in the VA housing program.
- After controlling for other variables, childhood conduct disorder was correlated with incarceration, criminal charges, and convictions.
- After controlling for other variables, childhood family instability and childhood abuse were not associated with criminal justice involvement or incarceration.

**Implications for Programs:**

- Programs may be developed to assist incarcerated Veterans in their transition from prison to community.
- Programs may teach parents effective discipline skills to prevent child abuse among military personnel.
- Programs may consider screening for conduct disorders in children of Service members.

**Implications for Policies:**

- Policies may recommend screening for childhood conduct disorder at accession.
- Policies may recommend providing families of incarcerated Veterans with services designed to promote family stability.
- Policies may recommend funding practitioners who can work with military families in which a child has some conduct or behavioral problems.

**Avenues for Future Research:**

- Future research may examine indirect pathways between childhood abuse/family instability and involvement in the criminal justice system.
- Future studies may consider whether children with conduct disorder may be more attracted to the structure and discipline of military life.
- Future studies may consider situational stressors which interact with childhood conduct disorders to increase the risk of criminal justice involvement.
Methodology:
- A convenience sample of veterans was interviewed once prior to enrollment in the housing support program, and again every three months thereafter for one year.
- Validated survey instruments were used to assess childhood conduct disorders, criminal histories, and childhood family instability.
- Veterans were asked if they had been emotionally, sexually, or physically abused as children.

Participants:
- 1,161 homeless Veterans across 19 sites participating in the VA Supportive Housing program.
- Mean Veteran age was 42.9 years (SD=8.0).
- Nearly all Veterans were men (95%) and unmarried (95%).
- A large proportion was black (48%).
- Most common mental health issues included alcohol abuse/dependency (63%), drug abuse/dependency (49%), and mood disorders (32%).

Limitations:
- The study does not test for a possible correlation between childhood abuse and either childhood conduct disorder or family instability.
- Childhood conduct disorder only accounts for 6% of the variance in outcome variables.
- The population consists of a convenience sample that may not be representative of homeless Veterans in general.

Assessing Research that Works

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Design and Sample</th>
<th>Quality Rating:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The design of the study (e.g., research plan, sample, recruitment) used to address the research question was...</td>
<td>Excellent (★★★★)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Research Methods</td>
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<td>The research methods (e.g., measurement, analysis) used to answer the research question were...</td>
<td>Excellent (★★★★)</td>
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<td>Limitations</td>
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<td>The limitations of this study are...</td>
<td>Excellent Minor Limitations (★★★★)</td>
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<td>Implications</td>
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<td>The implications of this research to programs, policies and the field, stated by the authors, are...</td>
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Overall Quality Rating: ★★★★☆