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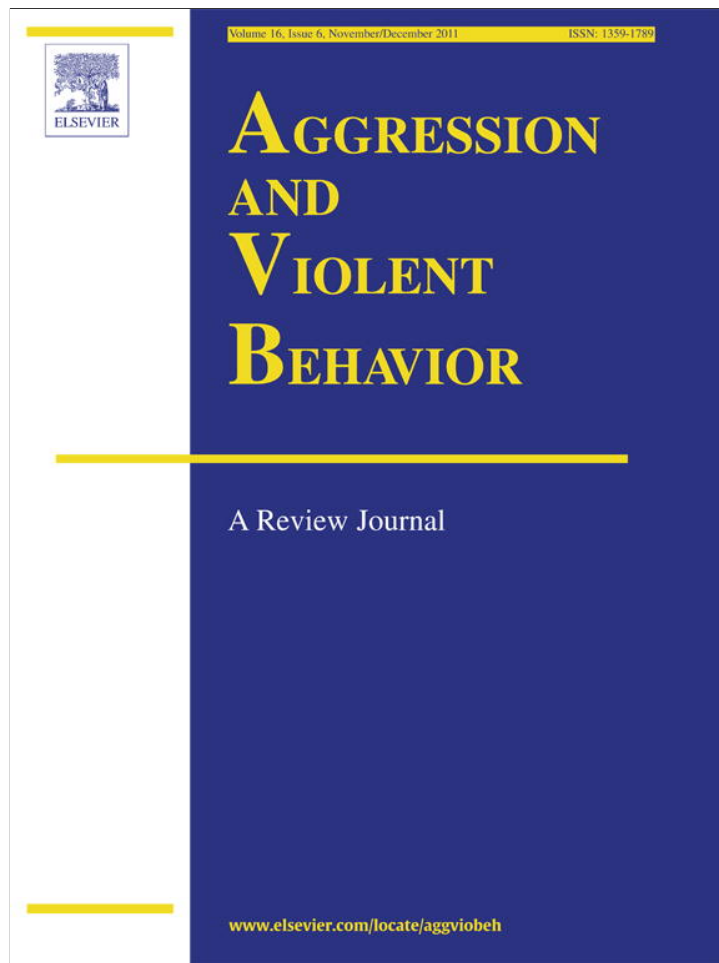


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Sexual victimization in childhood and the propensity for juvenile delinquency and adult criminal behavior: A systematic review

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ABSTRACT

Child sexual abuse has been suggested as a precursor to criminal and deviant behaviors in adolescence and adulthood. This review will examine and consolidate findings from the empirical research concerning childhood sexual abuse and the propensity of victims to become juvenile and adult offenders. First, we develop a demographic profile of sexual abuse victims most likely to commit juvenile and adult offenses. Second, we explore the literature to determine whether, in general, sexually abused children have an increased likelihood of criminality as juveniles and as adults. Third, we explore whether the types of crimes and delinquent acts committed by sexual abuse victims are unique or consistent with traditional crime trajectories. Fourth, the methodological and statistical limitations of this literature will be discussed, and suggestions for future research will be presented.

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1. Introduction

Child sexual abuse (CSA) has been the subject of a great deal of empirical research over the last several decades. Child sexual abuse can be defined as “forced or coerced sexual behavior imposed on a child” or as “sexual activity between a child and a much older person whether or not obvious coercion is involved” (Browne & Finkelhor, 1986, p. 66). Accurate national estimates of CSA are difficult to obtain and such estimates vary greatly depending on sample size and region, thus making the subject

difficult to study (Briere, 1992; Finkelhor, Hammer, & Sedlak, 2008). Nevertheless, some consistent patterns have emerged. Estimates of the prevalence of CSA suggest that in a given year approximately 1 in 12 children will be victims of sexual abuse (Finkelhor, Ormrod, Turner, & Hamby, 2005). The likelihood of victimization appears to be greater for females than for males (Douglas & Finkelhor, 2005; Finkelhor et al., 2008). Among sexual assaults reported to law enforcement agencies, females were six times more likely to be victims than males (Snyder, 2000; see also Finkelhor et al., 2005). The family context is also an important determinant of child sexual abuse. Children who live in homes in which intimate partner violence occurs have a greater chance of experiencing sexual abuse themselves (e.g., Cawson, 2002).

In addition to developing a demographic profile of CSA victims and offenders, investigators have explored myriad outcomes of this crime.

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Investigators have focused much attention on uncovering the psychological and emotional outcomes of victimization from both short-term and long-term perspectives. For example, Walsh, Fortier, and DiLillo (2010) recently reviewed 39 studies of adult functioning and coping among CSA victims. They identified CSA as a “non-specific risk factor” for adult functioning issues given that 10 to 25% of victims experienced no direct psychological problems in childhood, and 20 to 40% of victims had no clear symptomatology in adulthood (Walsh, Fortier, & DiLillo, 2010, p. 2). Nevertheless, for the majority of CSA victims, the trauma of childhood sexual abuse was linked (directly or indirectly) to a wide range of negative adult outcomes, including depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, relationship difficulties, and substance abuse.

Investigators have also studied many behavioral outcomes of CSA and other forms of family violence. Typically, the focus is on whether abuse victims have a greater likelihood of becoming victims or perpetrators of family violence as adults. The relationship between childhood victimization and adult offending or victimization in the family context is one of the most established relationships in the empirical literature, including cross-cultural studies (Bassuck, Dawson, & Huntington, 2006; Bensley et al., 2003; Feerick & Haugaard, 1999; Corvo, 2006; Jin et al., 2007; Kalmuss, 1984; Kerley, Xu, Sirisunyaluck, & Alley, 2010; Kernsmith, 2006; Mihalic & Elliott, 1997; Schewe et al., 2006; Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980; Swinford et al., 2000; Whitfield, Anda, Dube, & Felitti, 2003). One of the first studies to identify this relationship was the National Family Violence Survey conducted by Straus et al. (1980). The authors found that males and females who had experienced higher levels of physical abuse (direct exposure) as children were more likely to engage in violence against their spouses and children as adults. In addition to the long-term effects of this direct victimization, Straus et al. (1980) and Kalmuss (1984) further established that males and females who had witnessed parental violence (indirect exposure) as children were also significantly more likely to abuse their adult partners than children who did not witness such abuse. Based on a meta-analysis of over 160 studies, Stith et al. (2000) concluded that children growing up in an abusive home have a significant, albeit not statistically large, likelihood of being involved in a violent romantic relationship in adulthood.

Focusing more specifically on child sexual abuse (CSA), it is established in the literature that individuals who have been sexually molested as children have an increased likelihood of being a perpetrator of adult intimate partner violence (Bassuck et al., 2006; Widom, 1989). Whitfield et al. (2003) found that children who were victims of physical or sexual abuse as children were significantly more likely than children who were not abused to become perpetrators and victims of family violence in adulthood. As adults, abused children often display violence towards their children (Straus et al., 1980; Widom, 1989). Murrell, Christoff, and Henning (2007) found that individuals who perpetrate intimate partner violence and who were abused as children were more likely to abuse their own children than batterers who were not abused. Men who not only witnessed domestic violence as children, but also were abused themselves, committed the most severe offenses of all batterers (Downs, Smyth, & Miller, 1996; Kalmuss, 1984; Murrell et al., 2007). In short, the focus of most investigators has been on how childhood victimization for CSA or other forms of family violence is related to adult behavioral outcomes in the familial context.

This line of research has expanded to include a broader range of criminal outcomes associated with child sexual abuse. A small but developing literature over the past decade and a half has addressed whether children who are CSA victims are more likely to become juvenile and adult offenders over time (Spano, Rivera, & Bolland, 2010; Swanston et al., 2003; Widom, 1995; Widom, 1996; Widom & Maxfield, 2001). This topic is the primary focus of our review. Although many studies find a link between being a victim of CSA and the propensity to become a juvenile or adult offender, most CSA victims do not grow up to be delinquents or criminals (Widom & Maxfield, 2001). Other researchers have found that CSA is more of a general risk factor for a range of criminal and deviant outcomes among victims (Putman, 2003;

Romans, Martin, & Mullen, 1997). This variation in outcomes may be associated with the nature of the abuse, the severity of the abuse, and the relationship between the victim and perpetrator (Beitchman et al., 1992; Bennett, Hughes, & Luke, 2000; Glasser, Kolvin, Campbell, Glasser, & Farrelly, 2001).

Thus, although there has been an increase in interest among sociologists, psychologists, criminologists, and family researchers regarding the criminal outcomes of CSA, little attempt has been made to synthesize the empirical findings from this research over the past two decades. Here we address this issue by reviewing the empirical literature on who is most likely to become a victim of child sexual abuse and by exploring whether victimization increases victims' propensity to commit crimes as juveniles or adults. We have identified 20 empirical studies that focus specifically on this issue. Additionally, to the extent that CSA increases criminal propensity, we explore which types of crimes victims are most likely to commit. We conclude with a critique of the current empirical literature and offer a call for more research on the criminal outcomes of CSA victims.

1.1. Theoretical framework

In studies of the relationship between child sexual abuse and criminal outcomes, investigators often use a distinctive theoretical framework. This framework draws extensively from social learning theories, and is often referred to as the “Cycle of Violence” or the “Intergenerational Transmission of Family Violence” (Corvo, 2006; Corvo & Carpenter, 2000; Felson & Lane, 2009; Kerley et al., 2010; Kernsmith, 2006; Mihalic & Elliott, 1997; Widom, 1995, 1996; Widom & Maxfield, 2001). Parallel research streams from criminologists, psychologists, and sociologists suggest this framework for understanding how child sexual abuse (or exposure to other forms of abuse) is linked to adult criminal outcomes. Sutherland (1939) contended that individuals learn criminal behaviors, much like other behaviors, through a process of socialization in inmate groups such as family and peer groups. Within these intimate groups, they learn both criminal attitudes (e.g., ways to neutralize guilt, ways to deny responsibility) and criminal actions (e.g., how to commit crimes, how to elude detection by police). Bandura (1977) asserted that individuals tend to model the behaviors of authority figures and others whom they consider influential. The likelihood of modeling behavior is increased if the observed behavior is perceived to create a desired outcome. Children exposed directly (e.g., experience of emotional, physical, or sexual abuse) or indirectly (e.g., witnessing or hearing a parent or relative being emotionally, physically, or sexually abused) to violence in the family of origin may develop norms about the suitability of violence to address specific circumstances. More recently, Akers (2009) extended Sutherland's work to highlight the importance of positive and negative reinforcements in the learning process. Children exposed to family violence learn not only the rationale and commission of violence, but if the violence is perceived to “solve problems,” it may be even more likely to be replicated as victims enter adolescence and adulthood.

According to this framework, a history of family abuse may predispose victims to violence in later years. Over time, a pro-abuse set of family norms may emerge that increases the likelihood that children exposed to violence may be at greater risk of becoming violent offenders as adults. Thus, individuals who have been victims of CSA should be more likely to commit offenses as juveniles and as adults than those who were not victims of CSA. Felson and Lane (2009) contend that individuals who are sexually abused as children have learned the behavior and corresponding justification, and will often replicate it as they become sexual perpetrators later in life. Burton, Miller, and Shill (2002) found that male delinquents learned their sexually aggressive behaviors from their own sexual victimization experiences in childhood. Although our goal here is not to assess the veracity of this theoretical framework, it is important to understand the approach taken by most investigators as they study how child sexual abuse is related to youthful and adult criminal behaviors.

2. Demographic profile of sexual abuse victims

There is great diversity among victims of child sexual abuse in the United States in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (Alaggia & Millington, 2008; Ramsey-Klawnsnik, Teaster, Mendiondo, Marcum, & Abner, 2008; Tyler & Cauce, 2002; Yin & Luo, 1998). Avery, Diane Hutchinson, and Whitaker (2002) found that 62% of women and 31% of men are victims of childhood sexual assault while others estimate that between 12 and 35% of women and 4 to 9% of men are sexually abused before the age of 18 (Daignault, Hebert, Parent, Piche, & Tremblay, 2006). Of those sexual assaults of children reported to police authorities, girls are much more likely to be victims than boys. In fact, several studies estimate that well over 80% of victims of sexual assault are female (Douglas & Finkelhor, 2005; Finkelhor et al., 2008; Kendall-Tackett & Simon, 1992; Snyder, 2000).

Age also is a significant correlate of child sexual abuse. Perhaps not surprisingly, juveniles experience sexual assault at a higher rate than adults. Snyder (2000) found that each individual age group between 3 and 17 had more victims than any individual age group over 17. Juveniles between the ages of 12 and 17 made up 81% of victims in national estimates. Finkelhor et al. (2008) found that one in every six victims of forcible fondling, sodomy, and sexual assault with an object were under 12 years of age. Children who are four years of age had the greatest risk of being sexually abused, especially boys.

In addition to gender and age, there are several other predictors of child sexual assault victimization. Children from lower-income families are more at risk of becoming victims of CSA (Douglas & Finkelhor, 2005). More specifically, children that reside in households with a family income of less than \$10,000 are more likely to be victims of CSA (Avery et al., 2002). Child sexual abuse is also higher among those who live with a step-father. Children who live in homes where they witness alcoholism, drug abuse, intimate partner violence, and divorce increase one's risk of becoming a victim of CSA (Avery et al., 2002).

3. Propensity of sexual abuse victims to become offenders

3.1. Propensity of victims to become juvenile offenders

In any discussion of the long-term impact of childhood victimization on adolescent and adult criminal outcomes, there must be a recognition of the difference between retrospective and prospective study designs. Retrospective studies typically use cross-sectional designs in which they ask respondents to recall childhood victimization and then attempt to link that victimization to adult behaviors. Prospective studies, by contrast, use longitudinal designs that identify children at a relatively young age and then record instances of abuse and later delinquent or criminal behaviors as they occur during the life course. Consider the example of the well-known "gateway hypothesis" regarding drug use. When investigators study hardcore drug users (retrospective design), inevitably they find that these individuals experimented with cigarettes and marijuana during their pre-teen or early teenage years. In his study of heroin addicts, Faupel (1991) found that virtually all used cigarettes and marijuana extensively as youths. However, when investigators track a general population sample of children over time (prospective design), typically they find that cigarette smoking and marijuana use among youths is not a significant risk factor for hardcore drug use in adulthood (Kandel, 2002). Thus, although retrospective studies can yield important information, the more appropriate approach here is a prospective one. In our case, the focus is whether child sexual abuse increases the propensity for adolescent and adult criminal behaviors over the life course.

Despite the physical and socio-psychological trauma associated with child sexual abuse, not all victims will become delinquents. Nevertheless, their chances are greater than for those who are not abused as children (Felson & Lane, 2009; Widom, 1995; Widom & Maxfield, 2001). Avery et al. (2002) found that victims of several forms of childhood

abuse and neglect are at an increased risk of participating in delinquent behavior and adult criminality. Children who experience any type of abuse or neglect are more likely to be arrested than juveniles that had never experienced any type of abuse (Widom, 1995; Widom & Maxfield, 2001). The result of Widom's (1995) study was that CSA victims were more likely to become offenders than victims of other types of crimes. Smith and Thornberry (1995) found that maltreatment was related to both official and self-reported delinquency. Swanston et al. (2003) found that children with a history of sexual abuse are more likely to self-report criminal behavior but it was not a predictor of having a juvenile criminal record. History of child sexual abuse was clearly associated with self-reported criminal behaviors over the 9-year period of investigation (Swanston et al., 2003).

Although children who have been abused or neglected are more likely to become delinquents, the acts that they part take in differ depending upon the type of abuse suffered. Victims of sexual abuse are least likely to be arrested for a violent crime (Siegel & Williams, 2003; Widom & Maxfield, 2001). However, Gault-Sherman, Silver, and Sigfusdottir (2009) found that children who were sexually abused were more likely to engage in violence. One of the most common non-violent delinquent behaviors sexually abused children participate in is running away. Children who are sexually abused are most likely to run away compared to other abused or neglected children and non-victims. Victims who experienced sexual abuse in addition to physical abuse or neglect were the most likely to run away (Siegel & Williams, 2003; Widom, 1995; Widom, 1996). Smith (1988) found that in a sample of male juvenile sex offenders who were in the Juvenile Offenders Program, the more violent offenses were committed by juveniles who had been sexually abused. In a second sample, which was drawn after major revisions to the survey instrument in 1981, indicated that the more violent offenses were committed by juveniles who had experienced either physical or sexual abuse, but only if the abuse occurred over an extended period of time.

CSA victims not only participate in criminal behaviors but also in other maladaptive behaviors. Children who were sexually abused exhibit maladaptive behaviors, such as delinquency, and display a significantly greater number of behavioral problems than children who were not abused (Friedrich, Beilke, & Urquiza, 1987). Chandy, Blum, and Resnick (1996) found that a greater proportion of teenagers who had been sexually abused reported involvement in several crimes, such as vandalism, hitting others, fighting, stealing, forcing sex, and prostitution, as well as deviant behaviors such as cheating in school compared to those who had not been sexually abused. Additionally, Chandy et al. (1996) found that male CSA victims were more likely to commit criminal and deviant acts than female CSA victims. Although CSA victims in the general population have a small likelihood of committing especially violent offenses (e.g., rape, manslaughter, homicide), Hussey, Chang, and Kotch (2006) and Swanston et al. (2003) found that they have higher rates of aggression towards others. Specifically, Hussey et al. (2006) report that children who had a history of sexual abuse victimization were more likely to get into fights and to injure others to the point that medical attention was required.

Not only have studies researched violent behavior in adolescents who have been sexually abused, but some have looked specifically at their propensity to commit sexual crimes. One study found that male delinquents who participate in sexually abusive behaviors tend to have been sexually abused themselves (Burton et al., 2002). Smith (1988) found that the delinquents who reveal a history of sexual abuse were at a higher risk for committing a serious sexual offense during adolescence. The author also found that offenders that were sexually abused as children were more likely to target younger children as their victims. Although some research indicates that those who are sexually abused are more likely to commit a sexual offense, Widom (1995) did not come to the same conclusion. Widom (1995) found that victims of physical abuse, but not sexual abuse, were at a higher risk for committing sexual crimes such as rape or sodomy.

3.2. Propensity of victims to become adult offenders

Just as CSA victims do not all become delinquents after the traumatic experience, not all CSA victims grow up to be adult offenders with extensive criminal histories (Felson & Lane, 2009; Widom, 1995; Widom & Maxfield, 2001). With that caveat, the empirical literature indicates that sexually abused children do have higher rates of arrests compared to children who did not experience sexual or other forms of abuse (Widom, 1995, 1996). Women who have been sexually abused as children are four times more likely to be arrested for a crime than those who did not experience any type of abuse, and CSA victims are more likely to be arrested for violent crimes (Siegel & Williams, 2003). Although CSA victims are more likely to be arrested as adults than non-abused children, compared to children who experienced non-sexual physical abuse and neglect, they were no more likely to be arrested as adults (Felson & Lane, 2009). Widom (1995) found that children who experienced sexual abuse were no more likely to be charged with a crime as an adult than those who were physically abused or neglected. Children who experience abuse and neglect, in general, were more likely to be arrested as adults, especially for sex crimes (Widom, 1995; Widom & Maxfield, 2001). Put very simply, children who are not abused are least likely to be arrested as adults, those who are sexually abused have an increased chance of being arrested, and those who are physically abused or neglected have an even higher chance of arrest.

In the case of sexual crimes committed as adults, there appears to be a relationship with child sexual abuse. Felson and Lane (2009) found that adult offenders who experienced sexual abuse were more likely to commit sexual offenses than nonviolent offenses and the odds of committing a sexual offense against a child was more than 8 times higher if the offender had been sexually abused. Romano and De Luca (1997) found that 75% of sexual abusers were sexually abused themselves as children. Widom (1995) found that CSA victims were almost 5 times more likely to be arrested as an adult for a sex crime. Compared to children who had been physically abused, children who were sexually abused were less likely to be arrested for any sex crime (Widom, 1995, 1996).

Glasser et al. (2001) found that far fewer female victims of sexual abuse committed a sexual offense as compared to male sexual abuse victims. Females make up the majority of sexual assault victims; however, they do not often commit violent sexual offenses. It is well known in the literature that males commit more violent crimes than females. According to the “cycle of violence” perspective referenced previously, those who are sexually abused as children may learn the corresponding criminal attitudes and behaviors and thus commit sexual offenses as adults (Glasser et al., 2001; Widom, 1995). Sexual abuse has been linked to sexual deviancy, but not necessarily more violent sexual offense (Glasser et al., 2001; Widom, 1995, 1996; Widom & Maxfield, 2001). One reason that males commit more violent sexual offenses than females who were victims of CSA is that males may suffer from more traumatic effects of the abuse than females. Males may also view themselves as self-reliant and therefore capable of preventing the abuse, and when the abuse does occur they tend to internalize it and not seek out help. Prostitution is the only crime in which individuals who have experienced CSA were more likely to be charged with than individuals who experienced physical abuse or neglect. Widom (1995) found that female CSA victims were 27 times more likely to be charged with prostitution as an adult than those who did not experience any type of abuse.

Sexually abused children are less likely to be arrested for a violent crime than children who experienced physical abuse or neglect (Widom & Maxfield, 2001). Children who were sexually abused did not report starting fights as children as often as violent offenders (Haapasalo & Kankkonen, 1997). Widom (1995) found that children who were physically abused, as opposed to sexually abused, showed a greater tendency toward all types of violent crimes (including violent sexual crimes). She suggests that it could be the violent aspects of child sexual abuse and rape, rather than the sexual aspect, explain the association

between physical abuse and violent sex offenses. This finding appears consistent with notion that “violence begets violence.”

Although most investigators have studied the relationship between child sexual abuse and subsequent offending using general population data, others have studied this relationship among those in captive contexts. While most CSA victims do not become delinquents or adult criminals, the rates of CSA in inmate populations tend to be much higher than rates of CSA in the general population (Fondacaro, Holt, & Powell, 1999). Smith (1988) found that between 19 and 32% of juvenile offenders had been victims of sexual abuse while Fondacaro et al. (1999) found that over 40% of prisoners in the study met the standard criteria for being victims of CSA with an average age of abuse of 10.4 years. Wijkman, Bijleveld, and Hendriks (2010) found that of women who were incarcerated for sexual offenses, 31% had been sexually abused themselves. Other studies have also indicated that individuals who have experienced some form of sexual abuse as children were at an increased risk of coming into contact with the justice system either as a juvenile or adult (Darby, Allan, & Kashani, 1998; Felson & Lane, 2009; Gover, 2004). Haapasalo and Kankkonen (1997) found that incarcerated sex offenders were more likely to have experienced CSA than non-sexual violent offenders who were also incarcerated.

4. Methodological and statistical limitations of prior research

As with any emerging topic, there are many methodological and statistical issues to consider when studying child sexual abuse and later adolescent or adult crime. First, there is substantial variation in the measurement of CSA and youthful or adult crime. Swanston et al. (2003) assert that child sexual abuse encompasses a wide variety of incidents; however, some researchers use very narrow definitions (Glasser et al., 2001). Some have used official records to determine if their respondents were victims of CSA (Friedrich et al., 1987; Siegel & Williams, 2003; Widom, 1989, 1995, 1996) while others have determined victimization by asking one or more questions on a self-report survey (Burton et al., 2002; Felson & Lane, 2009; Gault-Sherman et al., 2009; Gover, 2004; Hussey et al., 2006). Using only children who have reported sexual abuse to police authorities excludes those who did not report and may reflect only the most serious cases of CSA (Douglas & Finkelhor, 2005). Additionally, most studies define sexual abuse as physical contact of a sexual nature and thus eliminate experiences of sexual abuse with no physical contact. Examples of the latter include sexual harassment or innuendo and exposure to pornography or other sexual images (Fassler, Amodeo, Griffin, Clay, & Ellis, 2005; Felson & Lane, 2009; Romano & De Luca, 1997; Swanston et al., 2003). Another issue with the definition of CSA is that some studies consider sexual abuse by any person (Felson & Lane, 2009), while others consider only sexual abuse between adult offenders and child victims (Fassler et al., 2005; Gover, 2004; Hussey et al., 2006; Romano & De Luca, 1997). Cases of child v. child or teenager v. child sexual abuse thus would be ignored if a restricted definition of CSA were used. To summarize, most studies reviewed here do not use the same definition of child sexual abuse, and thus it is difficult to compare results and to replicate studies.

Likewise, investigators have used a wide array of measures for juvenile delinquency and adult crime. Many investigators have measured these constructs in terms of official arrests for certain types of offenses (Siegel & Williams, 2003; Smith & Thornberry, 1995; Widom, 1989, 1995, 1996; Widom & Maxfield, 2001). There are many potential limitations of using only official police statistics. These include the high number of delinquent and criminal acts that do not result in arrest (the “dark figure of crime”) and the inherent race and class biases in police data (Smith & Thornberry, 1995). Childhood sexual abuse is a severely underreported crime and so using official statistics is even more problematic than with other crimes (Smith & Thornberry, 1995). As a remedy to these problems with police data, Swanston et al. (2003) and others have used self-report surveys to measure youthful and adult criminal behaviors. This methodological approach is not without limitations either as respondents may under-report or over-report their victimization and offending, while others may

have problems with recalling exact details, especially if a significant amount of time has elapsed or if they have a history of drug abuse. Ideally investigators studying CSA and offending would use both police data and self-report surveys. [Smith and Thornberry \(1995\)](#), for example, used police arrest data and a self-report scale of 32 delinquency items. By utilizing both types of data for measuring delinquency and adult criminality, the authors were able to understand more in-depth how child maltreatment affected the likelihood of delinquency.

Second, in addition to not having a consensus on the definition of child sexual abuse and how to measure it, researchers also have different definitions of “children.” [Swanston et al. \(2003\)](#) studied children ages 4 to 15, [Friedrich et al. \(1987\)](#) studied children between the ages of 3 and 12 when the abuse occurred, and [Widom \(1989\)](#) studied only children who were age 11 or younger at the time of the abuse. Other studies considered children who were younger than 18 ([Felson & Lane, 2009](#)), 17 ([Fassler et al., 2005](#)), or 16 ([Gault-Sherman et al., 2009](#); [Romano & De Luca, 1997](#)). When studying a child's propensity to become delinquent, using children who are younger is sufficient. However, when looking at the propensity to become an adult offender, limiting the age range of the children being studied limits what can be learned. A better understanding of how sexual abuse affects a child's propensity to become an adult offender would occur if a consistent definition of under age 18 were used.

Third, there is variation in the type of dataset used to study the criminal outcomes of victims of child sexual abuse ([Howing, Wodarski, Kurtz, Gaudin, & Herbst, 1990](#)). Most of the studies conducted on this subject have been cross-sectional, which tend to be retrospective in nature. These types of studies are problematic because they rely solely on respondents' reports of past events, often over very long time periods, and the passing of time may result in less accurate memories of the abuse ([Briere, 1992](#)). Longitudinal studies are preferred because of the heightened ability to pinpoint the sequencing of sexual abuse and crimes over the life course ([Briere, 1992](#); [Swanston et al., 2003](#); [Widom, 1989, 1995, 1996](#)). Even longitudinal studies, however, are not without limitations. In addition to the typical issues of survey design and sample attrition, some studies may only be able to estimate the relationship between child sexual abuse and later criminality ([Briere, 1992](#); [Howing et al., 1990](#)). For example, if a child was enrolled into a longitudinal study (e.g., National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health) at age 10, but the sexual abuse began at age 5, it would be difficult to determine the exact sequencing of abuse and crime. Similarly, if the subject had already committed delinquent acts before enrollment in a longitudinal study, but had not yet experienced sexual abuse, there would be challenges in determining causation.

Fourth, several studies reviewed here are limited because of inadequate sample sizes ([Darby et al., 1998](#); [Friedrich et al., 1987](#); [Romano & De Luca, 1997](#); [Swanston et al., 2003](#)). The small sample sizes provide insufficient statistical power and make comparisons more difficult. According to [Briere \(1992\)](#) and [Howing et al. \(1990\)](#), small sample sizes in studies of sexual abuse decrease the ability to detect a significant relationship. [Swanston et al.'s \(2003\)](#) study consisted of only 99 individuals who fit the study criterion of abused or not abused. They found that sexual abuse was a significant predictor of juvenile delinquency but due to the small sample they could not adjust for ethnicity nor could they run a separate analysis of the abused group. Moreover, a small sample size can lead to a large standard error, and thus is less likely to approximate the study population. A small sample then leads to the inability to generalize to a larger population. When there is an insufficient sample size to run multivariate tests, such as regression analysis, the researcher is potentially enlarging the error and producing misleading results ([Briere, 1992](#)). It is important to note that some of the more recent studies have used larger samples ([Felson & Lane, 2009](#); [Gault-Sherman et al., 2009](#); [Gover, 2004](#); [Hussey et al., 2006](#)), thus making their results more generalizable.

Fifth, another issue with the majority of studies is the lack of an appropriate comparison group ([Howing et al., 1990](#); [Widom, 1996](#)). Many studies do not match the comparison group on important variables, although some studies have made the attempt to do so ([Friedrich et al., 1987](#); [Siegel & Williams, 2003](#); [Smith & Thornberry, 1995](#); [Swanston et al.,](#)

[2003](#); [Widom, 1989, 1995, 1996](#); [Widom & Maxfield, 2001](#)). [Briere \(1992\)](#) argues that since sexual abuse is not randomly assigned, researchers cannot ensure that the abused subjects and the comparison subjects are equivalent in all other respects. [Widom \(1989\)](#) created a comparison group on several key socio-demographic measures, including race, gender, socioeconomic status, and age, and made an attempt to compare abused and non-abused subjects. Instead of trying to match subjects, [Briere \(1992\)](#) argues that it is better to draw a representative sample from the same population. Many of the more recent studies do use large representative samples from the population they are studying, ranging from over 800 to just under 14,000 ([Chandy et al., 1996](#); [Felson & Lane, 2009](#); [Gault-Sherman et al., 2009](#); [Glasser et al., 2001](#); [Hussey et al., 2006](#)).

Sixth, prior studies often focus on a specific group of abuse victims. [Briere \(1992\)](#) notes that most of the early studies restricted themselves to female victims. While some studies have used representative samples of the general population ([Chandy et al., 1996](#); [Fassler et al., 2005](#); [Gault-Sherman et al., 2009](#); [Hussey et al., 2006](#); [Siegel & Williams, 2003](#)), many have focused on prisoners or those in treatment facilities ([Burton et al., 2002](#); [Felson & Lane, 2009](#); [Gover, 2004](#)), those who have committed a sexual offense ([Romano & De Luca, 1997](#); [Smith, 1988](#)), those in a clinical setting ([Glasser et al., 2001](#); [Friedrich et al., 1987](#)), or dependents of the state ([Widom, 1989, 1995, 1996](#); [Widom & Maxfield, 2001](#)). The scope of the research has become broader over time, but many researchers still focus on very specific populations thus making the results less generalizable to other populations.

Seventh, a final issue is the temporal order between CSA and delinquency/crime ([Briere, 1992](#); [Smith & Thornberry, 1995](#)). The precise temporal relationship between CSA and the propensity to commit delinquent acts and crimes is difficult to pinpoint and often not addressed in the empirical literature ([Briere, 1992](#)). One explanation is that delinquent behavior produces family dysfunction, which then produces sexual abuse. Another explanation is that family dysfunction produces sexual abuse, which then produces delinquent behavior, and then crime in adulthood. Some researchers have drawn attention to the possibility that delinquency is stable over time and that instead of sexual abuse leading to delinquency, it may be that delinquency leads to unstable parenting ([Smith & Thornberry, 1995](#)). It would be beneficial in future studies for researchers to control for early onset of delinquency. In general, non-linear modeling techniques are needed to account for potentially non-recursive relationships between CSA and juvenile delinquency or adult crime.

5. Conclusions and future directions

Child sexual abuse (CSA) has been suggested as a precursor to criminal and deviant behaviors in adolescence and adulthood. Indeed, there has been an increase in interest among sociologists, psychologists, criminologists, and family researchers regarding the criminal outcomes of CSA. However, little attempt has been made to synthesize the empirical findings from this research over the past two decades. Here we addressed this issue by reviewing 20 empirical studies on who is most likely to become a victim of child sexual abuse, whether victimization increases victims' propensity to commit crimes as juveniles and as adults, and what types of crimes CSA victims are most likely to commit.

Overall, despite important findings derived from the studies reviewed on the relationship between child sexual abuse and criminal behaviors in adolescence and adulthood, there are several important limitations. Issues such as: 1) definitions of child sexual abuse and delinquency/crime, 2) definitions of children, 3) use of cross-sectional versus longitudinal research designs, 4) inadequate sample size, 5) lack of appropriate comparison groups, 6) a focus on special populations, and 7) temporal order make it difficult to compare results of different studies, to replicate previous studies, and to generalize the findings beyond the study population ([Briere, 1992](#)). Our hope is that investigators will continue to study child sexual abuse and criminal offending with these methodological and statistical issues in mind.

6. Summary table of major studies

Study	Size and source of study sample	Major finding(s)
Wijkman et al. (2010)	672 cases of registered female sex offenders between 1994 and 2005 in the Netherlands; 598 of the cases could be linked to a criminal record; 33% of the cases were dropped for technical reasons leaving a final sample of 337; 128 of the offenders were sexual offenders; in 17 of the cases no court records could be found leaving a final sample of 111.	16% of the sample had been physically or psychologically abused as children and 31% had reported being sexually abused. Of those that were sexually abused 20% had been abused by a family member. The median age for the abuse was 8 with a duration of 7 years. One third of the women abused their own children. The abuse though is often carried out with an intimate male accomplice.
Felson and Lane (2009)	13,964 male prisoners in state and federal prisons who were convicted of a serious crime	Inmates who were sexually abused as children were 8 times more likely to commit a sexual offense against a child. Those who had been sexually abused as children were 2.3 times more likely of committing nonviolent offenses than those not abused. Found that the sexual crimes committed by individuals who were sexually abused as children are consistent with social learning theories.
Gault-Sherman et al. (2009)	2004 Junior College Questionnaire; 8949 aged 16 and older	Those who were sexually abused as children were more likely to engage in theft and violence as juvenile. The authors found no gender effect of sexual abuse on violent behavior or theft. These results are inconsistent with other studies.
Hussey et al. (2006)	Add Health Study 1994–1995 and 2001–2002	4.5% of respondents indicated that they were victims of sexual abuse. The findings from this study indicate that children who had a history of sexual abuse are more likely to get into serious fights and to hurt others badly enough to require medical attention.
Fassler et al. (2005)	290 females ages 21 & older self-administered questionnaire	The authors found no difference between the abused and non-abused women on education, race, marital status, or household income.
Gover (2004)	588 inmates from 6 correctional facilities	Individuals who experienced childhood sexual abuse were found to be at an increased risk of coming into contact with the juvenile justice system.
Siegel and Williams (2003)	411 mostly African American, low-income women 206 reported being sexually abused and 205 with no record of sexual abuse. The abuse occurred between the ages of 1 and 12.	Those who were sexually abused were not more likely than the comparison group to be arrested for running away, controlling for dependency status. The odds for an arrest for violent offenses as a juvenile was 2.1 times higher than the comparison group. As adults, the women who were sexually abused were 4 times more likely to be arrested than those not abused. As adults, children who experienced sexual abuse were more likely to be arrested for drug offenses and violent crimes.
Swanston et al. (2003)	99 sexually abused children ages 4 to 15 who presented to the child protection units after going to a hospital in Sydney, Australia between 1988 and 1990; all had a follow up 9 years later; 84 non-abused children were used if they had an official juvenile criminal record.	The study found that sexual abuse was a significant predictor of juvenile criminal activity compared to the non-abused control group. Those who were in the sexual abuse group were also found to be more aggressive, regardless of gender, than the non-abused individuals.
Burton et al. (2002)	471 male delinquent youths in 3 Michigan treatment facilities; 272 in sexual offender sites and 199 non- sexual offenders	Of the 272 sexual offenders almost 80% reported having been sexually victimized while only 46.7% of the non sexual offenders reported being sexually victimized.
Glasser et al. (2001)	843 subjects were randomly selected from 25,000 patients who attended a clinic between 1985 and 1990; 747 (88.6%) were male and 97 (11.4%) were female; the abuser group consisted of 225 (30% of all males) men and 2 (2% of all females) women	Of those who were victims of sexual abuse, 2% of the females and 79% of the males were also perpetrators of sexual abuse. The study also found that male victims who were sexually abused by females, especially if it were a mother or sister, were more likely to become perpetrators than males that were sexually abused by other males.
Widom and Maxfield (2001)	1575 Midwestern children who were 11 years of age or younger at the time of abuse; arrested records examine in 1988 and reexamined in 1994; matched group had no abuse	Abused and neglected children were more likely to be arrested as juveniles and adults, and for violent offenses compared to those who were not abused or neglected. Those who suffered physical history of abuse or neglect as opposed to sexual abuse or neglect were most likely to be arrested for a violent crime. Victims of sexual abuse were least likely to have been arrested for a violent crime.
Darby et al. (1998)	112 juveniles ages 14–17; prosecuted and convicted of a homicide related crime	Females who committed homicide were more likely to report family abuse than males. Individuals who experienced sexual abuse were younger when they committed homicide than subjects who did not experience sexual abuse.
Romano and De Luca (1997)	24 males who committed sexual offenses against children; recruited from correctional facilities	Of those who were sexual abusers, 75% were sexually abused themselves as children.
Chandy et al. (1996)	Minnesota Adolescent Health Survey 1986–1987; 370 males and 2681 females; reported being sexually abused	Greater portion of males reported involvement in vandalism, hitting another person, group fighting, stealing, forcing sex, involvement in prostitution, and cheating on a test than female adolescents
Widom (1996)	908 individuals who had been subjected to physical abuse or sexual abuse or neglect and a matched group of 667 who had not been maltreated; all were 11 years of age or younger when the abuse occurred	Being sexually abused was not associated with an increase risk for being arrested for a sex crime. Children who were sexually abused were about as likely as those in the control group and less likely than those who had been physically abused or neglected to be arrested for any sex crime. Those who were victims of sexual abuse were more likely to be runaways. Compared to males who had been physically abused or neglected, male childhood sexual abuse victims were not at an increased risk to be arrested for rape or sodomy.
Smith and Thornberry (1995)	Multi-wave panel interviewing youth and primary caretakers every 6 months for 4.5 year	Maltreatment was related to both official and self reported delinquency. Maltreatment subjects were arrested 1.4 times while those who were not maltreated were arrested .8 times.
Widom (1995)	908 individuals who had been subjected to physical or sexual abuse or neglect and a matched group of 667 who had not been maltreated; all were 11 years of age or younger when the abuse occurred	Those who were victims of sexual abuse were found to be no more likely to become involved with crime than any other type of abuse victim. Individuals who were victims of sexual abuse and physical

Table (continued)

Study	Size and source of study sample	Major finding(s)
Widom (1989)	908 abused children under the age of 11; control group of 667	abuse or neglect were more likely than those subjected to other types of maltreatment to be arrested for running away as juveniles. Sexual abuse victims were as likely as neglect victims to be arrested for any sex crime but less likely to be arrested than victims of physical abuse. Those who were sexually abused were significantly more likely to be arrested as an adult for a sex crime and prostitution than non victims. Individuals who were sexually abused were no more likely to be charged with a crime later in life than individuals who were physically abused or neglected as children.
Smith (1988)	450 male juvenile sexual offenders who were in the Juvenile Offenders Program within the Adolescent Clinic of The University of Washington between 1976 and 1983. Sample 1 constitutes all of those interviewed before the major survey revision in 1981. Sample 2 consists of all those interviewed after the revisions.	Those who experienced sexual abuse during childhood were at an increased risk for engaging in adolescent behavior. Also, those individuals were at an increased risk for engaging in adult offending and violence. Females who were sexually abused were at an increased risk for property, drug, and public order crimes, but not violent crimes. Compared to children who were physically abused or neglected, the sexually abused children were least likely to be arrested for violence.
Friedrich et al. (1987)	93 sexually abused children from local sexual assault center and 3 outpatient facilities, 64 non-sexually abused children from Psychiatric outpatients from 2 outpatient psychiatric facilities, and 78 nonsexually abused children from the local communities Sexually abused group (35 boys and 58 girls) Psychiatric outpatient group (23 boys and 41 girls) Community group (31 boys and 47 girls) Criteria for inclusion in sex abuse group: substantiation by at least 2 mandated agencies or at least one incident of sexual abuse in the past 18 months, the indentified child was between the ages of 3 and 12, the child had been living with the respondent for the past 4 months or longer, and no evidence of severe developmental disability.	Between 19 and 32% of offenders had themselves been sexually abused. Offenders who had committed more serious types of sexual offenses were those who had been sexually abused. Offenders who had been sexually abused were more likely to victimize younger children than those who had not been sexually abused. For those in sample 1 that had been referred for more violent sex offenses were committed by juveniles who had been sexually abused themselves. For sample 2 the more violent referral offenses were committed by juveniles who had experienced extensive physical or sexual abuse and those individuals who had a family member who was a sexual offender. Juvenile sex offenders who revealed a history of sexual abuse are at a high risk for committing serious sexual offenses. Maladaptive behaviors, including delinquency, exhibited by children who have been sexually abused are greater than for a typical sample from the general public. Sexually abused children display a significantly greater number of behavior problems than normal. Sexually abused children exhibited fewer total behavior problems overall than outpatients of the psychiatric group.

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