

Resources for the Prevention of Sexual Abuse



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By David Prescott and Alisa Klein

“ Helplessness and Hopelessness in Adolescents Who Commit Sexual and Nonsexual Crimes ”

AUTHORS

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THE QUESTIONS

What is the relationship between having been a victim of child maltreatment and the experience of helplessness and hopelessness in adolescence? What is the relationship between feelings of helplessness and hopelessness and the commission of sexual and nonsexual crimes by adolescents?

THE RESEARCH

The authors note that, broadly, research has found that childhood maltreatment experiences are associated with higher levels of aggressive behavior, sexual offending, and other antisocial behaviors, as well as other “negative emotional states,” such as anger, betrayal, fear, helplessness, hopelessness, blame, guilt, shame, humiliation, and others. The authors cite research by McCoy and Fremouw from 2010 that was unable, due to methodological limitations, to determine a causal relationship between negative emotional states and sexual offending behaviors. This prompted the current authors to examine the role of helplessness and hopelessness, two negative emotional states associated with trauma, and their relationship to subsequent criminal behaviors by adolescents.

In this study, Brown and Grady hypothesize that there will be a significant relationship between childhood maltreatment and higher rates of both helplessness and hopelessness, and that there will be a positive relationship between levels of helplessness and hopelessness in both sexual and nonsexual crimes. The authors collected data from 332 male youths between the ages of 12 and 20 who were living in secured juvenile detention centers and had been adjudicated for sexual offenses. They used the Millon Adolescent Clinical Inventory (MACI) and the Hopelessness Scale for Children to measure levels of helplessness and hopelessness; the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire to screen for traumatic experiences in childhood; the Self-Report Sexual Aggression Scale (SERSAS) to measure sexually aggressive behaviors; and the Self-Reported Delinquency (SRD) to assess nonsexual delinquency.

RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

The researchers found that higher levels of child maltreatment were indeed related to higher feelings of helplessness and hopelessness in their sample. While the feeling of hopelessness was strongly correlated with past emotional neglect, the feelings of both helplessness and hopelessness were strongly related to physical neglect. However, these feelings did not follow the same pattern with regard to criminal behavior. Specifically, higher levels of helplessness were associated with “more aggressive and forceful modes of sexual assault,” while feelings of hopelessness were not associated with any sexual crime characteristics. Yet, feelings of helplessness and hopelessness were both associated with general delinquency. Interestingly, helplessness was associated with more subtypes of criminal behavior than hopelessness, including sexual crimes. The authors posit that feelings of helplessness may contribute to criminal behavior particularly when the youths experienced situations that reminded them of their own abuse and neglect that is associated with feeling helpless.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONALS

Perhaps the clearest implication of this study is that professionals involved in assessing and treating youth who abuse will be most effective when they work with a deep understanding of each client’s experience. While specialized treatment programs of the past focused on accountability and safety planning, little has been published on trauma sequelae such as hopelessness and helplessness. Although our field has a growing sensitivity to the adversity that our young clients have experienced, all too often it seems that sorting through the components of their response to these experiences remains a challenge. These findings help to pave the way. Simply attending to client experience of helplessness can be an excellent first step, remedied through various means, such as family involvement in treatment and support and mentorship within the community.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FIELD

Much has been written about the components of effective rehabilitation in programs in and around the criminal justice system. These are the principles of risk, need, and responsivity. Brown and Grady remind us that there is more to designing treatment programs than simply

addressing risk factors. Indeed, these findings highlight the importance of exploring what responsivity actually means with youth in treatment. How can we expect youth to respond to interventions if they can't first address the hopelessness and helplessness that serve as two of many possible barriers to meaningful change?

Finally, these findings add to the support for treatment programs for young people who have abused. Given that increased helplessness is correlated with increased aggression and severity of offending, it seems silly to believe that we can simply punish young people into compliance with the law.

ABSTRACT

The authors' purpose was to test the relationship of helplessness and hopefulness to experienced trauma, as well to explore the role of these emotions to sexual and nonsexual criminal behaviors among 332 residential youths adjudicated for sexual crimes. All subtypes of trauma measured were positively correlated with helplessness, whereas hopelessness was not associated with sexual or physical abuse. Helplessness was associated with the severity of sexual crimes, as well as the commission of multiple nonsexual crimes. Hopelessness was not associated to any sexual crime characteristics and only associated with general delinquency and property damage. In the regression models, controlling for trauma, helplessness predicted sexual and nonsexual criminality, and hopelessness predicted nonsexual criminality. Implications for practice, policy, and research are discussed.

CITATION

Brown, A. & Grady, M.D. (2018): Helplessness and Hopelessness in Adolescents who Commit Sexual and Nonsexual Crimes, *Victims & Offenders* , DOI: 10.1080/15564886.2018.1539687. Published online: 08 Nov 2018.