



## November 2017 NEARI Press Newsletter

By David Prescott and Alisa Klein

### **"Impact of Childhood Adversity and Out-of-Home Placement for Male Adolescents Who Have Engaged in Sexually Abusive Behavior"**

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#### **THE QUESTIONS**

Do out-of-home placements increase the likelihood that adolescent males who have endured Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) will display earlier onset of aggressive and sexually harmful behaviors?

#### **THE RESEARCH**

Previous research indicates that youth involved with child welfare and social service systems are 30 times more likely than children living with two biological parents to have experienced four or more ACEs. Further, a large number of out-of-home placements results in poor outcomes such as adult criminality, substance use, and risky sexual behavior for young adults. This study examined the records of 120 adolescent males who had received treatment for sexually abusive behavior. The authors determined the young men's total ACE scores, which capture the impact of their trauma; and calculated the number of out-of-home placements they had experienced. Out-of-home placements were defined as:

- Residing in the homes of family members or friends; or
- Being placed in foster care, group homes, residential treatment centers, and detention facilities.

Psychiatric placements were not included in the calculations because of their short duration and because they were related to mental health problems, not systems' direct responses to parental maltreatment.

## **RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS**

More than three quarters of the 120 adolescents studied had documented instances of four or more adverse events as defined by ACE scoring, and approximately one third of the adolescents had ACE scores that indicated they had experienced significant cumulative instances of abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction in earlier childhood. Ninety-three percent of the adolescents studied had at least one out-of-home placement, most frequently in a residential treatment center (86 percent), 48 percent in non-familial foster care, 45 percent in familial foster care, 45 percent in a group home, 39 percent in a detention facility, and 4 percent in a friend's home. The results suggest that the adolescents studied did indeed experience more cumulative trauma than the comparison group of community-based adult males, and that this trauma, along with out-of-home placement instability, were "significantly associated with the probability of onset of aggression and sexually abusive behaviors."

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONALS**

Many implications follow for those working at the front lines of sexual abuse. These include:

- Going the extra mile to recognize the symptoms and sequelae of childhood adversity. Not all adverse experiences result in traditional diagnoses such as PTSD (which developed out of clinical experience and research with adults). Just the same, the effects of adversity can be pervasive across a young person's life nonetheless. As the saying goes, we should not wonder what's wrong with a client but rather what happened to him or her.
- Understanding that trauma can be so pervasive that it is easy not to see. The symptoms and sequelae of trauma, including anxiety, depression, hypervigilance, irritability, and emotional numbing, can be so common in the daily experience of professionals that we may be tempted to minimize or ignore them. It can be very easy to lose sight of the fact that problematic and treatment-interfering behaviors are themselves symptoms and not just bad behavior.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FIELD**

Perhaps the most dramatic implications of this study are for our field and society beyond. Clearly, it's time to move beyond the "presenting problem" paradigm. While many people come to understand a person's symptoms as indicative of a specific diagnosis, these findings highlight the importance of "moving upstream" from presenting problems to a deeper understanding of how life experiences have affected each of our young clients.

Further, given the high number of ACEs experienced by our clients, approaches towards them should honor their resilience. It is worth considering how many professionals would endure adversity as well as these young people.

## **ABSTRACT**

Child maltreatment and household dysfunction have long been linked to delinquency, adult criminality, and sexual offending. However, the association between adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), factors related to out-of-home placement, and the onset of maladaptive behaviors has not thoroughly been explored in adolescents who have engaged in sexually abusive behavior. In the present study, we examined archival records of 120 male youths who have received treatment for sexually abusive behavior. As expected, the male adolescents in this sample have experienced higher rates of ACEs than samples of adult males in the community, adult males who committed sexual offenses, and juvenile justice-involved males as reported in the literature. Discrete-time survival analyses yielded increased risks of onset of aggression and sexually abusive behavior during early childhood and mid-to-late childhood, with significant associations between higher ACE scores and a greater number of out-of-home placements. Implications and future directions are discussed.

## **CITATION**

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