

Placement Instability and Juvenile Delinquency

Children who experience maltreatment are at increased risk of delinquency. Prior research indicates that anywhere from 9% to 29% of maltreated children engage in delinquent behavior¹. Despite the consensus that maltreatment increases the risk of delinquency, there is little agreement about the mechanisms responsible for this increase. This is problematic for delinquency theorists, child welfare practitioners, and policy makers interested in the development of effective social interventions. In the current study we compare delinquency rates for all maltreated and non-maltreated children in the city of Chicago and surrounding Cook County suburbs, identify which victims of abuse and neglect are more likely to engage in delinquency, and determine whether or not substitute care placement and placement instability mediates the experience of maltreatment and delinquency. We hypothesize that substitute care placement and especially the instability of such placements increases the risk of delinquency for maltreated children because it disrupts the social bonds that tie youth to significant caregivers and conventional institutions.

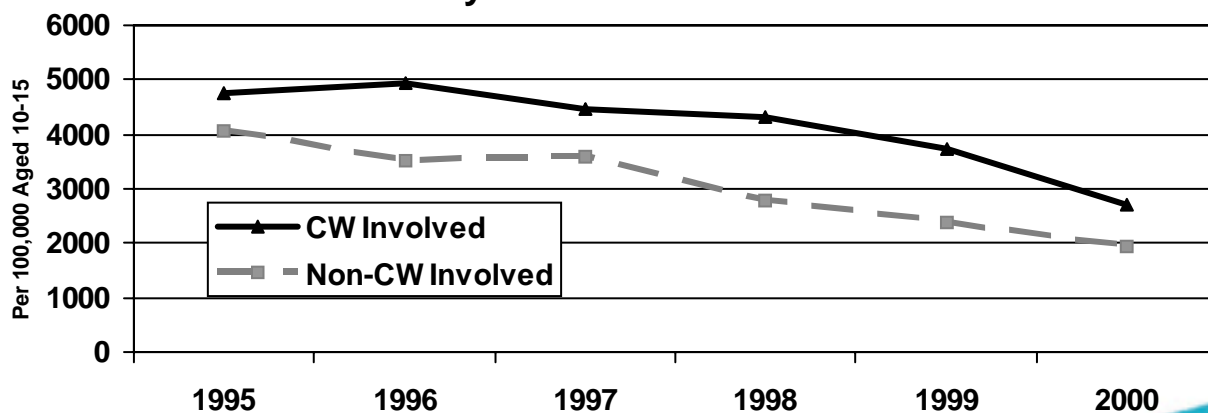
Methods and Results: To model the effects of placement and placement instability we analyzed two birth

cohorts: 18,676 children with at least one substantiated report of maltreatment born between January 1, 1983 and December 31, 1984. Data were available for each case from birth to eighteen years of age. The measure of delinquency included all petitions filed in the juvenile court. The children in the sample were 69% African American, 19% White and 12% Hispanic. On average, children were 6.3 years old at the time of the first substantiated report of maltreatment. Forty-eight percent of the sample was male.

Delinquency Rates: The delinquency rates for child welfare (CW) involved and non-involved youth are displayed in Figure 1. The trends for both groups indicate a steady decline between 1995 and 2000. The delinquency petition rates are consistently higher for CW-involved youth. These differences are greatest in 1998 and 1999 when the rate associated with CW-involved youth is 56% (4,330 vs. 2,780) and 57% (3,739 vs. 2,389) greater than the rate associated with non-CW youth.

Placement, Instability and Juvenile Delinquency: Overall, 8% of girls and 23% of boys had at least one delinquency petition subsequent to their first day in out-of-home placement. The odds of delinquency were much greater for this group of children relative to those who remained in the family home. Specifically, girls in

Figure 1
Cook County Juvenile Petition Rate: 1995-2000



School of Social Work
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

<http://cfrcwww.social.uiuc.edu>
cfrc@social.uiuc.edu
(217) 333-5837

placement were 2.11 times more likely and boys were 1.9 times more likely to be delinquent as compared with the children who remained in the family home. The effects of instability were less consistent. Placement instability increased the risk of delinquency for boys, but not girls. The increased risk of delinquency for boys was most noticeable after three or more placements.

Conclusion: Victims of child abuse and neglect are more likely to engage in juvenile delinquency relative to children in the general population. Using two birth cohorts of children with substantiated reports of maltreatment and

official delinquency petitions, we found that placement increases the risk of delinquency for boys and girls, and placement instability increases the risk of delinquency for boys. Given these findings it's important for future studies to address the following questions (1) what factors help explain instability, (2) how does instability impact the social bonds children create with positive individuals and institutions, and (3) if instability is unavoidable, how can child welfare systems support these positive social bonds? Addressing these questions will undoubtedly help in the development of effective prevention efforts.

Cross-Tabulations: Placement Characteristics and Delinquency, girls (n=9,766)		
	Not Delinquent	Delinquent
	n (%)	n (%)
Overall	9,339 (96)	427 (4)
Placement		
No placement	7,185 (97)	233 (3)
At least one placement	2,154 (92)	194 (8)
	$X^2 = 111.88, p < .001$	
Placement Instability (n=2,091)		
No change in placement	650 (94)	39 (6)
Two placements	400 (94)	26 (6)
Three placements	281 (97)	10 (3)
At least four placements	640 (93)	45 (7)
	$X^2 = 3.84, p > .05$	

Cross-Tabulations: Placement Characteristics and Delinquency, boys (n=8,910)		
	Not Delinquent	Delinquent
	n (%)	n (%)
Overall	7,666 (86)	1244 (14)
Placement		
No placement	5,875 (89)	697 (11)
At least one placement	1,791 (77)	547 (23)
	$X^2 = 234.86, p < .001$	
Placement Instability (n=1,994)		
No change in placement	574 (88)	77 (12)
Two placements	323 (89)	42 (11)
Three placements	202 (84)	39 (16)
At least four placements	581 (79)	156 (21)
	$X^2 = 28.84, p < .001$	

Joe Ryan & Mark Testa

References:

¹ Widom, C.S. (2003) Understanding Child Maltreatment and Juvenile Delinquency: The Research. In Wiig, J., Widom, C. S. & Tuell, J. (Eds) *Understanding Child Maltreatment and Juvenile Delinquency: From research to effective program, practice and systematic solutions*. CWLA Press: Washington D.C.