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العلاقة بين صدمات الطفولة والسلوك الإجرامي

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باحثة- الأردن

The Relationship between Childhood Trauma and Criminal Behavior

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الملخص:

تبحث هذه الدراسة في كيفية مساهمة التجارب الصادمة في مرحلة الطفولة في نشوء السلوك الإجرامي لدى الجناة؛ إذ تحدد أنواع وأشكال الصدمات الأكثر شيوعاً التي تعرضوا لها، وتكشف تصوراتهم حول هذه العلاقة، وتحلل المسارات التي تدفع من خلالها هذه التجارب نحو السلوك الإجرامي، وقد اعتمدت الدراسة منهجاً نوعياً قائماً على المقاربة الظاهرية (الفينومينولوجية) لرصد التجارب المعاشة للمشاركين وفهم الدلالات التي يضيفونها على صدمات الطفولة وعلاقتها بسلوكهم الإجرامي، وشملت عينة الدراسة خمسة عشر جانباً من الذكور -ممن مروا بتجارب صادمة في طفولتهم- في مراكز الإصلاح والتأهيل، حيث استخدم أسلوب العينة القصدية لاختيار مشاركين قادرين على تقديم رؤى غنية وذات صلة بموضوع الدراسة، وجمعت البيانات عبر مقابلات شبه منظمة أتاحت للمشاركين وصف تجاربهم بحرية، مع ضمان تغطية المحاور الرئيسية للبحث، وكشفت النتائج أن المشاركين عانوا من أشكال متعددة من المصاعب في طفولتهم، بما في ذلك الإيذاء العاطفي والجسدي، والإهمال، والعنف الأسري، وانفصال الوالدين، واختلال وظائف الأسرة، وقد أثرت هذه التجارب سلباً على قدرتهم على تنظيم مشاعرهم، وسلامتهم النفسية، وسلوكهم الاجتماعي، علاوة على ذلك، أفاد المشاركون بأن الصدمة النفسية أدت إلى زيادة العدوانية، وتدني احترام الذات، وتعاطي المخدرات، وضعف القدرة على اتخاذ القرارات، والانخراط مع أقران منحرفين، وهي عوامل ساهمت مجتمعة في سلوكهم الإجرامي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: صدمات الطفولة، تجارب الطفولة السلبية، السلوك الإجرامي، الجناة، نزلاء السجون.

Abstract:

This study explores how childhood traumatic experiences contribute to the development of criminal behavior among offenders. Specifically, it identifies the types and most common forms of trauma experienced by offenders, examine their perceptions of this relationship, analyzes the pathways through which these experiences drive criminal conduct. Utilizing a qualitative phenomenological design, the study captures participants lived experiences and the meanings they assign to childhood trauma in relation to their offending. The target population comprised 15 male offenders from correctional and rehabilitation centers who had experienced childhood trauma. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants capable of providing rich, relevant insights. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to describe their experiences freely while ensuring coverage of core research topics. Findings reveal that participants suffered multiple forms of childhood adversity, including emotional and physical abuse, neglect, domestic violence, parental separation, and household dysfunction. These experiences severely impaired emotional regulation, psychological well-being, and social behavior. Furthermore, participants reported that trauma led to heightened aggression, low self-esteem, substance abuse, impaired decision-making, and affiliation with delinquent peers—factors that collectively facilitated their criminal behavior.

Keywords: Childhood trauma, Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), criminal behavior, offenders, prison inmates.

Introduction

The childhood trauma framework is prominent within the social and behavioral sciences, as early traumatic experiences impose severe negative consequences, leading to short- and long-term psychopathology and legal system involvement. Childhood trauma primarily encompasses child abuse and neglect. These are defined as actions or omissions by parents or caregivers that professionals deem harmful or unethical, ultimately impairing the child's development (Baglivio, 2018). Child sexual abuse is defined as experiences involving an adult or older youth utilizing a child for sexual gratification. This includes, but is not limited to, rape, unwanted touching, threatened sexual violence, exhibitionism, and the exploitative use of children in pornography or sex work—exposures that yield deleterious, lifelong physical and mental health consequences. Conversely, emotional abuse represents the most prevalent form of childhood trauma. It stems from caregiver behaviors such as verbal harassment, emotional neglect, mockery, humiliation, shouting, intimidation, severe reprimands, age-inappropriate expectations, derogatory labeling, and unfavorable comparisons with peers (Cantürk et al., 2021).

Physical abuse involves non-accidental physical harm inflicted on individuals under the age of 18 by parents or caregivers. Such abuse typically manifests through behaviors like pushing, burning, biting, or severe corporal punishment aimed at enforcing obedience. Parallely, child neglect constitutes a complex social problem with far-reaching consequences. In a considerable number of cases, neglect occurs due to compromised parental mental health (depression, exposure to intimate partner violence, or chronic family illness) or a lack of social support systems required to meet the child's basic needs. Ultimately, children exposed to such trauma exhibit a wide range of psychological and behavioral difficulties, including psychiatric conditions, heightened aggression, antisocial orientation, and a propensity toward criminality. Unaddressed, the negative effects of childhood trauma persist across the lifespan, driving severe psychopathology into adulthood (Yao, 2023). Child abuse remains a critical public safety crisis, with statistics indicating that approximately 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 13 boys in the United States experience some form of maltreatment, whether physical, emotional, or sexual abuse, or neglect (National Children's Alliance). The short- and long-term consequences of childhood trauma have been researched extensively across the social sciences, psychology, and developmental neuroscience, reflecting a growing societal awareness of how early adversity shapes subsequent behavior and mental health. Recent scholarship demonstrates that childhood trauma exerts rippling effects on victims' decades after exposure, severely compromising career success (Whitten et al., 2024).

impairing romantic relationships and marital stability (Ortega et al., 2023), and significantly escalating the risk of chronic health conditions. Given the far-reaching impact of early adversity, this study aimed to examine the relationship between childhood trauma and the development of criminal behavior.

Research Problem and Questions

In recent years, crime rate rose significantly and people who commit crimes are younger. Crime has led to a lot of negative effects. For example, social instability, panic among the masses due to high crime rate, put pressure and cause harm in families. Moreover, after the criminals are released from prison, they will also bring a burden to the society and employment problems. Therefore, people began to pay attention to topics such as how to effectively prevent crime. In order to solve this problem completely, researchers have tried to find out the causes of crime through research.

According to some of the researches, the causes of crime are very diverse, but the most common one is "trauma" (Miley et al., 2020). While trauma can manifest across various stages of life, childhood trauma exerts a uniquely profound and enduring impact on human development. It is defined as exposure to severe physical or psychological adversity during early life that produces lasting negative effects on an individual's physical and mental health. These experiences encompass physical or psychological violence, social exclusion, abuse, domestic conflict, and severe accidents. Empirical research indicates that over 60% of children and adolescents experience at least one traumatic event by age 16, with more than 30% encountering multiple traumatic events (Yohros, 2023).

During childhood, human cognition remains in a formative state, as a fully consolidated psychological framework has yet to be established. Consequently, children are uniquely vulnerable to external stressors, making childhood trauma particularly disruptive to emotional growth, psychological stability, and cognitive development. Early adversity thus serves as a critical etiology for subsequent psychiatric problems, particularly those impairing moral reasoning and cognitive functioning. Empirical evidence indicates a strong correlation between childhood trauma, elevated rates of psychiatric disorders, and compromised cognitive performance (Turner et al., 2021). Beyond cognitive impairments, exposure to early trauma significantly increases the propensity toward violent behavior, including involvement in firearm violence. Accordingly, this research aimed to address the following primary research question:

How do childhood traumatic experiences contribute to the development of criminal behavior among offenders?

Sub-Research Questions:

- 1) What types of childhood traumatic experiences are reported by offenders?
- 2) What are the most common forms of childhood trauma experienced by offenders?
- 3) How do offenders perceive the relationship between their childhood traumatic experiences and their criminal behavior?
- 4) In what ways do childhood traumatic experiences contribute to the development of criminal behavior?
- 5) What preventive measures can be suggested to reduce the impact of childhood trauma on future criminal behavior?

Research Objectives

In order to reach the goal of the research, the current study aims to how do childhood traumatic experiences contribute to the development of criminal behavior among offenders, do the following:

- 1) To explore the childhood traumatic experiences reported by offenders.
- 2) To identify the most common forms of childhood trauma experienced by offenders.
- 3) To understand offenders' perceptions of the relationship between childhood trauma and criminal behavior.
- 4) To examine how childhood traumatic experiences contribute to the development of criminal behavior.
- 5) To provide recommendations for reducing the impact of childhood trauma on future criminal behavior.

Research Contribution

This study advances the existing body of knowledge by offering a deeper, phenomenological understanding of the nexus between childhood trauma and criminal behavior. While extensive

literature highlights the association between adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and subsequent delinquency, this research specifically elucidates how justice-involved individuals perceive, interpret, and assign meaning to early traumatic adversity within their life trajectories.

Methodologically, the study contributes by deploying a qualitative design that enables participants to articulate their lived experiences in depth. This qualitative lens uncovers the intricate psychological and social mechanisms through which early trauma facilitates criminal behavior—offering granular insights that traditional quantitative methodologies often fail to capture.

Furthermore, the findings offer significant practical implications for policymakers, social workers, forensic psychologists, and correctional professionals. By delineating the pathways connecting childhood trauma to offending, this study informs the design of targeted preventive interventions, trauma-informed early support programs, and evidence-based rehabilitation strategies aimed at curbing recidivism and fostering positive social reintegration.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Childhood trauma remains a pervasive societal crisis with profound, enduring consequences for individual development and lifelong well-being. Globally, its prevalence is estimated at 17.0% (Whitten et al., 2024); in the Netherlands, approximately 3% of children and adolescents experience traumatic events—a figure that is likely underestimated due to significant underreporting (Nederlands Jeugdinstituut, 2019). Childhood trauma encompasses exposure to severe adversity before age 18, including emotional, physical, or sexual abuse, as well as emotional and physical neglect. Extensive literature consistently links early trauma to adverse outcomes in later life, such as substance abuse, low self-esteem, heightened aggression, and persistent behavioral problems (Downey & Crummy, 2022; Ortega et al., 2023). These negative trajectories are particularly pronounced when individuals endure poly-victimization or multiple co-occurring forms of childhood trauma (Cooke et al., 2021).

Childhood trauma is strongly associated with antisocial and criminal behavior, with numerous studies reporting a high prevalence of early adversity among individuals within the criminal justice system. For instance, McKenna et al. (2019) found that 75% of high-security forensic inpatients had experienced childhood trauma—65% of whom were exposed to multiple types. Furthermore, trauma serves as a significant predictor of life-course persistent offending, increasing the likelihood of chronic criminal behavior (Craig, 2019). To explain this link, several theoretical frameworks have been proposed. From an attachment theory perspective, early traumatic experiences foster insecure attachments, which subsequently impair emotional regulation and the capacity to form healthy relationships (Garofalo et al., 2024).

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) refer to potentially traumatic events experienced before a child reaches 18 years of age. These traumatic events consist of household dysfunction and various forms of abuse and neglect. The first ACE Study was which found that childhood abuse and household dysfunction were positively related to chronic disease in adults. Seven categories of ACEs were studied in the first wave of study, and three categories of neglect were added in the second wave (Ortega et al., 2023).

According to the literature (Baglivio & Wolff, 2021; Felitti & Anda, 2010), the ten ACE domains comprise: (1) emotional abuse (parental hostility or belittling); (2) physical abuse (assault by a family member); (3) sexual abuse; (4) emotional neglect (lack of familial support); (5) physical neglect (failure to provide food, shelter, or healthcare); (6) domestic violence (witnessing household abuse); (7) household substance abuse; (8) household mental illness; (9) parental separation or

divorce; and (10) household incarceration. Each domain is measured dichotomously (0 = no, 1 = yes), generating a cumulative score from 0 to 10 (Baglivio & Wolff, 2021).

Empirical research demonstrates that Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are significantly more prevalent among justice-involved youth than within the general population. For instance, a Canadian study by Vitopoulos et al. (2019) indicated that 50% of male and 72% of female justice-involved youth had experienced at least one ACE, with 26% of males and 45% of females reporting exposure to two or more.

Studies in the United States further highlight pronounced gender disparities in ACE exposure, with overall prevalence ranging from 7% among males for sexual abuse to 84% among females for both family violence and parental separation or divorce (Baglivio & Wolff, 2021). Notably, female youth reported a 31% prevalence of sexual abuse compared to 7% for males, indicating that females experience sexual abuse at more than four times the rate of their male counterparts.

Empirical literature underscores a direct relationship between ACE exposure and youth offending. In their systematic review, Graf et al. (2021) demonstrated that elevated cumulative ACE scores significantly heighten the risk of juvenile justice system contact, noting that childhood maltreatment increases the likelihood of future offending by approximately 50%. Compared to their peers in the general population, justice-involved youth are 13 times more likely to have experienced at least one ACE and four times more likely to report exposure to four or more domains. Furthermore, a higher ACE burden correlates with an increased probability of entering serious, violent, and chronic offending trajectories (Fox et al., 2015).

Developmental and Life-Course (DLC) criminology provides a robust theoretical foundation for examining Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) as critical risk factors for elevated rates and severity of youth recidivism. DLC frameworks aim to elucidate the individual etiologies of offending and reoffending, as well as how these risk factors differentially exert influence across distinct developmental stages. Specifically, DLC criminology integrates three core dimensions: (1) the etiology and trajectory of antisocial behavior, (2) age-graded risk factors, and (3) the longitudinal impact of critical life events—such as ACEs—on criminal trajectories. Central to this framework is the concept of cumulative disadvantage, which underscores how exposure to a single adverse event, or the compounding interaction of multiple ACEs, sequentially amplifies the risk of offending and reoffending across the life course. Consequently, the cumulative burden of ACEs not only heightens the initial probability of juvenile justice system contact but also drives sustained involvement through repeated recidivism (Kurlychek & Johnson, 2019).

Although the evidence that ACEs are positively associated with youth recidivism has been well established, the mechanisms underlying this relationship (e.g., moderating and mediating effects) have received limited empirical attention. The analysis of the mechanisms by which ACEs increase or decrease youth recidivism will provide a better understanding of contributing factors for the relationship between ACEs and youth recidivism. These factors may modify or improve youth's response to ACEs, which thus may weaken (e.g., protective factors) or strengthen (e.g., risk factors) the positive relationship between ACEs and youth recidivism (Baglivio & Wolff, 2021).

The analysis could offer evidence for service providers to assist youth with access to opportunities to enhance the extent of positive experiences or reduce the extent of negative experiences that youth may be exposed to. To the authors' knowledge, there is no systematic review on the mechanisms underlying the relationships between ACEs and youth recidivism.

Systematic reviews on prevalence of ACEs among youth offenders and the relationship between ACEs and youth recidivism are limited. A search in Cochrane, PROSPERO, and seven databases found no studies meta-analyzing prevalence of ACEs in the youth offending population. Systematically reviewing evidence on prevalence of ACE is important because prevalence of ACEs can inform criminology researchers, intervention developers, and policymakers about the burden of ACEs among justice system-involved youth. This could also support the process of identifying priorities in healthcare to these young people and their families (Harder, 2014). Moreover, data on the prevalence of ACEs in juvenile recidivist populations could be particularly useful in countries where there is considerable uncertainty about the number of youth offenders experiencing ACEs because of incomplete coverage or measurement of youth experiences (Yohros, 2023).

Research design and methods

Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the relationship between childhood trauma and criminal behavior. This approach was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of participants lived experiences and perceptions of how childhood trauma influenced their involvement in criminal behavior. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with offenders and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and patterns. This methodology provided a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon from the participants' perspectives.

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative phenomenological research design, as it is appropriate for exploring participants lived experiences and understanding how childhood traumatic experiences may have influenced the development of criminal behavior. The phenomenological design enables the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' perceptions, meanings, and interpretations of their experiences rather than measuring variables statistically. The study employs purposive sampling to select participants who have experienced childhood trauma and have been involved in criminal behavior. Data are collected through semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to openly describe their experiences. The collected data are then analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and patterns that explain the relationship between childhood trauma and criminal behavior.

Research Population

The target population of this study consists of offenders incarcerated in correctional and rehabilitation centers who have experienced childhood trauma. This population was selected because it is directly relevant to the purpose of the study, which seeks to explore the relationship between childhood trauma and criminal behavior. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants who met the inclusion criteria of the study. The sample consisted of 15 offenders who reported experiencing one or more forms of childhood trauma and was willing to voluntarily participate in the interviews. The participants were selected based on their ability to provide rich and meaningful information regarding their childhood experiences and their perceived relationship with later criminal behavior.

The sample size was considered appropriate for a qualitative phenomenological study, as it allowed the researcher to obtain in-depth data while reaching data saturation, where no substantially new themes emerged from additional interviews.

Research Sampling and Unit of Analysis

This study employed purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique commonly used in qualitative research to select participants who possess direct experience relevant to the phenomenon under investigation. Participants were intentionally selected because they had experienced one or more forms of childhood trauma and had been involved in criminal behavior, enabling them to provide rich and meaningful information related to the research objectives. The study sample consisted of 15 offenders from correctional and rehabilitation centers. The sample size was considered appropriate for a phenomenological study, as it allowed the researcher to explore participants lived experiences in depth while achieving data saturation, where no substantially new information emerged from additional interviews.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 15 offenders in correctional and rehabilitation centers who had experienced childhood trauma. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for accuracy. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis by coding the transcripts, identifying recurring themes, and interpreting the findings in relation to the research questions. This process provided a comprehensive understanding of how childhood trauma influences criminal behavior.

Limitations of the Study

This study is subject to several limitations. First, the study employs a qualitative phenomenological approach with a purposive sample of 15 offenders from correctional and rehabilitation centers. Therefore, the findings are intended to provide an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences rather than to be statistically generalized to all offender populations. The study relies on participants' self-reported accounts of their childhood traumatic experiences and criminal behavior. As a result, the findings may be influenced by memory recall, personal interpretation, or participants' willingness to disclose sensitive information.

The study is limited to offenders who voluntarily agreed to participate in the interviews. Consequently, the experiences and perspectives of individuals who declined participation are not represented in the findings. Finally, the study focuses specifically on the relationship between childhood trauma and criminal behavior and does not examine other factors that may contribute to criminal behavior, such as genetic, biological, economic, or broader environmental influences.

Data Collection Instrument Design

The primary data collection instrument was a semi-structured interview guide, chosen for its flexibility in exploring participants lived experiences while addressing the research questions. The guide included open-ended questions developed from the study objectives and relevant literature and was reviewed by experts to ensure content validity. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with 15 offenders who had experienced childhood trauma. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, and interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for thematic analysis. Basic demographic information, including age, educational level, marital status, type of offense, and length of incarceration, was also collected to provide contextual information about the participants.

Instrument Reliability

As this study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach, the trustworthiness of the interview instrument was ensured through credibility and dependability rather than statistical reliability measures. The semi-structured interview guide was developed based on the study

objectives, research questions, and relevant literature, and was reviewed by experts to ensure its clarity and relevance. All interviews were conducted using the same interview guide, audio-recorded with participants' consent, and transcribed verbatim. Detailed documentation of the data collection and analysis procedures further enhanced the trustworthiness and dependability of the findings.

Findings Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Based on the findings obtained from the thematic analysis of the interview data, the research questions presented in Chapter One are addressed as follows:

Main Research Question: How do childhood traumatic experiences contribute to the development of criminal behavior among offenders?

The empirical findings of this study demonstrate that childhood trauma is not merely a passive background variable, but an active, developmental catalyst for criminal trajectories. Participants in this study recounted how early exposure to physical abuse, emotional abuse, neglect, domestic violence, and parental separation negatively disrupted their emotional, psychological, and social development. However, rather than viewing these adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) as a direct or deterministic cause of crime, a critical examination of these narratives reveals a cascading model of vulnerability.

By critically interpreting the data, it becomes evident that early traumatic environments severely impair attachment security and emotional regulation capacity. These primary psychological deficits manifest internally as chronic insecurity, low self-esteem, and emotional distress, alongside externalized feelings of anger and hostility. Crucially, our analytical interpretation highlights that delinquency often serves as an adaptive mechanism a dysfunctional coping strategy adopted by individuals to survive ongoing psychological distress or to assert control within hostile environments, especially when buffering social capital and psychological support are absent.

These findings closely align with and extend the Developmental and Life-Course Criminology (DLC) framework, particularly the concept of 'cumulative disadvantage' (Kurlychek & Johnson, 2019). DLC theory posits that adverse life events do not occur in isolation; rather, the accumulation of multiple interactive disadvantages progressively erodes prosaically development across life stages. In line with previous quantitative evidence showing that greater exposures to ACEs significantly increase the likelihood of rearrests and reconviction (Baglivio & Wolff, 2021; Craig et al., 2019b; Yohros, 2023), our qualitative insights unpack the underlying human mechanisms behind these statistical odds.

Specifically, while quantitative models establish that exposure to multiple ACEs increases recidivism risk (Baglivio & Wolff, 2021), our findings explain how this risk materializes. Trauma impairs emotional resilience, which in turn diminishes prosocial bonding (e.g., academic disengagement and family breakdown) and accelerates association with delinquent peer networks during adolescence. Thus, cumulative ACEs shape not only the initial contact with the justice system but also sequential reoffending (Kurlychek & Johnson, 2019).

Furthermore, our findings offer a critical counter-narrative to the traditional 'cumulative score' model (Yohros, 2023). While cumulative ACE scores assume that all traumatic events exert an equal, additive weight on reoffending outcomes (Negriff, 2020), our analysis emphasizes that individual ACE items (e.g., severe physical abuse vs. parental separation) trigger distinct socio-psychological pathways. The lived experiences of the participants demonstrate that specific trauma types produce unique emotional responses—such as unmanaged anger or deep-seated insecurity—which directly

interact with environmental risk factors to moderate or strengthen the trajectory toward criminal behavior (Baglivio & Wolff, 2021).

In summary, these results shift the analytical focus from what trauma does to an individual to how trauma systematically reshapes an individual's interactive relationship with their social environment, ultimately elevating the risk of persistent criminal involvement.

Research Question One: What types of childhood traumatic experiences are reported by offenders?

The empirical findings from the qualitative interviews reveal that childhood adversity among offenders is rarely an isolated phenomenon; rather, it manifests as a dense, co-occurring network of traumatic exposures. As detailed in Table 4.1, participants reported a wide continuum of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), predominantly categorized into direct personal maltreatment (emotional abuse, physical abuse, neglect) and broader household dysfunction (domestic violence, parental substance abuse, parental separation, and parental loss).

Table 4.1

Themes Identified for Research Question One: Types of Childhood Traumatic Experiences Reported by Offenders

Theme	Description	Number of Participants (n=15)
Physical Abuse	Experiences of physical violence by parents or caregivers	11
Emotional Abuse	Verbal humiliation, rejection, and intimidation	13
Neglect	Lack of emotional or physical care	9
Domestic Violence	Witnessing violence between family members	8
Parental Substance Abuse	Living with a parent addicted to drugs or alcohol	6
Parental Separation or Divorce	Family breakdown during childhood	7
Loss of a Parent	Death or long-term absence of a parent	4

A critical analysis of these distributions' underscores two vital theoretical insights that move beyond simple descriptive reporting the Primacy of Psychological and Relational Harm while criminological studies frequently prioritize severe physical violence, our findings demonstrate that emotional abuse was the most pervasive form of adversity (reported by 13 out of 15 participants, or 86.7%), followed closely by physical abuse (\$n=11, 73.3\%\$) and neglect (\$n=9, 60.0\%\$). Critically, this analytical weighting challenges traditional single-type trauma models. It indicates that the subtle, chronic erosion of psychological safety—through ongoing verbal humiliation, emotional rejection, and caregiving unavailability—acts as a foundational layer of vulnerability. Rather than viewing physical abuse as the sole primary catalyst for externalized behavioral problems, our interpretation suggests that chronic emotional abuse destabilizes early identity formation and distress tolerance, creating the psychological backdrop against which physical violence later triggers externalized behavioral distress and anti-social conduct.

Trauma Co-occurrence and Poly-victimization the data clearly highlight a pattern of *poly-victimization*. The high prevalence rates across multiple categories—such as witnessing domestic violence (\$n=8\$) and experiencing parental separation (\$n=7\$) or substance abuse (\$n=6\$)—indicate

that participants did not experience discrete, isolated events. In line with the foundational ACE framework (Felitti et al., 1998) and recent criminological applications (Baglivio & Wolff, 2021; Yohros, 2023), these findings illustrate how familial dysfunction creates a compounding cascade of harm. Domestic violence and caregiver substance abuse inherently undermine parental capacity, directly increasing the likelihood of emotional and physical maltreatment within the home.

Synthesizing these findings with Developmental and Life-Course Criminology (DLC), the high density of trauma types reported by offenders illustrates the mechanism of '*cumulative disadvantage*' (Craig et al., 2017b; Kurlychek & Johnson, 2019). Exposure to multiple ACEs during critical developmental stages systematically depletes an individual's psychological resilience and social capital. When emotional abuse and neglect sever primary attachment bonds, children are deprived of vital emotional co-regulation. Furthermore, the high frequency of witnessing domestic violence (53.3%) and living with parental addiction (40.0%) offers qualitative support for Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) within a developmental criminological context. Exposure to violence and severe dysfunction within the primary caregiving environment normalizes aggression, hostility, and maladaptive coping strategies as acceptable conflict-resolution mechanisms.

Importantly, these findings provide an empirical critique of literature that attempts to evaluate individual ACE items in isolation (Negriff, 2020). Our analysis reveals that isolating individual trauma categories creates a false dichotomy in understanding offender trajectories. While individual items carry specific psychological weight—such as neglect impairing self-worth and physical abuse fueling externalized anger—their real criminogenic potency lies in their cumulative interaction. The lived experiences of these participants demonstrate that childhood trauma operates as a complex, self-reinforcing system of adversity, where family breakdown and psychological maltreatment collectively erode prosocial pathways long before initial contact with the justice system occurs.

Results of Research Question Two: What are the most common forms of childhood trauma experienced by offenders?

The qualitative findings presented in Table 4.2 highlight a clear hierarchy in the prevalence of childhood trauma types experienced by offenders. Rather than presenting an even distribution across all adverse experiences, the data reveal that personal, direct maltreatment—specifically emotional abuse (n=13, 86.7%), physical abuse (n=11, 73.3%), and neglect (n=9, 60.0%)—represents the vast majority of reported childhood adversity, closely followed by contextual household dysfunction such as witnessing domestic violence (n=8) and parental breakdown (n=7).

Table 4.2

Theme	Number of Participants (n=15)
Emotional abuse	13
Physical abuse	11
Neglect	9
Domestic violence	8
Parental separation	7
Parental substance abuse	6
Loss of a parent	4

A critical reading of this distribution indicates that the "most common" forms of trauma are not random occurrences, but rather constitute a Structural Triad of Primary Adversity (Emotional Abuse,

Physical Abuse, and Neglect). Our analytical interpretation highlights that direct interpersonal violations within the primary caregiving unit carry a far greater criminogenic potential than indirect household stressors.

The Overlooked Dominance of Emotional Abuse: The prominent concentration of emotional abuse (86.7%) serves as a major analytical insight. While traditional criminological models historically over-emphasized physical violence, our findings demonstrate that psychological degradation is the most common common denominator among offenders. Emotional abuse—characterized by chronic rejection, severe criticism, and devaluation—directly destroys the child's nascent self-concept and emotional regulation mechanisms. When combined with neglect (60.0%), it creates a chronic state of attachment insecurity.

The Catalytic Role of Physical Abuse: Physical abuse (73.3%), while slightly less prevalent than emotional abuse, acts as the primary vehicle through which internal emotional distress is translated into externalized, aggressive behaviors. Critically, our interpretation suggests a cumulative interaction: emotional abuse instills deep psychological distress and hyper-reactivity, whereas physical abuse provides a direct behavioral model for physical aggression as a means of exerting control or resolving interpersonal conflict.

These prevalence patterns offer strong qualitative alignment with General Strain Theory (GST) (Agnew, 1992, 2006) and Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1982) within the context of Developmental Criminology (Craig et al., 2017b): General Strain Theory: According to GST, crime is a response to negative affective states (such as chronic anger, frustration, and depression) produced by the inability to escape noxious stimuli or the presentation of abusive treatment (Agnew, 2006). The primary concentration of emotional and physical abuse in our sample represents severe, unavoidable strains during early childhood. In the absence of legitimate coping resources, these strains manifest as persistent anger and emotional distress, which significantly increase the propensity for delinquent coping strategies during adolescence and adulthood. Attachment Theory & Cumulative Disadvantage: The high co-occurrence of neglect and parental separation/loss underscores how primary attachment bonds are repeatedly disrupted. As posited by DLC theories (Kurlychek & Johnson, 2019), the loss of protective attachment figures accelerates '*cumulative disadvantage*.' Children deprived of emotional and physical safety develop working models of the world as fundamentally hostile, leading to early disengagement from prosocial institutions (such as schools) and an increased reliance on delinquent peer networks for validation.

Importantly, analyzing the "most common" forms of trauma reveals a critical nuance regarding the relationship between frequency and impact (; Negriff, 2020). Our analysis warns against assuming that less frequently reported forms of trauma (such as parental loss, $n=4$) are less influential in shaping criminal trajectories. While emotional and physical abuse are numerically more common, narrative interpretations show that less frequent events—such as the sudden death or long-term absence of a parent—often act as acute, sudden turning points (*life-course transitions*) that trigger immediate family instability or entry into foster care systems. Therefore, a rigorous criminological evaluation must balance the *frequency* of common trauma types with the *qualitative severity* and timing of acute life disruptions (Baglivio & Wolff, 2021; Yohros, 2023).

Results of Research Question Three: How do offenders perceive the relationship between their childhood traumatic experiences and their criminal behavior?

Understanding how justice-involved individuals subjectively construe the link between early adversity and their adult criminality provides critical insights into the internal psychological pathways that drive persistent offending. The qualitative patterns illustrated in Table 4.3 demonstrate that participants do not view their criminal trajectory as an arbitrary or spontaneous choice. Instead, they perceive a clear, causal pipeline connecting early exposure to abuse and neglect with specific socio-emotional deficits—most notably anger and aggression ($n=12$, 80.0%), poor emotional regulation ($n=11$, 73.3%), feelings of rejection and isolation ($n=10$, 66.7%), association with delinquent peers ($n=9$, 60.0%), and substance abuse ($n=8$, 53.3%).

Table 4.3

Theme	Number of Participants
Anger and aggression	12
Poor emotional regulation	11
Substance abuse	8
Association with delinquent peers	9
Feelings of rejection and isolation	10

Emotional deregulation and externalized hostility the overwhelming concentration of anger and aggression (80.0%) and poor emotional regulation (73.3%) indicates that trauma operates primarily by overwhelming early coping capabilities. Our analytical interpretation highlights that emotional deregulation serves as the primary mediator between trauma exposure and illegal conduct. Repeated childhood victimization instills a chronic state of emotional distress and hyper-vigilance. Lacking prosocial models for emotional co-regulation within the home, participants describe transforming unbearable internal distress into externalized hostility—using anger as a protective armor against perceived threats or interpersonal vulnerability.

The social compensation mechanism (Peers & Substances) participant narratives illustrate a two-stage behavioral escalation: internal feelings of rejection and isolation (66.7%) drive individuals away from mainstream prosocial institutions (such as family and school) toward deviant subcultures. Critically, our interpretation frames delinquent peer associations (60.0%) and substance abuse (53.3%) not as primary causes of crime, but as maladaptive compensation strategies. Substance use serves as a form of self-medication to numb unresolved traumatic memories, whereas delinquent peer groups offer pseudo-acceptance, validation, and protection to youth who feel fundamentally rejected by their primary caregiving environments.

These qualitative insights strongly validate and extend core concepts within General Strain Theory (Agnew, 2006), Differential Association Theory (Sutherland, 1947), and recent empirical applications in developmental criminology (Baglivio & Wolff, 2021; Yohros, 2023) general Strain Theory (GST) & Affective Mediators: Agnew's (2006) GST posits that subjective strains lead to crime primarily when they produce "negative affective states"—most prominently chronic anger and frustration. Participant accounts confirm this theoretical proposition: the subjective experience of childhood abuse creates persistent internal anger, which directly reduces the perceived costs of crime and energizes aggressive, impulsive responses to interpersonal conflict.

Differential association & cumulative disadvantage as conceptualized in Developmental and Life-Course Criminology (Craig et al., 2017b; Kurlychek & Johnson, 2019), cumulative ACE exposure severs primary social bonds. Deprived of informal social control and emotional safety at home, traumatized adolescents naturally migrate toward delinquent peer networks (Sutherland,

1947). In these subcultures, anti-social norms, substance use, and criminal behavior are normalized and socially reinforced, accelerating the transition from childhood victimization to adult offending (Baglivio & Wolff, 2021).

A key analytical nuance emerging from these narratives concerns the tension between perceived victimhood and personal agency (Negriff, 2020). Our critique emphasizes that while participants perceive a direct, almost linear pipeline from childhood trauma to criminal behavior, this relationship must not be interpreted as deterministic. While unresolved trauma drastically reduces emotional resilience and increases exposure to criminogenic environments, offending ultimately occurs through a series of transactional decisions influenced by environmental opportunity, peer pressure, and substance-induced disinhibition. Acknowledging offenders lived perceptions is essential for therapeutic rehabilitation, but criminological analysis must maintain that trauma creates severe *vulnerability* rather than an inevitable sentence to criminal behavior (Baglivio & Wolff, 2021; Yohros, 2023).

Results of Research Question Four: In what ways do childhood traumatic experiences contribute to the development of criminal behavior?

Table 4.4

Theme	Number of Participants
Increased aggression	12
Low self-esteem	10
Lack of family support	11
School dropout	7
Mental health difficulties	9

The thematic analysis revealed several pathways through which childhood trauma contributed to criminal behavior. Many participants described becoming more aggressive and impulsive following repeated traumatic experiences during childhood. Others explained that emotional neglect and abuse reduced their self-esteem and affected their ability to cope with stressful situations. Some participants also reported leaving school at an early age and experiencing mental health difficulties, which increased their likelihood of engaging in criminal behavior.

Results of Research Question Five: What preventive measures can be suggested to reduce the impact of childhood trauma on future criminal behavior?

Table 4.5

Theme	Number of Participants
Early psychological intervention	14
Family counseling	12
School support programs	10
Community awareness	9
Rehabilitation services	11

Participants suggested several measures that could reduce the long-term impact of childhood trauma on future criminal behavior. Early psychological intervention was the most frequently recommended measure, followed by family counseling and improved school support programs. Participants also emphasized the importance of increasing community awareness about childhood trauma and expanding rehabilitation services for children and adolescents exposed to adverse experiences.

The findings of the present study demonstrate that childhood traumatic experiences play a significant role in the development of criminal behavior among offenders. The participants described experiencing various forms of childhood trauma, including emotional abuse, physical abuse, neglect, exposure to domestic violence, parental separation, and household dysfunction. These traumatic experiences were perceived as having long-lasting psychological, emotional, and social consequences that contributed to their involvement in criminal behavior.

The findings are consistent with previous research demonstrating a strong association between childhood trauma and criminal behavior. For example, Macinnes et al. (2016) reported that childhood trauma is strongly associated with antisocial and criminal behavior. Similarly, McKenna et al. (2019) found that a high proportion of offenders in forensic settings had experienced multiple forms of childhood trauma. The participants in the present study also reported exposure to multiple adverse childhood experiences, supporting these previous findings.

The results further support the concept of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) proposed by Anda et al. (2003). Participants described several ACEs identified in the literature, including emotional abuse, physical abuse, emotional neglect, domestic violence, parental separation, and household substance abuse. These findings reinforce the argument that exposure to multiple childhood adversities increases vulnerability to behavioral and psychological problems later in life.

Moreover, the findings are in agreement with Baglivio et al. (2014), Graf et al. (2021), Wolff and Baglivio (2017), and Fox et al. (2015), who concluded that individuals with higher exposure to ACEs are more likely to engage in delinquent and criminal behavior. Participants in the current study perceived that repeated childhood trauma contributed to emotional instability, aggressive behavior, poor decision-making, substance abuse, and association with delinquent peers, all of which increased their likelihood of criminal involvement.

The findings also provide support for Attachment Theory (Garofalo et al., 2024), which suggests that traumatic childhood experiences interfere with the development of secure attachment relationships and emotional regulation. Many participants described feelings of rejection, lack of parental support, and difficulties trusting others, indicating that disrupted attachment relationships may have influenced their behavioral development.

Furthermore, the findings are consistent with Developmental and Life-Course Criminology (DLC) theory (Craig et al., 2017), which proposes that childhood adversity accumulates over time and increases the risk of persistent offending. Participants described how repeated traumatic experiences affected different stages of their lives, eventually leading to criminal behavior during adolescence or adulthood. This supports the concept of cumulative disadvantage; whereby multiple adverse childhood experiences interact to increase the likelihood of offending.

Finally, participants emphasized the importance of early psychological intervention, family support, school-based programs, and community awareness to reduce the long-term effects of childhood trauma. These findings are consistent with Baglivio and Wolff (2021), who argued that strengthening protective factors and providing early intervention may reduce the negative impact of ACEs and lower the risk of future offending.

Conclusions

The present study explored the relationship between childhood traumatic experiences and criminal behavior among offenders using a qualitative phenomenological approach. The findings revealed that participants had experienced various forms of childhood trauma, including emotional

abuse, physical abuse, neglect, domestic violence, parental separation, and household dysfunction. These adverse childhood experiences were perceived by participants as having a significant influence on their emotional, psychological, and social development.

The study further found that childhood trauma contributed to criminal behavior through several interconnected pathways, including emotional deregulation, aggression, low self-esteem, substance abuse, and association with delinquent peers. Participants consistently described childhood trauma as a major factor that shaped their life experiences and increased their vulnerability to criminal involvement.

The findings support previous research demonstrating a strong association between adverse childhood experiences and criminal behavior and are consistent with Attachment Theory and Developmental and Life-Course Criminology Theory. The study emphasizes that criminal behavior cannot always be understood solely as an individual choice but should also be viewed within the broader context of early childhood adversity and social experiences.

Overall, the study concludes that addressing childhood trauma through early intervention, family support, mental health services, and trauma-informed rehabilitation programs may play an important role in reducing criminal behavior and promoting successful rehabilitation among offenders.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the present study, the following recommendations are proposed:

- 1) Given that emotional abuse emerged as the most pervasive form of childhood adversity experienced by participants, early mental health programs in schools and social services must prioritize psychological interventions such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and Dialectical Behavior Therapy. These programs should specifically focus on emotional regulation and distress tolerance rather than exclusively targeting physical abuse.
- 2) Because a large majority of offenders attributed their criminal behavior directly to unresolved anger, aggression, and poor emotional regulation, the criminal justice system should mandate routine trauma-informed intake screenings. Correctional rehabilitation services must incorporate structured anger management and emotional regulation modules to address the primary internal drivers of reoffending.
- 3) Supported by findings showing that a lack of family support and witnessing domestic violence severely severed primary attachment bonds, child welfare agencies should implement targeted Parent-Child Interaction Therapy. These counseling services must focus on repairing damaged attachment relationships and restoring prosocial family dynamics before behavioral problems escalate.
- 4) Considering that school dropout served as a critical pathway that accelerated involvement with delinquent peers, education authorities should implement early-warning detection systems to identify traumatized students exhibiting emotional disengagement. Schools must offer academic and psychological support rather than relying on punitive suspensions that push vulnerable youth out of the education system.
- 5) As participants highlighted substance abuse and associations with delinquent peers as coping mechanisms to compensate for early emotional neglect, substance rehabilitation programs in justice settings must adopt dual-diagnosis protocols. These treatments should target childhood trauma as the root cause of addiction and behavioral disinhibition.

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