Does Childhood Sexual Abuse Contribute to the Risk of Adult Criminal Offending?

Derailment Theory in Light of the Evidence

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Foundations of Social Research

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Prospectus

I seek approval to propose to test a hypothesis derived from derailment theory. Compared to adults who do not report child sexual abuse, victims of child sexual abuse are more likely to criminally offend in adulthood. According to derailment theory, strategies girls use to survive a history of abuse estrange them from non-deviant social networks and situations increasing the likelihood of deviant behavior and application of criminal labels. The process is self-reinforcing, with interactions of substance abuse, juvenile delinquency, and social control constraining choices through stigmatization and alienation. A dynamic of cumulative disadvantage puts victims of sexual abuse at greater risk for involvement with the legal system. Early research indicated that, compared to adults who do not report abuse, victims of child sexual abuse are more likely to criminally offend in adulthood, thus supporting the theory (Widom 2000). More recent findings raise questions about the validity of earlier studies (Austin 2004). I propose to evaluate derailment theory with a two-stage strategy that identifies (1) proximate (or endogenous) causal factors for adult criminal offender status and (2) exogenous factors influencing proximate factors. The principal variables are self-reported child sexual abuse and frequency of arrest. Control variables are introduced, including measures indicating socioeconomic situation and juvenile offending. Analysis builds on a series of bivariate and multivariate statistical procedures. As at-risk women are judged to provide the strongest test of hypotheses derived from the theory, residents in an intensive drug and alcohol treatment center serve as study subjects. Determining the effects on child sexual abuse on adult criminal offending contributes to the literature on this topic and may assist professionals in the development of successful rehabilitation programs.
Works Cited
