
Original research article

IMPACT OF CHILDHOOD NEGLECT ON VIOLENT VICTIMIZATION IN EARLY ADOLESCENCE

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Abstract

Purpose: The relationship between childhood neglect and subsequent violent victimization was examined using a large, nationally representative sample.

Methods: Data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health were used to examine childhood neglect and adolescent violent victimization at Wave 2. The data used for the present study included adolescents ranging from Grades 7 to 12. The logistic regression model tested the effect of childhood neglect on violent victimization in early adolescence, controlling for demographic factors, depression, self-esteem, and physical disability.

Results: After adjusting for socio-demographic factors and confounding risk variables (e.g., depression, self-esteem, physical disability), childhood neglect was found to be significantly associated with violent victimization at Wave 2. Furthermore, childhood neglect was significantly related to violent victimization for boys more than for girls, and for Black and Hispanics more than for White adolescents.

Conclusion: These results indicate that interventions should prioritize neglected children to avoid or at least minimize subsequent violent victimization during adolescence and promote long-term emotional and physical well-being.

Keywords: *Childhood neglect; Early adolescence; Longitudinal study; Violent victimization*

INTRODUCTION

Childhood neglect, a pervasive form of maltreatment, has far-reaching implications that extend into various facets of an individual's life. Being unable to meet a child's basic requirements for the physical, emotional, educational, and social dimensions of life, can have detrimental effects on a child's development and well-being. As children transition into adolescence, the consequences of early neglect become increasingly apparent, influencing their social interactions, emotional stability, and overall mental health.

The move towards early adolescence – a developmental stage characterized by significant physical, emotional, and social change – can be particularly tumultuous for those who have experienced neglect. Research indicates

that neglected children are more likely to become victims of violence during this stage of life (Widom et al., 2014). This victimization can manifest in various forms, including bullying, physical assaults, and other forms of peer violence, exacerbating the already challenging transition into adolescence.

Insight into the complex interplay between non-recognition of child neglect and early adolescent violent victimization is crucial to designing effective prevention and intervention strategies. By examining the pathways through which neglect influences vulnerability to violence, researchers and practitioners can identify key factors that may mitigate these risks. The goal of this paper is to examine the connections between child neglect and experiencing violent victimization in early adolescence, highlighting the underlying

mechanisms and potential protective measures that can be implemented to support at-risk youth.

Literature review

Research has shown that adults who report experiencing neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and/or psychological abuse during childhood are more likely to experience psychological distress and struggle with mental health challenges (Austin et al., 2023; Hussey et al., 2006; Tillyer, 2015). It is particularly crucial to understand childhood neglect in relation to violent victimization during adolescence. There is an abundance of literature analyzing different types of child maltreatment, but the relationship between neglect and victimization in adolescence has been less extensively studied. For instance, most of the research on childhood maltreatment and subsequent victimization has concentrated on the association between childhood sexual abuse and adult intimate partner violence (Caspi et al., 2002; Tyler et al., 2000). Child maltreatment, particularly neglect, has been associated with various negative outcomes, including substance abuse, low academic achievement, emotional turmoil, and behavioral issues (Benedini and Fagan, 2020; Shin et al., 2009; Tillyer, 2015; Wright et al., 2009).

A subsequent recent systematic scoping review by Goemans et al. (2023) reported that maltreated children – and particularly those who are neglected – had twice to four times greater odds of being rejected or victimized by peers as adolescents. Similarly, a second report published in 2022 provided evidence of a continuity between types of emotional neglect and the presence of peers who were members or affiliates of deviant groups (Haslam and Taylor, 2022). Adolescent relationship difficulties like these may exacerbate the risk of violent victimization.

Experiences such as being left home alone and enduring physical abuse in childhood, as well as encountering violent victimization in the community during adolescence also had a significant influence on being a victim of intimate partner violence (IPV) or wide-ranging violence (Murphy, 2011). Consistent with this, a 2023 longitudinal study of a Brazilian birth cohort demonstrated that neglect in early childhood predated much later experiences of violent victimization in young adulthood

(Bordignon et al., 2023). These findings reinforce the concept that the impact of neglect in early life has far-reaching and profound effects that can influence a myriad of domains, such as vulnerability to victimization later in a person's life.

Studies about adolescent victimization indicate that individuals are particularly vulnerable during this stage of life. Although no empirical evidence exists showing a link between childhood maltreatment and later adolescent violent victimization, victimization theory (Cohen et al., 1981; Finkelhor and Asdigian, 1996; Hindelang et al., 1978; Meier and Miethe, 1993), along with what is known about child maltreatment from research, suggests that these experiences are related. In recent years, the above theoretical research has begun to turn into empirical work. According to a longitudinal study based on three waves of junior high school students in China (Zhou et al., 2024), people exposed to child neglect are at a higher risk of being involved in weekly bullying and/or victimization influenced by neuroticism and low conscientiousness. In addition, in a national sample of rural adolescents from China in 2024, Zhang and Ngai (2024) observed that neglect, victimization and peer rejection, plus associations with antisocial peers were significant mediators of neglect in relation to later victimization. The results highlight the effect of neglect on social and emotional development, which in turn enhances vulnerability for violent victimization during adolescence.

In this study, we build upon existing work on child neglect, examining the association between early life deprivation in childhood and violent victimization in adolescence. Physical and emotional low resistance due to clear physical problems, emotional crises, or other forms of physical and psychological weakness increases the vulnerability to victimization for adolescents (Petersilia, 2001; Tillyer et al., 2011). Recent research has illuminated the neuro-developmental vulnerabilities of a certain subset of children. A 2025 paper in *Development and Psychopathology* found that children who experience neglect show slower development of working memory skills during adolescence. This delay can interfere with decision-making and put them at greater risk of peer pressure and violence (Clinchard et al., 2025).

Childhood maltreatment in general (and specifically childhood neglect) might also cause other vulnerabilities, such as creating low self-esteem among early adolescents. Some studies have compared neglected children to non-neglected children and found that neglect during childhood was significantly associated to low self-confidence (Bolger et al., 1998; Hutchinson and Mueller, 2008). Furthermore, a recent study showed that low self-esteem and emotional instability – both consequences of neglect – are predictors of future victimization among Turkish adolescents, particularly in societies characterized by weak family bonds (Aydoğan and Gürhan, 2020). Consequently, maltreated children who experience neglect become targets for future violent victimization.

Study objectives

This study aims to expand knowledge about adolescent violent victimization. The primary objective was to examine the relationship between childhood neglect and experiences of violent victimization during adolescence. The secondary objective was to examine how demographic characteristics, self-esteem, depressive symptoms, and physical disabilities are related to these experiences.

Sub-objectives:

1. To examine whether adolescents with a history of childhood neglect have an increased likelihood of violent victimization.
2. To examine whether males with a history of neglect are at higher risk of violent victimization than females.
3. To examine whether Black and Hispanic adolescents with a history of neglect have a higher likelihood of violent victimization than their white peers.
4. To assess whether increased depressive symptoms and lower self-esteem are associated with a higher risk of violent victimization.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Sample

This study addressed its objectives using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), a nationally representative school-based survey of U.S.

adolescents in grades 7–12, conducted in 1994–1995 (Harris, 2013). Add Health is designed to analyze the determinants of adolescents' health factors and behaviors, including lifestyle behaviors, diet, healthcare utilization, illness, harm, abuse, sexual experiences, family planning, sexually transmitted diseases, childbearing, suicidal intentions, substance use, and delinquency. The data includes 90,000 students from grades 7–12. They participated in the 45-min paper-and-pencil survey conducted from September 1994 to April of 1995 during school hours. The questionnaire gathered data on socio-demographic factors, peer relationships, school experiences, overall health, and risk behaviors related to health. The second phase of data collection involved adolescents in grades 7–12 who completed the Wave I In-Home Interview from April to December of 1995. Questions related to decision patterns, household structure, substance consumption, and delinquent and illegal acts were gathered from 20,745 adolescents across 132 schools. Their parents, particularly mothers, were also interviewed. Follow-up in-home interviews with adolescents were conducted from April to August (1996) as part of Wave 2 data collection. Data collected during Wave 2 were used to measure adolescent experiences of violent victimization, which served as the dependent variable. Wave 3 data collection occurred between August 2001 and April 2002. During Wave 3, 15,170 respondents aged 18–26 at the time were asked about mistreatment by adults prior to entering the sixth grade (Harris, 2013). Finally, a fourth in-home interview was conducted in 2008 with the original Wave 1 respondents. During Wave 4, 15,701 original Add Health respondents were re-interviewed. The Wave 4 participants were 24–32 years old. Through Wave 4 data collection, longitudinal survey data on the social, economic, psychological, and health circumstances of respondents was obtained, as well as longitudinal geographic data.

Measures

Dependent variable: violent victimization

The dependent variable, violent victimization, is binary and derived from three specific questions. Participants were asked how frequently in the past year they had (a) a knife or gun pulled on them, (b) been shot or stabbed,

(c) been physically attacked. If a respondent indicated experiencing any of these elements, they were assigned a value of 1. Those who did not report any of these incidents were assigned a value of 0.

Predictor variable: child neglect

The child neglect variable was derived from three survey questions assessing experiences of neglect by adults before the respondent entered sixth grade. Participants were asked how frequently their parents or other adult caregivers: (1) left them home alone when adult supervision was necessary, and (2) failed to meet their basic needs, such as hygiene, food, or clothing. Additionally, they were asked how often social services intervened to investigate their care or attempted to remove them from their living environment. Responses were measured from “this never happened to me” to “more than 10 times”. This variable was dichotomized to take two values: 1 = yes and 0 = no.

Covariates

Demographic variables such as age, gender, and ethnicity were controlled at Wave 1. Age was computed from participants’ date of birth and interview date. Gender (0 = male; 1 = female) and race (0 = white; 1 = black; 2 = Hispanic; 3 = other) were coded using conventional numeric indicators.

Other variables that may increase an adolescent’s chances of becoming a victim are depression, physical disability, and low self-esteem. These factors have been related to childhood neglect – either as contributing causes or as consequences – and may help clarify how neglect relates to violent victimization during adolescence. Depression was measured by the sum of the items from CES-D, with higher scores representing more depressive symptoms. A dichotomous measure of physical disability captured whether the adolescent exhibited physical limitations, such as difficulty using their limbs, or the use of mobility aids, including braces, canes, or crutches. Self-esteem was assessed by averaging responses to six statements on self-perception: “You have a lot of good qualities”, “You have a lot to be proud of”, “You like yourself just the way you are”, “You feel like you are doing everything just about right”, “You feel socially accepted”, and “You feel loved and wanted”.

Respondents rated their agreement with each statement on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Data analytic strategy

To ensure national representativeness, survey responses were weighted to account for stratified sampling and the oversampling of underrepresented groups. The researcher conducted SPSS 24.0 version to analyze the data.

A logistic regression model was used to assess how childhood neglect relates to the chances of experiencing violent victimization as an adolescent. Logistic regression is well-suited for modeling binary outcomes and estimating the probability of an event occurring as a function of multiple predictor variables (Hosmer et al., 2013). This method allows for the inclusion of both continuous variables (e.g., depressive symptoms, self-esteem) and categorical variables (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity), making it appropriate for the present study’s multivariate framework.

Multicollinearity was tested using VIF values (<2.0 for all predictors). Missing data were handled via listwise deletion, given the low proportion (<5%). Effect sizes are reported as Adjusted Odds Ratios (AORs) with 95% confidence intervals.

The model analyzed the relation between childhood neglect and the risk of experiencing violent victimization in adolescence, while accounting for demographic variables. It also tested additional variables that may have an influence on an adolescent’s risk of violent victimization. The model extended beyond demographic factors and childhood neglect to include depression, physical disability, and self-esteem.

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics

In terms of sample demographics, the mean age was 15.53 (SD = 1.79). There were 57.5% white, 22.6% black, 11.3% Hispanic, and 8.5% adolescents from other races. Regarding gender, there were 48.4% males and 51.6% females. A little more than one in ten (14.2%) of the adolescents reported being victims of violence, and 12.9% of the adolescents reported childhood neglect.

Bivariate association between adolescent violent victimization and childhood neglect

Results from the chi-square analyses are presented in Table 1 and indicate that adoles-

cents who experienced child neglect were significantly more likely to be victim of violence than adolescents who did not experience child neglect.

Table 1 – Adolescent violent victimization in relation to childhood neglect – United States, Add Health, 1994–1995

	Experienced neglect % (<i>n</i> = 667)	Did not experience neglect % (<i>n</i> = 4,139)	χ^2 (df = 1)
Wave 2 violent victimization	20.1%	13.3%	21.95 ^a
Note: ^a <i>p</i> ≤ 0.001			

Multivariate analyses

Results from the logistic regression models are presented in Table 2. Of all the covariates, only three had a significant relationship with violent victimization risk.

Findings regarding the covariates indicated that males were significantly more likely than females to experience violent victimization during adolescence. Students who identified their race as Black and Hispanic were significantly more likely to experience violent

victimization during adolescence than students who identified as White. Furthermore, adolescents who experienced higher levels of depressive symptoms were more likely to experience violent victimization at Wave 2. Even after controlling for the covariates, adolescents who experienced neglect during childhood were significantly more likely to be violently victimized than adolescents who had not experienced childhood neglect.

Table 2 – Adjusted Odds Ratios (AORs) and 95% Confidence Intervals (CIs) for predicting adolescent violent victimization – United States, Add Health, 1994–1995

	Wave 2 violent victimization AOR	95% Confidence interval	
		Lower	Upper
Female vs. male	0.26**	0.22	0.32
Young adolescents	1.02	0.97	1.08
"Black" v. White	1.71**	1.39	2.11
"Hispanic" v. White	1.89**	1.48	2.43
"Other" v. White	1.29	0.95	1.75
Self-esteem	0.92	0.81	1.04
Physical disability	1.40	0.93	2.11
Depression	1.07**	1.06	1.09
Neglect vs. Non-neglect	1.41*	1.13	1.76

Note: * *p* ≤ 0.01; ** *p* ≤ 0.001

DISCUSSION

This study used a nationally representative study of adolescents to examine the relationship between childhood neglect and violent victimization in adolescence. Previous studies on childhood maltreatment (involv-

ing neglect) have concentrated on damaging outcomes, such as low self-esteem and high psychological distress (Benedini and Fagan, 2020; Shin et al., 2009; Widom et al., 2006; Wright et al., 2009). Most recent studies focus on the long-term impact of childhood neglect – such as intimate partner violence or

sexual abuse. However, empirical evidence that childhood neglect increases the risk of violent victimization during adolescence is still limited.

When adjusting the logistic regression model for demographic characteristics and other confounders, childhood neglect was significantly associated with increased odds of violent victimization in adolescence. In the nationally representative Add Health sample, 12.9% of respondents reported experiencing neglect. This rate aligns with Gallup estimates showing that 13.7% of American parents were unable to provide sufficient nourishment for their children (Strauss et al., 1998). Based on the logistic model used in the present study, only three of the covariates were found to be associated with adolescent violent victimization.

The findings revealed that violent victimization was much higher for male than female adolescents. Although much of the literature on childhood maltreatment and victimization focuses on females – and in particular the area of sexual and intimate partner abuse (Finkelhor et al., 2005) – the current findings align with research indicating that adolescent males are often more exposed to physical forms of violence, especially in peer or community contexts (Espelage et al., 2013). This may reflect gendered socialization patterns that encourage risk-taking or reinforce aggressive norms among males (Connell et al., 1995), increasing their exposure to environments where violence is more likely to occur.

Study limitations

Before drawing conclusions about the findings of this study, several limitations should be considered. Firstly, the neglect variable represents experiences that occurred prior to grade 7 but were collected later (Wave 2 of data collection) when participants were on average 15.5 years old. Give that respondents had to recall events that occurred several years earlier and their young age at the time of reporting, potential memory inaccuracies should be acknowledged as a study limitation. Second, the present study did not identify the onset of neglect or assess whether it persisted into adolescence. Widom et al. (2014) highlighted the importance of accounting for the duration of neglect – whether it was limited to childhood or extended across developmental

stages – when examining its effects on later problem outcomes. The study revealed that neglect extending from childhood through adolescence, as well as neglect limited to adolescence, had more pronounced and detrimental effects than neglect limited to childhood. Unfortunately, the Add Health data lack measurements of neglect experiences across different stages of development.

For a more comprehensive understanding of the effects of maltreatment and neglect on the odds of violent victimization during adolescence, future studies should consider multiple sources of information and evaluate co-occurring experiences at other developmental stages in youth. The current results should also be interpreted in the context of how adolescent violent victimization was measured. To be considered victimized, participants in the present study could only report incidents of having a weapon (knife or gun) pulled on them, being shot, being stabbed, or attacked physically by a group. However, this definition omits other types of violence, including bullying and non-weapon-related assaults. Individual-based characteristics (including physical/mental disability and low self-esteem) may increase vulnerability and might be crucial for understanding these other, unmeasured types of victimization.

Although the Add Health dataset includes several contextual and environmental variables – such as neighborhood safety and school climate – these factors were excluded from the analytical model. This decision was made due to the study's theoretical emphasis on individual-level predictors. Future research should explore how neighborhood and school environments might intervene in the pathway from early childhood neglect to adolescent experiences of violent victimization. Integrating these contextual factors is expected to improve understanding of the environmental and social influences on youth risk and resilience. Despite these limitations, this study explores how childhood neglect by parents and caregivers may affect the likelihood of violent victimization in adolescence. Possible mediators of this association would be risk factors that increase adolescents' exposure to dangerous situations. However, additional studies are needed to fully explore the evolution of violent victimization over the life-course.

CONCLUSION

The current study examines how childhood neglect by parents or caregivers may have negative consequences and increase the likelihood of violent victimization during adolescence. Childhood neglect is prevalent, and its negative effects are many. Neglect is the most common form of harm. The results of this research indicate that neglected children should be the focus of interventions to prevent – or at least reduce – subsequent violent victimization during adolescence.

Some final suggestions may be necessary to conclude this study, related to intervention and protective programs and agencies among children and their parents. Reducing and ultimately eliminating childhood neglect should be a key public health goal. While not every adolescent who experienced childhood neglect becomes a victim of violence, the likelihood of experiencing violent victimization is significantly higher.

The outcomes from this study contribute valuable insight into how early childhood neglect is linked to increased risk of violent victimization during adolescence, particularly among males. These results can help guide the development of targeted school-based interventions by identifying students with a history of neglect as a high-risk group for peer violence. The study also underscores the importance of early prevention, emphasizing the need for collaboration between educational institutions, mental health professionals, and child welfare systems. By translating these findings into practice, schools can become proactive environments that not only respond to violence but work to prevent it by supporting vulnerable youth before harm occurs.

Ethical aspects and conflict of interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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