Trauma and delinquency among adolescent females: The mediating roles of mental health and substance abuse

Kayla A. Wanamaker¹, Shelley L. Brown¹, and Tracey A. Skilling²

¹Carleton University, Ottawa, Ontario; ²University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario

ABSTRACT

Few quantitative studies have examined how substance use, childhood trauma, and mental health may be sequentially linked as antecedents to delinquency and how these relationships may vary as a function of gender. As a result, this cross-sectional study examined the mediating effects of substance use and mental health on the relationship between childhood trauma and delinquency. Specifically, it was hypothesized that there would be an indirect effect of trauma on delinquency through substance abuse and mental health, and that the effect would be stronger for females than males (i.e., that gender would moderate the indirect effect of trauma on delinquency through mental health and trauma). The study utilized self-report data from 212 justice-involved youth (139 males, 73 females) from Ontario, between the ages of 14 and 21. Results indicated no significant moderating effects of gender, nor were there mediating effects of substance abuse and mental health. Potential limitations including the absence of an in-depth measure of trauma are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

- Mental health issues, in particular depression and anxiety, as well as substance use, have been found to be positively correlated to delinquency (Paton, Crouch, & Camic, 2009; Walden, McGue, Iacono, Burt, & Elkins, 2004).
- Many girls in the justice system have experienced some form of extreme trauma, most often some type of abuse by a family member (Belknap, 2001). This type of trauma—child abuse, is often cited as an important risk factor for delinquency, particularly among girls (Kingree, Phan, & Thompson, 2003).
- Many qualitative studies have found a link between trauma, substance use, mental health and delinquency (Belknap, 2001), although little is known about how these factors are related sequentially using quantitative methods.
- A noteworthy exception involves a study conducted by Salisbury and Van Voorhis (2009). However, they used a female-only adult sample. The extent to which the findings will generalize to an adolescent sample with a male comparison group requires investigation.

Hypotheses

- Gender will moderate the indirect effects of trauma on delinquency through the mediating effects of substance use. It is believed that this relationship will be stronger for females than males.
- Gender will moderate the indirect effects of trauma on delinquency through the mediating effects of mental health. It is believed that this relationship will strengthen for females than males.

METHOD

Participants

- secondary, archival data on 212 participants (139 males, 73 females); average age of 17.15 (SD = 1.19) for males, 16.82 (SD = 1.14) for females.
- 68.5% of the females and 37.6% of the males were Caucasian, and 20.5% of the females and 38.8% of the males were African-American.

Measures

- MAYS! (Massachusetts Youth Screening Instrument; Grisso & Barrum, 2000), self-report questionnaire; used for mental health variable
  - depressed/anxious subscale: 9 items
  - suicidal ideations subscale: 5 items
- YASI (Youth Assessment and Screening Instrument; Orbis Partners, 2000); semi-structured risk assessment instrument
  - mental health: only abuse section was used (3 items ranging from 0-2)
  - Examined emotional, physical and sexual abuse
  - substance use: Examined frequency of use of 11 categories of drugs
  - Each drug was scored between 0-4 (0=no use; 4=daily use)

RESULTS

Hypothesis 1

- The small indirect effect that was found, was non-significant for both males (p = .559) and females (p = .934).
- Results indicate that gender does not moderate the indirect effect of substance use between trauma and delinquency.

Hypothesis 2

- A small indirect effect was found for both males (p = .275) and females (p = .916), although non-significant.
- Results indicate that gender does not moderate the indirect effect of mental health on trauma and delinquency.

DISCUSSION

- The lack of a moderating effect of gender on the relationship between trauma and delinquency is inconsistent with a large body of research (i.e., Belknap, 2001; Belknap & Holsinger, 2006).
- One possible reason for the insignificant results is the inadequate operationalization of trauma. The MAYS! measure of trauma was found to have an alpha coefficient of .20 for the females, indicating that this was not a strong or reliable measurement of trauma. A more sensitive trauma index that examines severity is needed.
- The reliability for some of the measures was lower than expected
- In order to fully understand the relationship between trauma, substance use, mental health and delinquency and whether each variable is related sequentially, a longitudinal study must be conducted

REFERENCES


