

Effect of Adverse Childhood Experiences on Juvenile Delinquencies and Recidivism

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ABSTRACT

Background: Adverse experiences in childhood is an umbrella term which covers many different factors that comes under it like neglect; abuse (sexual, physical, emotional, or psychological); maltreatment; violence (whether by parent, caregivers, or community); and dysfunctional household during childhood. Recidivism can be defined as the tendency of people to repeat the criminal act after being convicted for the crime and their release. The aim of this secondary paper is to study the effect of adverse childhood experiences on juvenile delinquency and recidivism with the help of various review of literature collected using keywords essential for the topic. The study highlights that experiencing adverse conditions during the childhood increases the likelihood of juvenile delinquency and recidivism due to factors like lack of family support, supportive measures, and proper infrastructure for rehabilitation facilities. It highlights that addressing adverse experiences faced in childhood are necessary not only for improving their mental health but also to promote long term positive outcomes.

Keywords: adverse childhood experiences, distress, juvenile delinquencies, adolescence, recidivism, rehabilitation.

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INTRODUCTION

Children are always seen as the future of our society and deemed especially important part of future growth and wellbeing of the globe. It is still unsettling to see and know that how many of these youth are involved in crimes due to lack of proper guidance and proper environment needed for their growth. Every now and then we hear about children committing crimes something still unimaginable to us yet becoming common nowadays. For people, the thought of a child committing crime alone is scary. There would be rarely any of them who you will find out who have always dreamed of being a delinquent or committing a criminal offense. The crimes always catch the attention of people but seldom anyone tries to go and work behind the curtains to uncover and understand the reasons behind why in the first place a child would even think about committing crime. Things always are not as black and white as they seem to be. There is always a grey area which we may fail to gain access to.

Adverse childhood Experiences can be defined as “the most intense and frequent occurring source of stress and trauma children has to face in their daily life in early stages.”

Adverse Childhood Experiences are more common among people than we know. Though many people have experienced it but in no way does it necessarily guarantee that a person has gone through adverse experiences in their childhood would be committing criminal offences in their future.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) are one of the most common factor found as the reason behind engagement of adolescents in juvenile delinquency and recidivism. ACEs are said to be experienced in the age

between of 0 years to 17 years of age. The child is under so much pressure and stress that they have recourse to things like committing petty or in some cases violent crimes as a way to gain control over their life and a way out of the terrible experiences they have been facing in their childhood.

These experiences not only affect the mental health of the victim but sometimes also leads them to commit crimes (and in this case the victims are children who later become delinquents or serious offenders as the aftereffects of adverse experiences they face in their childhood).

Adverse childhood experiences cover a number of factors under it like:

- Neglect
- Abuse (be it physical, sexual, emotional, or psychological)
- Maltreatment
- Violence (it can include parent, caregivers, siblings, peers in school or community members)
- Dysfunctional household (due to substance abuse) (Winser, 2025)

1. **Neglect** – neglect refers when a caregiver or the personal responsible to take care of the child is unable or fail to provide for, and care for them or in other words insufficient regard and care. The neglect can be of any type like they may be physically neglecting their children by ignoring basic needs like food, shelter, or clothing; educational negligence where the children is not given proper education; emotional neglect might include how the emotions, feelings are ignored; and lastly medical neglect when the child's health is ignored, and no proper medical facilities are provided even when they are sick in need of medical attention. Neglect maybe hard to spot and sometime people may confuse it with the caregiver being busy or a mistake and brush it off, but if the same continues for a large amount of time it will be considered neglect.

2. **Abuse** – abuse here does not specifically means sexual or physical abuse but also psychological too. The person responsible for the abuse can be anyone related to the child (their caregiver, parents, sibling, peers or even people in community around them) and also it can be someone unknown to the child or their family. *Sexual abuse* refers to the violation of a child by a perpetrator who has not given the consent or is not able to give consent due to any reason and in some cases the forced intercourse will result in causing mucosal tears. *Physical abuse* does not only limit to hitting or beating the child but also performing the act which result in harm of the safety, survival, development, or dignity of the child will be counted as physical abuse. *Psychological abuse* sometime is referred or addressed as emotional abuse. In this the perpetrator exploits the other person mentally by disrespecting their emotions, humiliation or gaslighting them. (Dong et al, 2003)

3. **Maltreatment** - Child maltreatment basically includes both abuse and neglect of a child that occurs from the age of 0-17 years. As a result of maltreatment when the child is treated very harshly, cruelly by a person it might result in either physical or psychological or both harms. It involves any kind of act that may result in actual harm to a child by the caregiver, parent, sibling, or peers; or the failure of being able to protect them from the harm coming their way. Things like human trafficking for the purpose of organ selling, sexual favours, slavery, forced labour or commercial sexual exploitation comes under maltreatment too. (Dube et al, 2023)

4. **Violence** – an act of committing behaviour with physical force with an intent to harm, bring danger or even to kill someone; or doing the same with emotional force. The one thing necessary in committing an act of violence is the intent or purpose, which means that the act of harming other be it mentally or physically is done intentionally and being fully aware of the damage it would bring to the other person. Violence can be both physical or emotional both and can be inflicted by anyone known or unknown to the victim. It can include act of violence in school, workplace, prisons, or healthcare facilities.

5. Dysfunctional household – this basically means that a family is not able to function properly due to lack of communication, little empathy, huge amount of criticism and most common substance abuse, (it can be alcohol abuse, drug abuse). Lack of communication can be led to a lot of miscommunication and unnecessary number of fights in between family members. Being not able to relate to each other or lack of empathy do cause an imbalance in a family. When people are not able to understand each other, they often forget that the other person can also be going through pain and difficult times resulting in dysfunction of the household. (Dong et al, 2003).

Juvenile delinquency refers to an act of criminal offense or unlawful activities committed by a young person under the age of 17 years for most parts in the world (in some place the age for juveniles may vary depending upon the policies made in that specific authority). (Young et al, 2017)

While there are things that are legal for adults but illegal for minors at the same time. Delinquency or delinquent behaviour usually involve activities like smoking, drinking while being a minor; trespassing on someone else's property; vandalizing places by spray paints or other ways. Hence, there are different punishments (like assigning them social work, more family and peer support) and correction homes for minors (for minors who commit serious and violent crimes like murder or sexual assault intentionally) by the law. The correction facilities for minors are referred to as juvenile detention homes. They are specifically made for holding people who are minors. In many cases it is avoided to send minors to send to correctional facilities rather try to reform them by engaging in positive behaviour. Correctional facilities or juvenile detention centre can end up causing more mental harm to people.

There are very rare case when a minor is tried as an adult in the court of law until or unless the nature of the crime is very heinous, like murder, sexual offense or the person shows no level of remorse for the crimes they committed; or the worst-case scenario the person is deemed as a threat to other peoples in societies due to their activities and behaviours they engage in.

In India, many factors can lead to delinquent behavior among the adolescents. One of the primary reason is family problems. When the household is dysfunctional due to any reason like lack of affection, communication problem, family support, continuous conflict between parents or there is neglect happening it could negatively affect a child's mental, emotional and social development. Another reason could be economic status of the family, financial hardship can lead to lack of basic necessities to a child which can lead to indulging in negative activities to fulfill their needs, increasing the risk of juvenile delinquency and reoffending. (Kaur et al, 2023)

Recidivism can be defined as the tendency of people to repeat the criminal act after being convicted for the crime and their release. In the context of juvenile justice, recidivism is commonly measured through re-arrest, reconviction, or re-incarceration following an initial offense (Mears et al., 2011). High rates of recidivism among juvenile offenders are a significant concern, as they suggest persistent behavioural difficulties and indicate limitations in existing rehabilitative and correctional approaches (Mulvey, 2011). Examining recidivism is therefore essential for understanding the long-term outcomes of juvenile justice interventions and their effectiveness in preventing repeated offending.

Recent research shows that early adverse life experiences play a crucial role in juvenile delinquency and recidivism. In a study done by Narvey et al. (2020) to examine the interrelation between empathy and adverse childhood experiences and their effect on juvenile recidivism. The results shows higher effect of adverse childhood experiences on juvenile recidivism. This study used a sample of 11,000 serious juvenile offenders.

Some key risk factors for recidivism can be:

- i) Adverse childhood experiences – early exposure to things like neglect, abuse, violence and household dysfunction can increase emotional dysregulation and maladaptive coping, which can increase the likelihood of repeated offending. (Narvey et al. 2020)
- ii) Criminality in family members – youth who have a history of family background of criminal history, their risk of recidivism increases.
- iii) Problems in school – it includes having to drop out from the school or academic failure, which have shown to increase the risk of recidivism, as the absence of engagement with education diminishes the opportunities for prosocial development.
- iv) Age at first offense – Age at the very first offense also plays a role, as with younger juveniles are more exposed to risky environment for longer duration which can result in increasing the chance of reoffending.
- v) Peer influence – the most important factor at the age of adolescence is interaction with peers. If there is always presence of people who normalize delinquent behaviour and reward such behaviour it increases the risk of reoffending. (Ortega – Campos et al, 2016)

METHODOLOGY

The aim of this review paper is to explore the relationship between the effect of adverse childhood experiences on juvenile delinquency and recidivism. The literature for review that been used in this paper has been searched using the keywords like adverse childhood experiences, abuse, maltreatment, juvenile offences, recidivism to increase the credibility of this paper across different databases. Literature reviews are from year between 2026-2015. The electronic databases such as PubMed, Sage journal, Tandfonline, Google scholar, Science Direct and NCBI were used. Various journals such as Journal of Youth and Adolescence, Aggression and Violent Behaviour, Child Abuse and Neglect, Journal of Criminal Psychology and Journal of Criminal Justice. The main focus was on words like adverse childhood experiences, juvenile offences and recidivism. The variables used in this study are that of my interest and I wanted to gain more knowledge about the factors involved and be more aware about this increasing concern around the globe. The conclusion on the basis of all the literature reviews found indicate towards a relationship between adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and juvenile delinquencies and recidivism

Review of Literature

Casey et al, (2025) carried out a research in order to investigate the association of adverse situations in the childhood and recidivism among juvenile offenders. The study was conducted on a sample of 12,143 youth from Florida juvenile justice department. The results of the study revealed that adverse childhood experience especially linked to long time exposure to violence and abuse are strong predictor of recidivism.

Oei et al. (2023) conducted a study to examine the effect of adverse conditions during the childhood and aggression, disruptive behavior, and risk factors for juvenile delinquency. The study was conducted on a sample of 1130 young offenders (juveniles, Mean age = 17 years). The results that people who experienced adverse experiences in childhood has direct effect on delinquency and reoffending.

Jackson et al. (2023) carried out a research in order to investigate the relationship between adverse situations during childhood and delinquency. The study used data from longitudinal birth cohort study for the analysis. The results indicated that adverse experiences in childhood lead to delinquency in adolescence.

Astridge et al. (2023) conducted a systematic review to understand the effect of adverse situations during childhood on recidivism in young people or juveniles. The study used meta-analysis including 31 studies to synthesize the data. The results revealed that adverse incidents in the childhood and neglect were positively related to recidivism among young offenders.

Jackson et al. (2022) conducted a study to examine the association between adverse situations during childhood and adolescent police contact. The study was conducted on a sample of 11313 adolescent (including being warned and arrested). The results showed a significant increase in juvenile delinquency by the age of 14 years for adolescents who have experienced adverse situations in childhood.

Fava et al. (2022) conducted a study to examine the association between the adverse situations during the childhood and juvenile delinquency. The study was conducted on a sample of 480 adolescent (consists of 71% boys). The result indicated connection between ACEs (adverse experience in the childhood) and juvenile delinquency (via sleep problems or low self-control).

Meldrum et al. (2022) carried out a study to investigate the association of adverse situations in the childhood to lower self-control and a level of increase in delinquency. The sample consisted of two separate cohorts (sixth graders and ninth graders). The result indicated a positive association between adverse situations in the childhood and delinquency in each cohort of the youth used in this study.

Wolff et al. (2022) conducted a study to assess the connection between adverse situations in the childhood and continued delinquency. The sample was limited to juveniles under the age of 18 years. Logistic regression models are used as a tool to assess the relationship between adverse situations in the childhood and continued delinquency. The results showed that adverse situations in the childhood play a role in yielding continued juvenile delinquencies.

Yohros (2022) carried out a systematic review to investigate the association of adverse situations in the childhood and juvenile recidivism. The study used meta-analysis including 16 studies to synthesize the data. The results revealed that adverse experiences during the childhood lead to increase in recidivism rates among the juveniles.

Oei et al. (2021) carried out a study by examining the association between adverse situations during the childhood and substance use in young offenders (juveniles). The study included a sample of 790 young offenders (in which there were 669 males). Multiple regression was used a tool to assess the association between adverse situations during the childhood and substance use in young offenders (juveniles). The results showed a positive relationship between adverse experiences during the childhood and drug use or dependency in young (juvenile) offenders. It highlighted ACEs as a high-risk factor in yielding substance use.

Doelman et al. (2021) conducted a study to explore the association between maltreatment of child (childhood adverse experience) and delinquency in juveniles. The sample for this study consisted of 24,956 adolescents from nine different West European countries, who were between the age of twelve to sixteen years. Self-reported juvenile delinquency and self-reported child maltreatment were used as tools to measure the level of maximum possible scores in a range acceptable to be considered as maltreatment. The results indicated that between maltreatment of child (childhood adverse experience) is connected with serious and violent delinquency experiences in juveniles.

Jones et al. (2021) carried out a study to examine the association between early exposure to adverse situations during the childhood and delinquency in youth. The data for the study consisted of fragile families and child well-being study (n=3,402). The results from the study indicated that exposure of adversities from childhood leads to delinquent behavior in lives of youth.

Turner et al. (2020) conducted a study to investigate the relationship between the adverse situations during the childhood and mental health problems in juvenile offenders. The study used 161 adolescent from the detention centre (Germany) as a sample in this study. Youth self-report and Childhood Trauma Questionnaire was used as a tool in measuring and analysing the effect of ACEs. The result showed that a considerable amount of people experienced adverse experiences in childhood (more in females as compared to males).

Narvey et al. (2020) conducted a study to examine the interrelation between empathy and adverse situations during the childhood and their effect on recidivism in juveniles. This study used a sample of 11,000 people who were juvenile offenders. This study used R-PACT assessment as a tool. The results shows higher effect of adverse situations during the childhood on juvenile recidivism.

Baglivio et al. (2020) conducted a study to assess the effect of adverse situations during the childhood between juvenile offending that are chronic and serious. The sample consisted of 64,007 juvenile offenders for this study. The results revealed a positive correlation between adverse situations during the childhood and chronic and serious juvenile offending.

Wolff et al. (2019) carried out a study to see the association between adverse situations during the childhood and gang involvement of juvenile offenders. The study included a sample of 104,267 juvenile offenders. The results showed that adverse childhood experiences exposure does play an important role in gang involvement among juvenile offenders (also substance use is there in play).

Clements-Nolle et al. (2019) carried out a study to investigate the association between adverse situations during the childhood and psychological distress among the juvenile offenders. The sample consisted of total 429 (male and female) adolescents involved with juvenile justice system. The results from the study indicated that increased exposure to adversities during childhood results in increases psychological distress among the juvenile offenders.

Braga et al. (2017) carried a meta-analysis to thoroughly investigate the relationship between maltreat (one of the childhood experiences) and juvenile antisocial behaviour. The meta-analysis used 33 studies, including 23,973 youth as a sample. The results showed that maltreatment during the childhood is associated with the increasing rates of general antisocial behaviour and aggressive antisocial behaviour.

Pflugrad et al (2017) carried out a study to investigate the effect of adverse situations during the childhood on the violent young female offenders (including sex offenders and intentional homicide). The sample for this study included both groups of violent young female offenders. The results revealed that female homicide offenders experience more adverse childhood experiences.

Wolff et al. (2016) conducted a study to examine the association between adverse situations during the childhood and pathways to juvenile recidivism. The sample for this study consisted of 25,000 juvenile offenders. The results indicated that adverse situations during the childhood have both a direct and indirect effect on recidivism in juveniles through negative emotionality.

Perez et al. (2016) carried out a study to assess the connection of adverse situations during the childhood and highly maladaptive behaviors, delinquency in juveniles that are serious and violent. The study used a sample of 64,329 offenders who were juveniles from Department of Juvenile Justice in Florida. The results showed a positive relationship between adverse situations during the childhood and SVC delinquency in juveniles.

Greene et al. (2015) carried out a study to understand the association between chronic child neglect (factor that comes under adverse childhood experience) and aggression and delinquency among adolescences. This study included children between the age of 12 and onwards as a sample. The results indicated that boys are more prone to show aggressive and delinquent behavior due to chronic neglect.

Baglivio et al. (2015) carried out a study to investigate the association between adverse situations during the childhood and juvenile offenders. The study conducted used a sample of 64,000 passed on judicially juvenile

offenders (Florida). Multinomial logistic regression was used to examine the adverse situations during the childhood score as a tool in this study. The results indicated a positive relationship between increased exposure to multiple adverse situations during the childhood and serious and violent patterns of delinquencies in juveniles. Epps et al. (2015) conducted a study to explore the relationship between adverse situations during the childhood and juvenile offenders at high risk. The study used 64,329 juvenile offenders as a sample for examining. The results showed high prevalence of exposure to adverse situations during the childhood in the juvenile offenders at high risk (more so often in females as compared to the males).

Wolff et al. (2015) conducted a study to explore the connection of adverse situations during the childhood and recidivism among juveniles. The study was conducted on a large sample among juvenile offenders from the Florida. Cox hazard models were used as a tool for assessment. The results indicated that adverse situations during the childhood increase the risk of subsequent arrest and with a higher prevalence of recidivism of juvenile offenders.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this secondary paper was to study the relationship between Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and their effect on juvenile delinquency and recidivism. The objective was to determine whether there is a positive relation between adverse experiences of childhood and juvenile delinquency and whether this leads to an increase in the risk of recidivism. The findings indicate that adverse childhood experiences not only elevate the risk of initial delinquent behaviour but also contribute to sustained involvement in the juvenile justice system. When underlying trauma remains unaddressed, juveniles may encounter challenges in adapting to corrective interventions, thereby increasing the likelihood of recidivism.

The studies used included in this paper shows that how adverse experiences of childhood are not only positively associated with juvenile delinquency but also can be a factor for increase in contact with police of adolescence (in a study conducted by Jackson et al. (2022) which stated that ACEs increase the chance of police contact due to offenses in minors increases). Another study provided support that how adverse childhood experiences can lead to recidivism (in a study done by Wolff et al. (2015) to explore the relationship between adverse situations during the childhood and recidivism of juveniles. The study was conducted on sample of juvenile offenders from Florida. Cox hazard models were used as a tool for assessment. The results indicated that Adverse childhood experiences increase the risk of subsequent arrest and with a higher prevalence of recidivism of juvenile offenders.)

They provide further proof that how not only minors get involved in committing juvenile offenses but also things like substance abuse, or gang involvement which further affect their future. This can be seen in literature review of a study conducted by Oei et al. (2021) in which they stated that there has been identified a positive link between childhood adverse experiences like abuse or maltreatment may lead to substance abuse specially while you are getting influenced by other people around you and being indulged in juvenile offenses.

Adverse experiences also effects a personal mentally too. Being mistreated or worse getting abused by a person who is supposed to protect you from other or even by people you do not know and reasons unknown to you as a child they abuse you, illtreat you (causing both physical as well as mental harm) cause an extremely negative effect on you. These various studies focused on how the prevalence of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) is found more in juvenile delinquents as compared to people who have not committed any kind of delinquency or criminal offenses. When juvenile justice interventions fail to address the underlying trauma, the likelihood of recidivism increases because behavioural problems are managed without resolving their root causes.

Consequently, recidivism among juvenile offenders can be understood not just as repeated rule-breaking, but as a result of unresolved childhood adversity.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this secondary paper was to study the relationship between Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and their effect on juvenile delinquency and recidivism. Adverse childhood experience is in fact an umbrella term for different factors like abuse, neglect, violence, or dysfunctional household. In retrospect, many childhood experiences may not be particularly pleasant to recall. These experiences can arise from the loss of something precious or serve as reminders of past adversities. Not everyone experiences the same childhood, and some may face greater challenges. These adverse experiences significantly influence the shaping of an individual's future. The signs of abuse and neglect are hard to notice until or unless you are focusing on them. Some of the common signs may include bruising on the child every other day, unclean clothes or shoes, lack of proper care and medication even when sick, poor hygiene, sudden change in behaviour or frequent emotional outburst of child, subtly denying going near the people who are abusing them.

This review underscores the influence of adverse childhood experiences on juvenile delinquency and the heightened likelihood of recidivism. Existing literature indicates that early exposure to abuse, neglect, violence, maltreatment and familial dysfunction not only precipitates delinquent behaviour but also leads to involvement with the juvenile justice system.

Juveniles experiencing increasing levels of childhood adversity frequently demonstrate emotional dysregulation, impulsivity, and maladaptive coping mechanisms, thereby augmenting their susceptibility to reoffending. Recidivism among juvenile offenders should be comprehended as a continuation of unresolved childhood adversity rather than merely repeated rule violations. Addressing early trauma through supportive, trauma-informed, and rehabilitative approaches may play a pivotal role in mitigating reoffending and fostering long-term positive outcomes.

Consequently, efforts directed towards mitigating recidivism should transcend punitive measures and concentrate on early identification, psychological assistance, and rehabilitative strategies that foster stability and resilience among affected youth.

RECOMMENDATION

Adverse childhood experiences refer to situations that can result in long term stress or trauma in a person's life. Though there are many laws and intervention made for the protection of rights of juveniles and their proper care but there is a large gap in implementation of these guidelines practically. In India specifically there is a huge gap in care and protection of juveniles in the childcare facilities that are available for them which may result in children not being rehabilitated properly and engage in behaviour that increases the risk of recidivism. There is also a gap in research done over to find out about the role of adverse childhood conditions in recidivism.

The considerably basic thing recommended that can be taken into consideration to prevent recidivism is to provide counsellors for help in every children care home. Although on paper there are childcare home made for both juveniles and children who require care due to adverse conditions in their families, but the condition of these homes are often seen to be in extremely poor shape. This lack of intervention and poor system of care often result in deteriorating the condition of a minor and increase the risk of reoffending.

There is lack of financial help, improper implementation of policies made, stigma that comes with the term juvenile or delinquent. The children care homes are overpopulated, there is lack of resources and personal

required for the care and their security. Although as a part of healthy intervention techniques there should be contact between the probation officer and the teacher, peers, friends, or employers of the child under their care for recording their development and growth but there is no proper procedure in the system for this. Though many a times seeing the gravity of the crimes juveniles are required to do social work as to make them realize their mistake; NGO involvement, family counselling (that could really help the minor and their family to cope up with the current situation in a more appropriate way), but there are no such thing practiced under Indian juvenile system. There is also lack of crisis intervention techniques and involvement of educational institutions which is especially important for preparing the juveniles to their integration back in society.

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