



# The Timing of Maltreatment and Delinquency: Do Substitute Care Placements Account for Some of the Developmental Effects?

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## Purpose

To examine how child welfare services, especially substitute care (i.e., out-of-home placement) impact the relationship between the timing of child maltreatment experience and juvenile delinquency.

## Background

1. Studies on the relationship between the timing of maltreatment and juvenile delinquency indicate that adolescent and persistent maltreatment have stronger and more consistent negative consequences as compared with maltreatment experienced only in childhood.
2. Some studies on the relationship between child welfare service and juvenile delinquency find that child welfare services protect maltreated children from involvement in juvenile delinquency among minority groups. However, instability in child welfare indicated by multiple placements is positively related to the likelihood of juvenile delinquency.
3. No studies to date consider child welfare service as potential mediating mechanism that may explain the relationship between the timing of maltreatment and juvenile delinquency.

## Research Questions

- Does the timing of maltreatment influence the risk of juvenile delinquency?
- Does the experience of child welfare services, especially substitute care impact the relationship between the timing of child maltreatment experience and juvenile delinquency?

## Sample Selection

The study sample consists of two birth cohorts: 18,676 children with at least one substantiated report of maltreatment born between January 1, 1983 and December 31, 1984. These cohorts were selected to accommodate a longitudinal design. Data are available for each case from birth to 18 years of age. Therefore, the risk period (i.e., the years eligible for a delinquency petition) does not vary among individual youth. The families of these children were residents of Cook County, Illinois at the time of their first substantiated report of maltreatment.

## Measures

The measure of maltreatment timing is based on administrative data from Illinois DCFS. Children in the sample were divided into five groups: early childhood maltreatment (i.e. under age 6), late childhood maltreatment (age 6-11), both-childhood-only maltreatment (early childhood and late childhood), adolescence-only maltreatment (age 12-17), and persistent maltreatment (childhood and adolescence combined).

Out-of-home placements are grouped as a dummy variable to represent placement experience.

The filing of a delinquency petition is used to measure delinquency.

## Sample Profile

Variable	Frequency	Percent
Female	9,766	57.3
African American	12,786	68.5
Hispanic	2,333	19.1
Maltreatment timing		
Early childhood only	8,408	45.0
Later childhood only	5,794	31.0
Both-childhood-only	1,265	6.8
Adolescent-only	2,431	13.0
Persistent	778	4.2
Out-of-home placement	5,354	28.7
Delinquency offending	1,671	9.0

## Analytic Approach

Logistic regression is the major analytic technique employed. Four models are tested: the first model includes only the timing of maltreatment as an independent variable; the second model includes demographic variables, including gender and ethnicity; the third model includes maltreatment type; finally, the fourth model includes the dummy indicator of substitute care.

## Findings and Conclusion

### Preliminary Findings:

- Regarding youth characteristics, male (OR=1.89) and African Americans (OR= 1.49) were at greater risk of delinquency.
- Regarding maltreatment type, physically abused (OR=1.33) or neglected (OR=1.23) youth were at an increased risk of delinquency as compared with children at substantial risk of harm.
- Regarding maltreatment timing, the first model shows three groups, later childhood-only, childhood persistent, and persistent from childhood to adolescent groups were all significantly more likely ( $\beta$ s >0; ORs >1;  $p < 0.05$ ) to be associated with a delinquency petition as compared to early childhood only group, while adolescent only group ( $\beta = -0.14$ ; OR = 0.87;  $p < 0.05$ ) appeared to be less likely. However, in the fourth model all but one developmental effect vanished. Later childhood-only (5 to 12 years of age) remained significant ( $\beta = 0.12$ ; OR = 1.13;  $p < 0.05$ ). Finally, children that did not enter a substitute care setting were significantly less likely to be associated with a delinquency petition ( $\beta = -0.26$ ; OR = 0.77;  $p < 0.001$ ).

### Conclusion

The findings from the current study indicate that developmental differences do exist, but that substitute care placements moderate and in some cases completely diminish the relative importance of timing.

## Next Steps

### Additional questions to explore:

Why does the risk of delinquency remains high for maltreated youth between 5 and 12 years of age? Who are these youth and what experiences account for their involvement in child welfare?

Do child welfare systems respond differently to cases of child abuse and neglect based on the age of the child? Might variations in response help explain the pathways from child welfare to juvenile justice?

Does the timing and type of placement help explain the risk of delinquency?

