

Childhood Sexual Abuse – Are There Consequences for the Victim in Adulthood?

Shelby Keefer

Abstract

In a contemporary society, individuals care very deeply about our future. This concern includes our children, whom we raise to become people who will eventually take care of us after they no longer need our care. Childhood sexual abuse continues to affect the lives of many children. According to the Centers for Disease Control, approximately 1 in 6 boys and 1 in 4 girls are sexually abused before the age of 18 ("National Sex Offender Facts and Statistics", n.d.). There has not been any study that I could find conducted on links between incarceration and sexual abuse of children. By conducting a study that focuses on prison inmates, this research looks at the relationship between reasons a person was incarcerated and whether that person was sexually abused in childhood. The participants would consist of 100 prison inmates who are incarcerated for sex-related crimes, and 100 inmates who are incarcerated for drug-related crimes. Questionnaires would be followed by individual face-to-face interviews to gather more information. This study can help to determine what the most likely outcome for child sexual abuse victims will be. The anticipated results of this study are that individuals who are sexually abused as children will attempt to avoid the vulnerability of being a sexual abuse victim by resorting to making someone else a victim or subduing themselves through drugs. We know that, in our society, we cannot always be there to protect our children from the dangers of the real world, such as crime; yet there is hope that with proactive measures, childhood sexual abuse will decrease significantly over time.

Introduction

Sexual abuse is a horrific, life changing occurrence in a person's existence, especially when it happens to a child. There are a couple of ways that a person who is sexually abused may continue on with their life. One way may be building character from such an awful experience, continuing on with life, figuring that they will grow as a person, and learning to cope with the scarring experience. However, not every victim is able to move past such a traumatic experience without lasting effects, and is thus not the focus of this research project. Another outcome that could result from such an event would be to attempt recovery by resorting to drug use or criminal behavior. Thus, this paper will explore the question of whether being sexually abused as a child does lead to drug use or criminal behavior in adulthood. These victims, who have been subject to such abuse, may have consciously turned to drug use or criminal behavior using the Rational Choice Theory, or even the Self-Medication Hypothesis, in order to

overcome the fear and feeling of victimization. Does being sexually abused as a child lead to drug use or criminal behavior in adulthood? Do these victims choose to resort to such acts so as not to feel like a victim anymore? The actions of others are a curious business, and since we are only human, curiosity is in our nature.

Background / Literature Review

This research focuses on sexual abuse and the actions taken by these victims after their abuse. For those people who have fallen victim to sexual abuse, there are different ways to cope with such an experience. The choices I focus on in this project are drug use and criminal behavior. According to Swan (1998), "As many as two-thirds of all people in treatment for drug abuse report that they were physically, sexually, or emotionally abused during childhood". According to the United States Department of Veterans Affairs, six out of ten abusers know the victim but are not family (e.g. family friend, or neighbor); three out of ten abusers are family

members (e.g. parent, cousin, etc.); one out of ten abusers are strangers to the victim. This type of outcome could be explained by the Self-Medication Hypothesis. The Self-Medication Hypothesis is an idea that a person will use a drug, or drugs, in order to "relieve symptoms of an underlying disorder or condition" (Radut, n.d.). The idea that a victim of sexual abuse would use drugs to try to forget the horrible experience of such an act seems plausible. For the victim, that experience may have scarred them psychologically, emotionally, and even physically. Such an event can traumatize a person to a point where they may never be able to touch or be touched without the fear, or without remembering their sexual abuse. Tracy (2013) discusses symptoms of childhood sexual abuse and how these events can affect a person. She describes some of the symptoms to include physical pain like eating disorders, sleeping disorders, addictions (including drugs or other substances), along with psychological affects such as PTSD, depression, anxiety, repeated self-injury, or even suicide attempts, and the list continues with many other symptoms. For these victims to resort to more extreme ways to "numb the pain of being a sexual abuse victim" could mean that they are attempting to suppress painful emotions that link to the abuse.

A second possible hypothesis to explain why victims turn to criminality or drug use is Rational Choice Theory. This theory is based on the idea that a person will weigh the pros versus the cons in a situation prior to following through on a certain act, and, while knowing the consequences that follow such an act, will commit the act anyway. Keel (2005) suggests "Rationality involves an end/means calculation, people freely choosing all behavior, both conforming and deviant, based on their rational calculations, the cost benefit analysis of pleasure versus pain, along with other points as well as those choices that are directed towards the maximization of individual pleasure". If we, a society full of human beings, will choose to live lives that include choosing between pleasure versus pain, pleasure will win almost every time. I say

"almost" because there is one time, though this instance may be uncommon, a person may choose pain over pleasure because of the means that build up to the end. For example, a person may be applying for a promotion at work, and is given a choice on how they can obtain said promotion. There are two options that this person is given in order to receive the promotion. The first option is to work for years in the same position, doing the same paperwork day in and day out, working overtime in order to stay ahead of the game. The second option is to exploit the coworker who is also up for the same position. For those people who do not want to do extra work, they may choose the second option to save themselves from more than they have to; even though the outcome may not be positive. Though the first option is harder, and more exhausting, by the time this employee is up for the promotion, the employee will know that this promotion was earned, and the means justify the end. Since people try to make their lives as simple as possible, no matter what obstacles may get in the way, people will search for an easier way to live without pain and suffering.

Research Question (Thesis) and Rationale

Childhood sexual abuse is a problem that not one person should have to endure in their lifetime. Does being sexually abused as a child lead to drug use or criminal behavior in adulthood? Does Rational Choice Theory or Self-Medication Hypothesis explain decisions being made by sexual abuse victims in order to make them feel as if they are no longer a victim? In order for society to find out the answer to these questions, research must take place to seek out the answers.

Methods / Research Design

Since the participants for my study consist of a protected class of individuals, there will be extra precautions taken. The participants I will be focusing on are inmates that are incarcerated for sex crimes and/or drugs. My goal for this study will be to attempt to understand why these inmates committed the crimes for which they are

incarcerated. If the crime was sexually based, such as rape or sexual assault, the question is did they commit such a crime because they were sexually abused in childhood or felt compelled to resort to such behavior? Or did they commit such a crime for other purposes, such as fulfilling a desire or pleasure for themselves that can only be obtained by committing such an act? By looking at the inmates that are incarcerated for drugs, whether that is use, selling, or other related crimes that involve drugs, if being sexually abused in childhood increased the likelihood of their interaction with drugs with assistance from the self-medication theory? Or perhaps other circumstances that led to the use of drugs? By selecting large enough groups of inmates for my study, about 200 inmates, 100 incarcerated for sex crimes, 100 incarcerated for drugs, I should be able to collect enough data that will either support, or reject my hypothesis. The assumption is that there is a relationship between childhood sexual abuse and drugs or criminal behavior in adulthood. These participants will receive a code that will link to their actual identity in order to keep the identities of the participants confidential throughout the study. I will be assigning codes to each participant while keeping the codes with the corresponding participant's identity on a spreadsheet that is under pass code protection, and I alone will know the pass code to access the spreadsheet. Each code will vary for each participant in the study, varying on numbers and letters. For example, participant D15, means the 15th participant in the study that is incarcerated for drugs, whether that is use or other narcotics charges. Another example would be participant S84, meaning the 84th participant that is incarcerated for a sex crime. The participants in this study will answer the following questions: What are you incarcerated for? Were you sexually abused as a child? If yes, why did you resort to drugs or criminal behavior? If no, why did you resort to drugs or criminal behavior? Collecting this data from the participants will assist in figuring out if there is a relationship between childhood sexual abuse and drug use or criminal behavior in adulthood.

Anticipated Results

My anticipated results for this study are that there will be a correlation between childhood sexual abuse victims and criminal activity in the form of drug use, or sexual crimes. Assuming the result is similar to the few sources that I have found, there is a causation relationship between childhood sexual abuse and drug use or criminal behavior in adulthood. According to a study conducted about sexual abuse and criminal consequences, Widom (1995) reports "All types of abuse and neglect put people at greater risk for arrest later in life." This study also states that in the results that "People who are victimized by sexual abuse as children are also more likely than nonvictims to be arrested for a sex crime" (Widom, 1995). This study will be difficult to conduct due to the participants and how cooperative or deceitful the participants are. The true result of this research is unpredictable since all the research is formed around the information received, whether it is true or false.

Conclusion

Sexual abuse is a foul act that no person should have to endure or carry the burden of being a victim. This research will be looking at the participants that took part in this study in the hopes of helping keep future generations of sexually abused victims from following in the footsteps that lead to incarceration. By figuring out other ways for child victims of sexual abuse to learn to cope with such abuse in a healthy way, there may be a reduction in crime in the future. Obviously, this will not get rid of crime altogether, but merely a piece of crime that will continue to decrease as time goes on if such actions are taken to help prevent this abuse in the future. Though each of these incidences of sexual abuse is different, generally the perpetrator is either a stranger to the victim, or worse, a family member. The victim will most likely develop trust issues with society; maybe even try to hide from the world for the rest of their life in the hopes of never having to experience an event as horrible as that ever again. Looking at the inmates that participated in this study,

organizations such as law enforcement, social services, even people working in the educational system, may be able to identify victims of such abuse and help those victims turn to another activity other than drugs or criminal behavior. These people may be able to help these victims restore their faith in society, realizing that not everyone is as horrible as the person who sexually abused them. By inspiring these victims to tell someone about the abuse and influencing

these victims to take part in school activities, or other groups like a Boys and Girls Club, can help lead away from gang involvement. This effect will also brighten the future for the victim by changing their course of action and being able to move past the abuse as opposed to a future that would consist of jail, and possibly recidivism, if the victim tries to bury their victimization with drugs or criminal acts.

References

- Keel, Robert (2005, July 14). Rational Choice and Deterrence Theory. Retrieved from <http://www.umsl.edu/~keelr/200/ratchoc.html>
- National Sex Offender Website. (n.d.). Retrieved May 2, 2015, from [http://www.nsopw.gov/en/Education/FactsStatistics?AspxAutoDetectCookieSupport= 1#victims](http://www.nsopw.gov/en/Education/FactsStatistics?AspxAutoDetectCookieSupport=1#victims)
- PTSD: National Center for PTSD. (n.d.). Retrieved May 2, 2015, from <http://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/types/violence/child-sexual-abuse.asp>
- Radut, Dr. (n.d.). The Self-Medication Hypothesis. Retrieved from <http://www.addictioninfo.org/articles/258/1/The-Self-Medication-Hypothesis/Page1.html>
- Swan, Neil (1998, July). Exploring the Role of Child Abuse in Later Drug Abuse. Retrieved from http://archives.drugabuse.gov/NIDA_Notes/NNVol13N2/exploring.html
- Tracy, Natasha (2013, July 3). Common Symptoms in Adult Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse. Retrieved from <http://www.healthypace.com/abuse/articles/symptoms-adult-survivors--childhood-sexual-abuse.html>
- Widom, C. S. (1995). Victims of Childhood Sexual Abuse - Later Criminal Consequences. *National Institute of Justice*. Retrieved from <https://ncjrs.gov/pdffiles/abuse.pdf>