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Poor Parenting and Antisocial Behavior among Homeless Young Adults: Links to Dating Violence Perpetration and Victimization

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Abstract

Though research has examined risk factors associated with street victimization among homeless young people, little is known about dating violence experiences among this group. Given homeless youths' elevated rates of child maltreatment, it is likely that they are at high risk for dating violence. As such, the current study examined the association between child maltreatment and parental warmth with dating violence perpetration and victimization through substance use and delinquency among a sample of 172 homeless males and females. Results from path analysis revealed that physical abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect were all significant correlates of both substance use and delinquency, whereas lack of parental warmth was only associated with substance use. Neglect and substance use had direct effects on dating violence and substance use and was found to mediate the relationship between physical abuse and dating violence. Finally, females, older youth, and non-Whites had significantly higher levels of dating violence compared with their counterparts.

Keywords: child abuse, dating violence, homeless young adults, antisocial behavior

One of the most prevalent forms of violence in contemporary society is the victimization of intimate partners (Wolfe & Feiring, 2000). It is estimated that 1.5 million women and approximately 835,000 men are physically assaulted and/or raped by an intimate partner each year (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Adolescent dating violence, which refers to assaultive or coercive behaviors such as physical or sexual violence, threats of violence, and psychological or emotional aggression, is also widespread: Between 9% and 30% of youth report violent victimization or perpetration within the context of a dating relationship (Knox, Lomonaco, & Alpert, 2009; Swahn et al., 2008). Dating relationships which typically include high school or middle school adolescents or unmarried, noncohabiting college students (Barnett, Miller-Perrin, & Perrin, 2005) are also marked by widespread violence. Straus (2004), for example, found that among 33 university samples in 17 countries, the prevalence of physical assault perpetration among dating couples ranged from 17% to 45%. Correlates of intimate partner violence (IPV) in the general population include younger age (Foshee, Benefield, Ennett, Bauman, & Suchindran, 2004; Rennison & Welchans, 2000), gender— female (Gover, Kaukinen, & Fox, 2008) and male (Catalano, 2007; Luthra & Gidycz, 2006), and negative family experiences such as child maltreatment and low parental warmth (Cyr, McDuff, & Wright, 2006; Godbout, Dutton, Lussier, & Sabourin, 2009; Whitfield, Anda, Dube, & Felitti, 2003). Alcohol and illicit drug use have also been found to be risk factors for partner violence (El-Bassel, Gilbert, Wu, Go, & Hill, 2005; Mahlstedt & Welsh, 2005), whereas delinquency has been found to mediate the relationship between child abuse and partner violence perpetration (Swinford, DeMaris, Cernkovich, & Giordano, 2000).

Although homeless young people experience numerous forms of victimization on the street (Baron, 1997; Hoyt, Ryan, & Cauce, 1999; Tyler, Hoyt, Whitbeck, & Cauce, 2001), little is known about dating violence[1] among this population. Given the high rates of child abuse that homeless young people have suffered (Tyler & Cauce, 2002), they are likely to be at higher risk for dating violence. Due to the dearth of literature on homeless youth and dating violence, the purpose of this study is to examine the association between child maltreatment and lack of parental warmth with dating violence through substance use and delinquency among a sample of homeless young adults.

Potential Modes of Intergenerational Transmission

The current study is informed by the social learning approach and an antisocial orientation perspective to understand the process that links poor parenting to dating violence perpetration and victimization. According to social learning theory, violence toward others is learned behavior (Bandura, 1977). Children who grow up in violent homes learn the techniques of being violent as well as the justifications for this behavior (Gelles, 1997). Consequently, childhood victims of violence not only learn how to be perpetrators but also may learn the social scripts necessary for becoming victims as they have internalized rationalizations for interpersonal violence. This framework, however, has been met with mixed support as the majority of child abuse victims do not engage in violence within their intimate relationships (Kaufman & Zigler, 1987; Spatz Widom, 1989; Wofford Mihalic & Elliott, 1997). Other researchers, however, have found that among various populations childhood physical abuse, sexual abuse, and/or neglect are directly linked to victimization (Bassuk, Dawson, & Huntington, 2006; Brownridge, 2006), perpetration (Herrenkohl et al., 2004; Swinford et al., 2000), or both (Godbout et al., 2009; Gover et al., 2008; Tyler, Melander, & Noel, 2009; Whitfield et al., 2003; Wolfe, Wekerle, Scott, Straatman, & Grasley, 2004).

Another mode of intergenerational transmission, which has been labeled as the antisocial orientation or criminological perspective (Gordon Simons, Harbin Burt, & Simons, 2008; Simons, Lin, & Gordon, 1998), suggests that children exposed to poor parenting (e.g., abuse and low support) are at greater risk for dating violence through delinquency and substance use. Delinquency has been found to mediate the relationship between child abuse and partner violence perpetration, (Swinford et al., 2000) as well as between poor parenting and perpetration (Simons et al., 1998). Although they did not find support for mediation, Lavoie et al. (2002) found that harsh discipline and delinquency were both directly associated with perpetrating dating violence. As such, there is mixed support for delinquency as a potential mediator of partner violence. Delinquency among homeless youth, however, is prevalent because it is often used as a basic survival strategy to generate money, goods, food, or drugs (Hagan & McCarthy, 1997). As many homeless youth are too young, uneducated, and inexperienced to obtain legitimate employment (Gilfus, 1992; Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, 1995), many resort to shoplifting, robbery, or selling drugs (Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999). Delinquency among this population is a risk factor for both vic-

timization and violence on the streets (Tyler & Johnson, 2004). In sum, according to this perspective, a general pattern of antisocial behavior is passed from parents to their children, and because the children's antisocial tendencies persist throughout the lifespan, this affects the probability that they will engage in dating violence.

Hypotheses

According to social learning theory, it is hypothesized that physical abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect (i.e., child maltreatment) and lower levels of parental warmth will be positively and directly associated with dating violence. Second, according to an antisocial orientation perspective, it is hypothesized that child maltreatment and lower levels of parental warmth will be positively associated with substance use and delinquency (i.e., antisocial behaviors). Third, child maltreatment and lower levels of parental warmth will be indirectly and positively associated with dating violence through antisocial behaviors. Fourth, it was hypothesized that substance use and delinquency would be positively linked with dating violence. The main difference between these two perspectives is that social learning theory states that violence is learned and thus will have a direct effect on outcomes, whereas the antisocial orientation perspective posits that the effect of negative childhood experiences on dating violence is indirect through antisocial behaviors.

Method

Data are from the Homeless Young Adult Project, a pilot study designed to examine the effect of neglect and abuse histories on homeless young adults' mental health and high-risk behaviors. From April of 2004 through June of 2005, 199 young adults were interviewed in three Midwestern cities including Des Moines, Iowa, and Omaha and Lincoln, Nebraska. Of this total, 144 were homeless and 55 were housed at the time of the interview. Participants comprising the housed sample were obtained via peer nominations from the homeless young adults. Despite being housed at the time of the interview, 28 out of the 55 housed young adults had extensive histories of being homeless and had run away from home numerous times. The final sample included 172 young adults who were homeless or had a history of running away and being homeless.

Experienced interviewers who have worked on past projects dealing with at-risk young people, have served for several years in agencies and shelters that support this group and are very familiar with local street cul-

tures (e.g., knowledgeable about where to locate young adults and where they congregate), conducted interviews. In addition, all interviewers had completed the collaborative Institutional Review Board (IRB) training initiative course for the protection of human participants in research. Interviewers approached shelter residents and located eligible respondents in areas where street young adults congregate. Study eligibility required young people to be between the ages of 19 and 25 and homeless. *Homeless* was defined as those currently residing in a shelter, on the street, or those living independently (e.g., with friends) because they had run away, had been pushed out, or had drifted out of their family of origin. Interviewers obtained informed consent from young adults prior to participation and told the young people about the confidentiality of the study and that their participation was voluntary. The interviews, which were conducted in shelter-interview rooms or quiet corners of fast food restaurants or coffee shops, lasted approximately 1 hr and all participants received US$25 for their participation. Referrals for shelter, counseling services, and food services were offered to the young adults at the time of the interview. Although field reporters did not formally tally screening rates, they reported that very few young adults (i.e., less than 5%) refused to participate. The IRB at the author's institution approved this study.

Measures

Dependent Variables. The Dating Violence Scale included 28 items from the Revised Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996) to assess the respondents' dating violence perpetration and victimization experiences. Respondents were asked, for example, how many times they did the following things to their partner or previous partner and how many times their partner did this to them: pushed or shoved, choked, and used threats to have sex. These items were dichotomized (0 = *never*; 1 = *at least once*) and then combined into an index. Previous research has found that the internal consistency estimate for these items is .87 for sexual coercion, .86 for physical assault, and .79 for psychological aggression (Straus et al., 1996).

Independent Variables

Poor parenting. Physical abuse included 16 individual items from the Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus, Hamby, Finkelhor, Moore, & Runyan, 1998). Respondents were asked to reflect on abusive experiences that occurred prior to age 18 and asked how frequently their caretaker, for ex-

ample, shook them or kicked them hard (0 = *never* to 6 = *more than 20 times*). Individual items were summed such that a higher score indicated more physical abuse (α = .88). Sexual abuse was measured using seven items adapted from previous research with homeless young people (Whitbeck & Simons, 1990). Respondents were asked, for example, how often an adult or someone, at least 5 years older, had touched them sexually on their butt, thigh, breast, or genitals before they were on their own and when they were below the age of 18 (0 = *never* to 7 = *more than once a day*). The items were dichotomized (0 = *never*; 1 = *at least once*) and then summed to create an index with a higher score indicating a greater number of different sexual abuse experiences. Both of these scales have been shown to have excellent reliability among homeless populations (α = .88 for physical abuse; Whitbeck & Simons, 1990 and .89 and .93 for sexual abuse; Tyler et al., 2001; Whitbeck & Simons, 1990, respectively). Low Parental Warmth (adapted from Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999) was a summed scale of 13 items that asked respondents what their relationship with their parent/caretaker was like when they were in junior high (about 13 years old). For example, your caretaker cared about your feelings, really understood you, and didn't pay enough attention to you (1 = *strongly agree* to 4 = *strongly disagree*). One scale item was reverse coded so that higher scores indicated lower parental warmth (α = .96). This scale has been shown to have excellent reliability among homeless youth (α = .91, Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999). Neglect was comprised of five items from a supplementary scale within the Parent–Child Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus et al., 1998). These items asked respondents, for example, how many times their caretaker left them home alone when someone should have been with them (0 = *never* to 6 = *more than 20 times*). Individual items were summed so that a higher score indicated more neglect (α = .83). Chan and colleagues (2011) also report a high alpha for this scale (α = .82).

Substance use included 12 items that asked respondents how often they had drank beer, wine, or liquor or had used marijuana, crank, amphetamines, cocaine, opiates, hallucinogens, barbiturates, inhalants, or designer drugs in the past year. Cronbach's alpha was .78. A mean scale was created (0 = *never* to 4 = *daily*). Other research on homeless populations using these same items report similar reliabilities (α = .82 for males and .83 for females, Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Yoder, 1999).

Delinquency included 12 items in which respondents were asked how often they had engaged in a series of delinquent behaviors such as stealing and violence (adapted from Whitbeck & Simons, 1990). Response categories ranged from 0 = *never* to 3 = *many times (5+)*. The 12 items were summed with a higher score indicating greater involvement in delin-

quent behavior (α = .89). This scale has been shown to have good reliability among homeless populations (α = .73, Tyler et al., 2001 and α = .75, Whitbeck & Simons, 1990).

Demographic characteristics. Gender was coded 0 = *male* and 1 = *female*. Age was a continuous variable that measured how old the respondents were at the time of the interview. Race was coded 0 = *non-White* and 1 = *White*.

Results

Sample Characteristics

Forty percent of the respondents were female and almost 80% were White. Other ethnic/racial groups included Black (8.7%), Hispanic (3.5%), American Indian (1.7%), Asian (1.2%), and biracial (5.2%). Young adults ranged in age from 19 to 26 years. A total of 47% of young adults had experienced at least one type of sexual abuse, 95% had been physically abused at least once, and approximately 78% had experienced some type of neglect which is consistent with other studies (Tyler & Cauce, 2002; Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999). Substance use in the past year ranged from weekly to monthly usage. The combined Dating Violence scale revealed that 59% of young people experienced and perpetrated dating violence. See Table 1 for descriptive statistics for all variables.

Procedure

A fully recursive path model was estimated using the maximum likelihood (ML) procedure in Mplus 5.1 (Muthen & Muthen, 1998-2007). The statistical assumptions of ML estimation (e.g., multivariate normality of the endogenous variables) were satisfied. This model takes into account both the direct effects as well as the indirect effects through substance use and delinquency. Although separate models were initially run for dating violence perpetration and victimization, they were later combined into a single Dating Violence Victimization/Perpetration Scale because the results for the separate models were very similar. This overlap in victimization and perpetration has been noted in other studies on bidirectional or mutual partner violence, which generally refers to situations in which a respondent reports being both a victim and perpetrator of violence in the context of an intimate relationship (Caetano, Ramisetty-Mikler, & Field, 2005; Harned, 2002; Robertson & Murachver, 2007). Previous studies have found that the majority of partner violence cases in-

Table 1. Descriptive Information

Dichotomous variables	*N*	%
Female	69	40.1
White	137	79.7
Continuous variables	***M***	***SD***
Age (range 19-26 years)	21.45	2.13
Physical abuse (range 0-76)	23.13	17.05
Sexual abuse (range 0-7)	1.63	2.19
Parental warmth (range 13-52)	28.34	9.81
Neglect (range 0-30)	8.82	8.93
Substance use (range 0-2.5)	0.55	0.48
Delinquency (range 0-32)	7.22	8.18
Perpetration/victimization (range 0-20)	4.84	4.85

N = 172

volve mutual violence (Anderson, 2002; Melander, Noel, & Tyler, 2010; Tyler et al., 2009) providing further support for combining the victimization and perpetration items.

Direct Effects

Standardized results for the significant findings are shown in Figure 1. Results revealed that young people who experienced greater physical abuse (β = .31), sexual abuse (β = .16), and neglect (β = .16) reported more substance use, whereas lower parental warmth was associated with less substance use (β = –.17). Females reported less substance use compared with males (β = –.21). In terms of delinquency, more physical abuse (β = .22), sexual abuse (β = .13), and neglect (β = .26) were associated with greater delinquent activity. Older individuals also participated in more delinquency (β = .13) compared with their younger counterparts. In terms of dating violence, higher levels of neglect and greater substance use were both positively associated with greater dating violence (β = .22 and β = .19, respectively). Finally, females (β = .31), older youth (β = .24), and non-Whites (β = –.18) were significantly more likely to experience greater dating violence compared with males, younger respondents, and Whites. These variables explained 31% of the variance in dating violence.

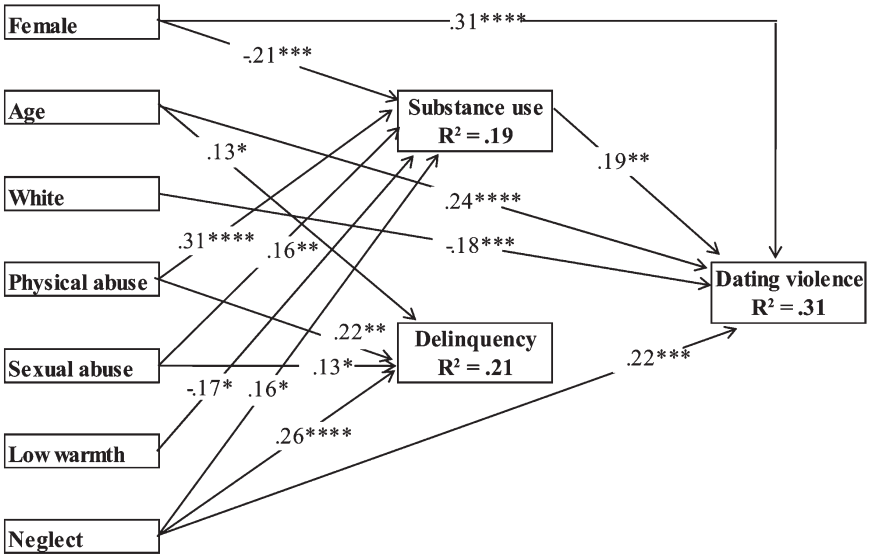

Figure 1. Path model for correlates of dating violence (only significant paths shown). * $p \leq .10$; ** $p \leq .05$; *** $p \leq .01$; **** $p \leq .001$

Indirect Effects

Table 2 shows the direct, indirect, and total effects for the full model on the combined dependent variable, dating violence perpetration and victimization. The results revealed that all three demographic variables had significant direct effects on dating violence as indicated above. Neglect and substance use also had direct effects on the outcome variable. In terms of total indirect effects on dating violence, one demographic variable (gender) was significant. In addition to the positive direct effect, gender also had a significant indirect effect on dating violence through substance use. Specifically, males had significantly greater substance use (results not shown) which, in turn, was positively associated with dating violence. In terms of parenting factors, one variable (physical abuse) had a significant indirect effect. That is, those who experienced higher levels of physical abuse had greater substance use (results not shown) which, in turn, was positively related to dating violence.

Table 2. Full Model Results

Variables	Direct effect estimate	*SE*	Total indirect effect estimate	*SE*	Total effect estimate	*SE*
Dating violence combined						
Demographic controls						
Female	.307****	.070	−.047**	.024	.261****	.071
Age	.238****	.067	−.006	.023	.232****	.068
White	−.175***	.067	.023	.019	−.151**	.068
Parenting factors						
Physical abuse	−.062	.092	.075**	.032	.013	.092
Sexual abuse	.064	.072	.040	.022	.104	.073
Lower warmth	−.025	.086	−.041	.025	−.066	.087
Neglect	.216***	.079	.050	.027	.266****	.078
Mediating constructs						
Substance use	.188**	.082				
Delinquency	.076	.084				

Standardized coefficients shown.
** $p \leq .05$; *** $p \leq .01$; **** $p \leq .001$

Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to examine the relationship between negative parenting experiences (i.e., child maltreatment and low warmth) and dating violence as well as simultaneously examining whether antisocial behaviors such as substance use and delinquency mediated this relationship among a sample of homeless young adults. Little is known about dating violence among homeless young people, despite their elevated risk, due to their exceptionally high rates of child maltreatment. Failure to examine dating violence among this high-risk population may result in continued exposure to violent partners which may have negative long-term effects.

The results for the current study reveal high rates of both perpetration and victimization within dating relationships among homeless young adults. Two theoretical perspectives guided analyses: social learning theory and the antisocial orientation (or criminological) perspective. Modest support was found for both perspectives in the current study. According to social learning theory, children learn how to engage with others by witnessing the interactions of people within their families of origin. Those who grow up in homes marred by violence learn the techniques and justifications for aggressive behavior (Bandura, 1977; Gelles, 1997).

As such, the theory proposes that there will be a direct effect from violence experienced in the family of origin and aggression toward others later in life. This is especially important to consider among homeless youth who have been found to experience high rates of child maltreatment prior to running away (Tyler & Cauce, 2002). Consistent with previous studies among general population samples (Cyr et al., 2006; Whitfield et al., 2003) and social learning theory, negative experiences in the family of origin such as neglect were directly and indirectly associated with dating violence.

Results from the current study also partially supported the antisocial orientation perspective. Unlike social learning theory, this criminological perspective posits that youth exposed to poor parenting in the form of child maltreatment and low parental warmth may be indirectly at greater risk for dating violence. That is, negative family experiences are linked to antisocial behaviors such as substance use and delinquency which, in turn, are associated with violent behaviors. Homeless youth are at risk for engaging in these negative behaviors because they may be unsupervised for longer periods of time. In addition, their chances of interacting with delinquent youth is also increased due to the amount of time they spend hanging out on the street engaging in deviant subsistence strategies (e.g., stealing, Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999) compared with general population samples. Consistent with the antisocial orientation perspective and previous research (Gover et al., 2008; Tyler et al., 2009; Whitfield et al., 2003), gender and physical abuse were found to be associated with dating violence through their relationship with substance use. As such, males and those who experience physical abuse are likely to engage in more substance use which is, in turn, associated with more dating violence. These findings suggest, a general pattern of antisocial behavior is passed from parents to their children. Youth who lack nurturing relationships with their parents may engage in antisocial behaviors such as substance abuse to cope with these negative experiences, thereby reinforcing their deviant behavior. As antisocial behaviors may persist throughout the lifespan, this increases the likelihood that youth will engage in other forms of deviant behavior including violence within dating relationships.

In terms of demographic variables, respondents who were female, older, and non-White were more likely to be in violent dating relationships. These findings on gender and age are consistent with some of the general population literature, which find that females are more likely to perpetrate and be victims of dating violence (Gover et al., 2008), and women of ages 20-24 have the highest risk of nonfatal intimate partner violence (Catalano, 2007). The gender finding should be interpreted with caution, given that males may be afraid of the negative stigma associated

with victimizing a female and consequently underreport their dating violence experiences (see. Gray & Foshee, 1997). The current findings on race are generally consistent with prior research in which Black teenagers are more likely to report being victims of dating violence compared with Whites and Hispanics (Eaton et al., 2006); however, caution is warranted because different racial/ethnic comparisons were not feasible in the current study given the small number of minority respondents.

Some other limitations should be noted. First, all data are based on selfreports; however, the respondents were informed that their responses were confidential, and the interviewers were knowledgeable with local street culture and had established relationships with many of the young adults prior to the interviews, so it is less likely that the respondents were motivated to falsify their responses. Furthermore, previous research reveals that when compared with parental reports, runaway adolescents do not appear to over report abuse and neglect within the home (Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Ackley, 1997). In addition, respondents were asked to report on their dating violence perpetration and victimization experiences, so it is possible that some respondents may have inaccurately assessed the amount of violence within the relationship due to social desirability bias. Finally, the data are cross-sectional so inferences about causality cannot be made; however, youth were asked to reflect on experiences that occurred during specific time periods (e.g., before the age of 18 and before leaving home for child maltreatment) that assist with temporal ordering of variables.

Despite these limitations, the current study has several strengths. First, the findings provide information on the risk factors for dating violence among a vulnerable population which is significant, given that little is known about relationship violence among homeless young adults. Second, these findings indicate that child neglect continues to affect young adults long after they leave home. This suggests that intervention with this group is essential because not only does early maltreatment continue to affect these young people in their relationships but continual exposure to violent partners may also result in long-term psychological distress and substance misuse (Salomon, Bassuk, & Huntington, 2002; Schiff, El-Bassel, Engstrom, & Gilbert, 2002). Third, the study examines the applicability of two different theoretical perspectives among a sample of homeless young adults to understand the correlates of partner violence which have typically only been used to assess general populations. Finally, this study employed a widely used standardized scale of partner violence, and the current findings can be compared with other general population studies that have used this instrument demonstrating its applicability to various populations.

The results of the current study have implications for prevention and intervention as well as future research. Because of the high rates of dating violence among this sample, service providers must address the needs of both males and females who are involved in these violent relationships. These individuals should also be cognizant that engaging in deviant behaviors such as excessive substance abuse may not only have immediate consequences for a person's physical health but may also increase the risk for being involved in a violent dating relationship. As such, a broader approach to intervention is warranted that accounts for the proximal and distal events that are precursors to dating violence. Future research needs to examine other correlates of dating violence to better inform these prevention and intervention strategies. For example, dating violence researchers may want to consider models that account for other factors such as posttraumatic stress and affect dysregulation that mediate the relationship between interpersonal trauma exposure and dating violence (Briere, Hodges, & Godbout, 2010). Early intervention is essential to prevent young people from forming persistent violent relationship patterns.

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Note

1. We do not use the term *intimate partner violence* for homeless young adults because we do not know the extent of their relationship with their partner.

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