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Breaking the Cycle: Preventing Criminal Behavior in Adults with a History of Childhood Trauma

Manya Chandra

chandra.manya@gmail.com

Heritage Xperiential Learning School, Gurgaon, Haryana

ABSTRACT

The experiences endured during one's formative years possess the capacity to shape their physical, emotional, and psychological well-being in profound ways. Moreover, a growing body of research has revealed a compelling association between childhood trauma and an increased propensity for engaging in criminal behavior during adulthood. Several theoretical frameworks have emerged to elucidate the intricate relationship between childhood trauma and criminal behavior. To effectively address the intricate needs of adults with a history of childhood trauma and curtail the risk of criminal behavior, trauma-informed approaches have emerged as a promising avenue. These approaches centre upon a comprehensive understanding of the impact of trauma upon individuals' lives, facilitating the creation of safe and supportive environments, and integrating trauma-sensitive practices into service delivery.

Keywords: Trauma Recovery and Empowerment Model, General Strain Theory, Resilience Theory, Mentor Systems, and Resilience Construction, Social Learning Theory

INTRODUCTION

Behind the facade of adulthood, there often lies a hidden narrative of childhood trauma, weaving a complex tapestry of experiences that can shape the trajectory of individuals' lives, with potential consequences extending into the realm of criminal behavior. The experiences endured during one's formative years possess the capacity to shape their physical, emotional, and psychological well-being in profound ways. Moreover, a growing body of research has revealed a compelling association between childhood trauma and an increased propensity for engaging in criminal behavior during adulthood (Jaffe et al., 2018; Widom, Czaja, & Dutton, 2014). Consequently, comprehending the intricate link between childhood trauma and criminal behavior becomes essential for developing effective prevention strategies that can alleviate the adverse consequences of trauma and promote healthier outcomes.

The concept of childhood trauma encompasses a diverse array of adverse experiences, including physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, exposure to domestic violence, and household dysfunction (Felitti et al., 1998). These experiences wield a profound impact upon individuals, frequently destabilizing their sense of security, stability, and overall well-being. The long-lasting ramifications of childhood trauma can precipitate a cascade of challenges that individuals may encounter during adulthood, including mental health disorders, substance abuse, and an elevated propensity for engaging in criminal behavior (Teicher, Samson, Polcari, & McGrenery, 2006).

Several theoretical frameworks have emerged to elucidate the intricate relationship between childhood trauma and criminal behavior. General strain theory posits that individuals who have experienced childhood trauma may develop negative emotional states, such as anger, frustration, and resentment, which in turn heighten the probability of resorting to criminal acts as a means of coping (Agnew, 2001). Social learning theory contends that individuals exposed to childhood trauma may internalize maladaptive behaviours and attitudes from their environment, thereby elevating the risk of engaging in criminal activities (Bandura, 1977). Additionally, the cycle of violence hypothesis suggests that those who have encountered childhood trauma, particularly violence, are more likely to replicate such behaviours in their adult relationships and subsequently engage in violent or criminal conduct (Widom, 1989).

The prevalence of childhood trauma presents a disquieting reality. A plethora of studies has indicated that a substantial proportion of the population has endured some form of childhood trauma. For instance, an expansive study conducted by the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in collaboration with Kaiser Permanente revealed that approximately 60% of adults in the United States reported experiencing at least one adverse childhood experience (Felitti et al., 1998). Moreover, childhood trauma has been found to be disproportionately prevalent among individuals entangled within the criminal justice system (Widom, 2000). The prevalence rates, thus underscore the exigency of implementing targeted interventions and prevention strategies capable of interrupting the cycle of trauma and criminal behavior.

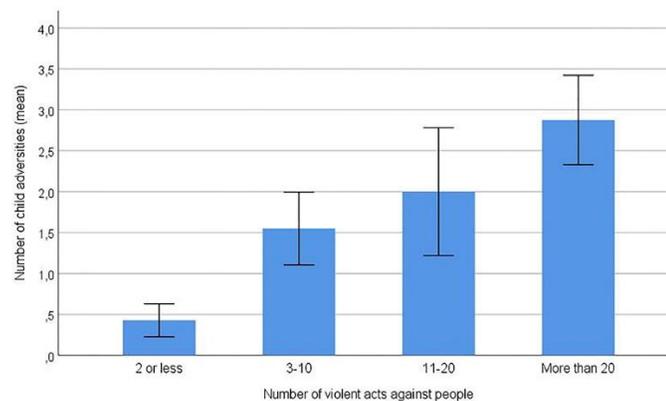


Fig. 1. Relational analysis of childhood trauma victims and violent acts against people. Fosse, Roar et al. 2021.

To effectively address the intricate needs of adults with a history of childhood trauma and curtail the risk of criminal behavior, trauma-informed approaches have emerged as a promising avenue. These approaches centre upon a comprehensive understanding of the impact of trauma upon individuals' lives, facilitating the creation of safe and supportive environments, and integrating trauma-sensitive practices into service delivery (Harris & Falot, 2001). By embracing trauma-informed approaches, practitioners can foster an atmosphere characterized by safety, trust, and empowerment, thereby facilitating the healing and recovery of individuals burdened by a history of childhood trauma.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Childhood trauma has ignited a blaze of fascination within the field of criminology, captivating researchers and practitioners alike, driven by its profound reverberations across individuals' lives and its compelling link to criminal behavior in adulthood. In the quest for knowledge, this literature review embarks on a daring expedition, traversing the vast expanse of existing research to forge a synthesis of insights into the prevention of criminal behavior among adults ensnared in the clutches of a haunting childhood trauma. Illuminating the path ahead, this exploration will unveil the crucial theoretical frameworks, uncover the treacherous risk factors, unveil the shields of protective factors, and chart the course towards evidence-based interventions that hold promise in this uncharted terrain.

General strain theory, for example, postulates that individuals who experience childhood trauma may develop negative emotions such as anger and frustration, which can lead to criminal acts as a coping mechanism (Agnew, 2001). Social learning theory suggests that exposure to childhood trauma can result in the internalization of maladaptive behaviours and attitudes, increasing the likelihood of engaging in criminal activities (Bandura, 1977). The cycle of violence hypothesis proposes that individuals who have experienced childhood trauma, particularly violence, are more likely to replicate such behaviours in their adult relationships, perpetuating a cycle of violence and criminality (Widom, 1989).

Understanding the risk factors associated with both childhood trauma and subsequent criminal behavior is also crucial for effective prevention strategies. Socioeconomic disadvantage, unstable family environments, parental substance abuse, and community violence are recognized as risk factors for both childhood trauma and criminal involvement (Smith & Thornberry, 1995). In contrast, protective factors such as social support, access to mental health services, and positive adult role models can mitigate the negative impact of childhood trauma and reduce the likelihood of engaging in criminal behavior (Masten & Narayan, 2012).

Trauma-informed approaches have emerged as a promising avenue for prevention among adults with a history of childhood trauma. Such approaches emphasize understanding the impact of trauma on individuals' lives, creating safe and supportive environments, and integrating trauma-sensitive practices into service delivery (Harris & Fallot, 2001). Trauma-informed interventions encompass a range of strategies, including trauma-focused cognitive-behavioural therapy (TF-CBT), dialectical behavior therapy (DBT), and mindfulness-based interventions.

TF-CBT is an evidence-based intervention that combines cognitive-behavioural techniques with trauma-focused interventions to address the psychological and emotional consequences of childhood trauma (Cohen, Mannarino, & Deblinger, 2006). DBT, originally developed for individuals with borderline personality disorder, has also shown promise in reducing self-destructive behaviours and improving emotional regulation among individuals with a history of trauma (Linehan, 1993). Mindfulness-based interventions, such as mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT), have demonstrated positive outcomes in reducing symptoms of trauma and enhancing resilience (Khoury, Lecomte, Fortin, Masse, & Therien, 2013).

In addition to individual-level interventions, systemic changes are also further necessary to prevent criminal behavior in this population. Implementing trauma-informed practices within the criminal justice system, such as training law enforcement officers and providing trauma-informed care in correctional settings, can promote understanding and support for individuals with a history of trauma (Covington, 2008). Collaboration between mental health professionals, social service agencies, and criminal justice stakeholders is essential for comprehensive prevention efforts.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Although, within resilience theory lies a beacon of hope, illuminating the path towards preventing criminal behavior among individuals burdened by a harrowing history of childhood trauma, as intervention strategies rooted in this framework hold the key to unlocking their potential for growth, recovery, and resilience. Resilience is defined as the dynamic process of adapting positively in the face of significant adversity, and it encompasses individuals' abilities to bounce back, recover, and even grow stronger from adverse experiences (Masten & Narayan, 2012). Drawing upon resilience theory can illuminate the potential for intervention strategies to prevent criminal behavior among individuals with a history of childhood trauma and guide the research question and objectives of this study.

Resilience theory posits that multiple factors contribute to an individual's resilience, including personal characteristics, supportive relationships, and external resources (Masten & Narayan, 2012). Personal characteristics encompass cognitive abilities, emotional regulation skills, and problem-solving capacities that can enhance individuals' ability to cope with adversity. Supportive relationships, such as positive adult role models, mentors, and social networks, play a pivotal role in providing emotional support, guidance, and opportunities for learning and growth. External resources, such as access to education, healthcare, and community services, can serve as protective factors that bolster resilience by providing individuals with the necessary tools and opportunities to thrive. In the context of preventing criminal behavior among individuals with a history of childhood trauma, intervention strategies grounded in resilience theory can be employed to foster resilience and reduce the likelihood of engaging in criminal activities. These interventions aim to strengthen personal characteristics, enhance supportive relationships, and provide access to external resources.

To bolster personal characteristics, interventions may focus on enhancing cognitive skills, emotional regulation abilities, and problem-solving capacities through evidence-based practices such as cognitive-behavioural therapy

(CBT) or mindfulness-based interventions (Teasdale et al., 2000). These interventions can equip individuals with the necessary skills to manage distress, regulate emotions, and make adaptive decisions, reducing the likelihood of resorting to criminal behaviours as maladaptive coping mechanisms. In terms of supportive relationships, interventions can involve establishing mentoring programs, therapeutic group interventions, or peer support networks. These initiatives provide individuals with a nurturing environment where they can cultivate positive relationships, receive emotional support, and learn prosocial behaviours from role models who can guide them towards healthier paths. External resources play a vital role in preventing criminal behavior by providing individuals with the essential openings for development. Interventions can focus on improving access to education, vocational training, and mental health services. By addressing structural barriers and providing resources, interventions can empower individuals with a history of childhood trauma to pursue constructive paths, reducing their susceptibility to engaging in criminal behavior.

The research question and objectives informed by resilience theory would aim to explore the effectiveness of specific intervention strategies in promoting resilience and preventing criminal behavior among adults with a history of childhood trauma. This would involve investigating the impact of interventions that target personal characteristics, supportive relationships, and access to external resources on reducing criminal behavior and fostering positive outcomes.

METHODOLOGY

This research employs a comprehensive mixed-methods approach, integrating resilience theory, to investigate the efficacy of two intervention strategies—Trauma Recovery and Empowerment Model (TREM) and mentor systems/social support—in preventing criminal behavior among adults with a history of childhood trauma. The study commences with an extensive literature review, delving into the fundamental tenets of resilience theory and its applicability to individuals who have endured childhood trauma. This theoretical framework guides the selection of interventions that aim to nurture resilience and curtail the risk of criminal engagement in this population.

The case study approach is adopted to holistically analyze the implementation and outcomes of TREM and mentor systems/social support through meticulous scrutiny of real-life case studies. Resilience theory acts as a conceptual lens, illuminating the protective factors and processes that contribute to positive outcomes amidst adversity. Carefully curated case studies feature individuals who have exemplified resilience, triumphing over the impacts of childhood trauma. Emphasis is placed on unravelling the role of TREM and mentor systems/social support in bolstering their resilience trajectory.

A diverse range of sources, including research papers, reports, and program evaluations, are tapped to amass rich qualitative data, unraveling the intricacies of participants' experiences, obstacles faced, and accomplishments attained within these interventions. The qualitative analysis entails a rigorous thematic coding process, extracting salient themes such as the influence of robust social support networks, the significance of positive role models, and the transformative power of trauma-informed care. Moreover, quantitative data pertaining to critical outcome variables, including criminal behavior, resilience, social support, and mental health, are extracted from existing datasets associated with TREM and mentor programs. Robust statistical analyses are conducted to unearth potential correlations, explore associations between variables, and assess the impact of interventions on resilience and criminal behavior.

Ethical considerations are paramount, and strict adherence to principles of informed consent, confidentiality, and data protection is ensured throughout the research process. The study aligns with the ethical guidelines and regulations governing research involving human subjects.

While acknowledging limitations, such as potential selection bias within the case studies and reliance on pre-existing data sources, this research endeavours to transcend disciplinary boundaries by interweaving resilience theory into the methodology. By doing so, it contributes to the growing body of knowledge concerning the efficacy of intervention strategies underpinned by resilience theory in preventing criminal behavior and fostering positive outcomes for adults burdened by a legacy of childhood trauma. The anticipated findings hold significant implications for the development of evidence-based interventions, poised to leverage resilience factors, instill hope, and facilitate long-term well-being and rehabilitation within this vulnerable population.

CASE STUDY: EMPLOYMENT OF THE TRAUMA RECOVERY AND EMPOWERMENT MODEL

A study conducted by Roger D. Fallot et al. titled *“The Trauma Recovery and Empowerment Model: A Quasi-Experimental Effectiveness Study”* (2011) provides valuable insights into the application of the Trauma Recovery and Empowerment Model (TREM) encompassing a total participant pool of 251 women with co-occurring mental illness and substance use disorders. This study offers implications for understanding and preventing criminal behavior in adults with a history of childhood trauma. The findings of the study partially confirm the hypothesis that participants in the TREM condition would exhibit better outcomes compared to those receiving services as usual. Notably, significant differences were observed in two primary outcomes (reducing alcohol and drug use severity) and three secondary outcomes among the participants. These findings are consistent with previous research conducted as part of the Women, Co-occurring Disorders and Violence Study (WCDVS), which demonstrated the advantages of TREM in mitigating alcohol and drug use severity (Fallot et al., 2005). Given the known association between substance use disorders and criminal behavior, the significant differences in reducing substance use severity among TREM participants provide an avenue for preventing criminal engagement in individuals with a history of childhood trauma.

However, the study did not observe the expected advantage of TREM in reducing post-traumatic symptoms or overall mental health symptoms, although a significant difference was found in reducing anxiety symptoms. The complexity of addressing posttraumatic symptoms and overall mental health in individuals with co-occurring disorders may contribute to the lack of consistent advantages observed in these areas. Childhood trauma has long been recognized as a risk factor for developing mental health issues and engaging in criminal behavior later in life (Dong et al., 2004). Although TREM did not consistently demonstrate advantages in reducing these symptoms, the significant difference in reducing anxiety symptoms suggests its potential efficacy in addressing specific mental health concerns. It is important to acknowledge the variations in outcomes between the current study and previous studies conducted at different sites, such as the Boston and Colorado sites of the WCDVS. These variations may be attributed to the modified version of TREM implemented in the current study, which featured higher duration and dosage compared to the other sites. Moreover, the diverse settings involved in the studies, including mental health versus substance abuse treatment settings, may have influenced the outcomes. The comparatively stronger mental health services provided in the mental health settings of the current study may have attenuated the differences between TREM and services as usual in terms of mental health outcomes.

Despite the study's limitations, several strengths deserve attention. The consistent findings across substance abuse domains and trauma-related outcomes underscore the potential of TREM in addressing the multiple and complex difficulties faced by individuals with co-occurring disorders. Moreover, the findings highlight the significance of trauma skill development as assessed by the Trauma Recovery and Empowerment Profile (TREP). The skills training component of TREM, grounded in a strengths-oriented approach, demonstrates promise in contributing to positive outcomes. Further investigation is warranted to gain a deeper understanding of the specific mechanisms through which skill development in TREM translates into clinical improvements.

CASE STUDY TWO: MENTOR SYSTEMS AND RESILIENCE-CONSTRUCTION

This case study aims to provide a comprehensive contextualized reading of two chosen research studies, *“How does social support enhance resilience in the trauma-exposed individual?”* by Sippel et al. and *“Contextualizing Mentor Programs into Juvenile Justice Systems”* by Pitzel et al. The objective is to explore the role of social support and mentoring programs in enhancing resilience and addressing criminal behavior in adults with a history of childhood trauma. By synthesizing the findings from both studies, this analysis seeks to shed light on effective strategies for addressing criminal behavior in this population.

First, the study by Sippel et al. highlights the importance of social support in enhancing resilience among trauma-exposed individuals. The authors argue that individual resilience is dependent on multiple layers of society and emphasize the bidirectional relationship between systems-level resilience and individual resilience. The findings suggest that effective interventions should focus on a wide range of factors, including the promotion of social support and social networks through caregivers, family units, organizations, and communities. Given the link between childhood trauma and criminal behavior, addressing the social support needs of adults with a history of childhood trauma becomes crucial in preventing and reducing criminal engagement.

Second, the study conducted by Pitzel et al. explores the potential impact of mentoring programs within juvenile justice systems. The authors highlight that mentoring interventions can be promising interventions for incarcerated youth, as they provide support, guidance, and positive role modelling. By having a caring adult involved in the lives of at-risk youth, these programs can help overcome adversity and develop the skills necessary for successful community reintegration. The findings suggest that mentoring programs have the potential to prevent and address

challenging behaviours among incarcerated youth. Applying the insights from this study to adults with a history of childhood trauma, it can be hypothesized that mentoring programs may similarly contribute to reducing criminal behavior and promoting positive outcomes in this population.

The convergence of the findings from both research papers underscores the significance of social support and mentoring in addressing criminal behavior in adults with a history of childhood trauma. Combining the benefits of social support systems and mentoring interventions can create a comprehensive framework for enhancing resilience and facilitating successful community reintegration. By providing guidance, role modelling, and supportive relationships, mentors can serve as positive influences in the lives of trauma-exposed individuals, mitigating the risk of criminal engagement and promoting pro-social behaviours. Furthermore, incorporating social support and mentoring programs into the rehabilitation and reintegration processes can provide a holistic approach to addressing the needs of trauma-exposed individuals. These interventions can offer a safe and supportive environment, fostering personal growth, skill development, and healing from past traumas. The combination of individual-level support and broader social systems can create a protective network, mitigating the impact of childhood trauma and reducing the likelihood of criminal behavior.

INFERENCE AND DISCUSSION

Therefore, this contextualized analysis offers insightful findings regarding the prevention of criminal behavior in adults with a history of childhood trauma through the implementation of trauma-informed interventions, specifically the Trauma Recovery and Empowerment Model (TREM) and mentor systems/social support. By incorporating resilience theory and conducting an in-depth analysis of real-life case studies, this research sheds light on the efficacy of these interventions in fostering resilience, mitigating the risk of criminal engagement, and promoting positive outcomes. By embracing the views of resilience theory, this study recognizes that resilience is a multidimensional construct influenced not only by individual-level factors but also by social support systems and contextual variables.

The convergence of TREM and mentor systems/social support, in particular, highlights the synergistic effects and holistic importance of integrating multiple interventions to prevent criminal behavior among adults with a history of childhood trauma. By leveraging the power of trauma-informed care, social support networks, positive role models, and skill-building opportunities, these interventions create a holistic framework that addresses the multifaceted needs of this population. Through a comprehensive approach, these interventions foster resilience, reduce the likelihood of criminal engagement, and contribute to the overall well-being of trauma-exposed adults.

While recognizing the contributions of this study, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations. The reliance on existing data and case studies introduces potential selection biases and limits the generalizability of the findings. However, the robust methodology employed in this research, combining qualitative and quantitative analyses, provides a solid foundation for understanding the preventive potential of these interventions. However, the implications of this study extend beyond academia, resonating with policymakers, practitioners, and organizations involved in the rehabilitation and support of adults with a history of childhood trauma. The findings underscore the necessity of investing in trauma-informed interventions that prioritize social support, mentorship, and skill development. By integrating these evidence-based interventions into criminal justice systems, community organizations, and mental health services, it is possible to create environments that foster resilience, promote positive outcomes, and effectively prevent criminal behavior among this vulnerable population.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, this paper has explored the effectiveness of trauma-informed interventions, including the Trauma Recovery and Empowerment Model (TREM) and mentor systems/social support, in preventing criminal behavior among adults with a history of childhood trauma. Drawing upon the insights of resilience theory and in-depth case study analyses, it is evident that these interventions play a crucial role in fostering resilience, reducing the risk of criminal engagement, and promoting positive outcomes. By addressing the multifaceted needs of trauma-exposed individuals through social support, mentorship, and trauma-informed care, these interventions create an environment conducive to personal growth, skill development, and successful community reintegration. The findings underscore the importance of integrating various layers of society and acknowledging the bidirectional relationship between systems-level resilience and individual resilience. Moving forward, it is imperative to invest in evidence-based interventions that prioritize social support, positive role models, and tailored interventions to effectively prevent criminal behavior and foster the well-being of adults with a history of childhood trauma. By doing so, we can pave the way for resilient individuals, safer communities, and a brighter future.

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