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Te efect of experiencing child physical abuse on violence in adolescence is weakest in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods

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Criminological Highlights

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Criminological Highlights is designed to provide an accessible look at some of the more interesting criminological research that is currently being published. Each issue contains "Headlines and Conclusions" for each of 8 articles, followed by one-page summaries of each article.

Criminological Highlights is prepared by Anthony Doob, Rosemary Gartner, Scot Wortley, Tom Finlay, Holly Campeau, Maria Jung, Alexandra Lysova, Natasha Madon, Katharina Maier, Voula Marinos, Nicole Myers, Holly Pelvin, Andrea Shier, Jane Sprott, Adriel Weaver, and Kimberly Varma.

Criminological Highlights is available at www.criminology.utoronto.ca and directly by email.

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This issue of *Criminological Highlights* addresses the following questions:

1. Is there evidence concerning the effects on crime of having police in schools?
2. Why do people confess to crimes they didn't do even when they experience no physical threats?
3. How can racial profiling of Blacks *increase* crime?
4. What determines changes in US residents' support for punitive responses to offenders?
5. How are the negative effects of child abuse affected by the neighbourhood in which the child lives?
6. Do ordinary citizens want harsh sentences to be imposed on offenders in cases they know well?
7. How can the state reduce future offending by those it has wrongfully convicted?
8. Are large influxes of foreign immigrants into a neighbourhood associated with increased crime?

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There is no plausible empirical evidence to support the hypothesis that non-educational police involvement in schools reduces crime in schools.

It is surprising, given the amount of police resources being expended in school settings, that we do not know more about whether there has been a positive impact of increased police resources in schools. Furthermore, we know almost nothing about what might provide positive results. Clearly what is needed is a program of randomized assignment of schools to different 'treatment' conditions. Given that most communities have limited resources to assign to police in schools, and many cities have many schools in their public school systems, random assignment of schools to receive (or not receive) police programs could provide both a fair distribution of resources and an opportunity to determine whether a school-police program was effective.

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Ordinary university students can be induced to plead guilty to something they did not do. All that is necessary is to make it clear that if they confess they can avoid a severe penalty.

The study demonstrates that 'ordinary' people (university students) will plead guilty to offences they did not commit to avoid the possibility of harsher outcomes. The findings challenge the notion that "innocent defendants [are] not vulnerable to the powers of bargained justice" (p. 46). It is quite clear that courts are incorrect in placing "confidence in the ability of individuals to assert their right to trial in the face of grave choices" (p. 48).

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Racial profiling can be counterproductive. Not only does it reduce public confidence in the justice system, but by profiling Blacks, Whites learn that they aren't going to get caught.

In this study, the behaviour that was the focus of concern (cheating on a test) *increased* in its overall rate of occurrence because of the profiling of Black students. More generally, it would appear that reducing the perceived likelihood of apprehension for a crime by focusing on one group to the virtual exclusion of other, can, in fact, *increase* overall offending in part because, by definition, there are more people who can cheat or offend with impunity than there are people who are deterred as a result of the profiling.

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The support in the general public for criminal justice policies that punish offenders is driven by important political factors such as the framing of crime by political leaders as the natural result of permissive policies.

It would appear that one can, with empirical support, talk about broad changes in the US population in support for punitive policies. However, "that the increase in support for punitive policies occurred at the same time as the public turned away from [social] solutions to poverty is no coincidence…. The ups and downs of punitive sentiment are driven by important political factors such as the construction of crime by political leaders. The framing of crime as a problem of a permissive system and increasing perceptions of racial integration increased public demand for punitive policies" (p. 357).

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The effect of experiencing child physical abuse on violence in adolescence is weakest in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

It is reasonably well established that those who suffer physical abuse as children are more likely to be violent as adolescents and young adults. It is less well known, however, whether the effects of abuse are amplified or made weaker by the social circumstances in which a child lives.

Previous research has demonstrated that disadvantaged neighbourhoods have higher rates of child abuse and maltreatment. Child abuse may be considered, in these neighbourhoods, to be more typical or commonplace than in less disadvantaged neighbourhoods. The abuse, then, may be more 'normalized' which may lead to less severe impacts on the victim.

This study examined data from 343 neighbourhood 'clusters' in Chicago, collected in two waves (1994-1997 and 1997-2000). Residents of each of these neighbourhood clusters were assessed on levels of 'concentrated disadvantage' (percent below poverty line, receiving public assistance, unemployed), tolerance for deviance (e.g., wrongfulness of drinking, drug use, fighting among teenagers) and the tolerance for family violence.

The measure of 'child physical abuse' was the report of the parent of the use, during the previous year, of any of four forms of physical abuse against the youth (e.g., hitting the child with a fist, beating the child). The nature of the relationship between parent and child, the socioeconomic status of the family, and parental criminality were also measured. When the children were (on average) 11 and 14 years old, they were asked about their involvement in the previous year in various forms of violence (including robbery) and using or carrying a weapon.

Controlling for various characteristics of the children, child abuse increased youths' subsequent violence at age 14. However, high levels of disadvantage in the youth's neighbourhoods *reduced* the impact of child abuse on subsequent violence. In other words, "the relationship between child abuse and violence became weaker as neighbourhood disadvantage increased" (p. 235). Indeed, in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods, there was essentially no impact of child abuse on subsequent violence.

In addition, children living in neighbourhoods characterized as being tolerant of deviance, and neighbourhoods that tolerated fighting among family members and friends, tended to exhibit higher levels of violence at age 14. These effects appeared to be independent of characteristics of the youth and the youth's family (age, race, parental warmth, parental criminality, self-control, delinquency of the youth's friends).

Conclusion: Although being abused as a child was associated with higher levels of violent behaviour as an adolescent, this effect was reduced considerably in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. This may be the result of the fact that "in disadvantaged neighbourhood, where violent behaviours are in general more abundant, violence is more likely to be seen as a somewhat common, legitimate, or necessary way of interacting with others, at least under some circumstances" (p. 239). Alternatively, in more advantaged neighbourhoods, "for youth who [generally] experience few risk factors, the effect of any one risk factor is more readily expressed and potentially more detrimental" (p. 241).

Reference: Wright, Emily M. and Abigail A. Fagan (2013). The Cycle of Violence in Context: Exploring the Moderating Roles of Neighbourhood Disadvantage and Cultural Norms. *Criminology, 51*(2), 217-249.