

## The Relationship between Childhood Traumas and Crime in Male Prisoners

### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** It is known that the negative impact of childhood traumas on the mental health of the individual is significant and leads to the emergence of many psychiatric conditions. The aim of this study was to determine the relationship between childhood trauma, violence tendency, and crime among male prisoners and inmates in prison.

**Methods:** The study group consisted of 313 male prisoners who have been convicted of drug crimes, sexual crimes, deliberate manslaughter, and theft crimes in Mersin Anamur T type closed-open prison. Sociodemographic forms prepared by researchers, Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ), and the Violence Tendency Scale (VTS) were used for measuring variables.

**Results:** It was observed that there is a relationship between childhood traumas and criminal behavior in prisoners and detainees and that criminal behavior is affected by socio-demographic variables. In addition, there is a relationship between childhood traumas and violent tendencies. As the scores of individuals on emotional abuse, physical abuse, physical neglect, sexual abuse, and childhood trauma scales increased, the scores of individuals on VTS increased as well. CTQ predicts 11% of the variance of violence tendency.

**Conclusion:** If psychiatric conditions and violence tendency of individuals with childhood trauma are detected, it will be possible for preventive actions to be taken before these people become prisoners or detainees.

**Keywords:** Crime, violence, childhood trauma, abuse, neglect, violence tendency

### Introduction

The childhood traumas framework is an influential one in the social and behavioral sciences<sup>1</sup> because childhood traumas have serious negative effects and cause psychopathological problems and detentions in the short and long term of the individual's life.<sup>2</sup>

Childhood traumas are seen as child abuse and neglect. Child neglect and abuse are all of the actions and inactions that are applied to the child by the parent or the caregiver, which are considered unethical and damaging by professional persons and hinder or limit the development of the child.<sup>3</sup>

Child sexual abuse is defined as experiences that involve an adult or older child using a child for sexual gratification and can include but is not limited to rape, unwanted touching, threatened sexual violence, exhibitionism, and exploitive use of children in pornography or sex work.<sup>4</sup> This exposure is associated with significant, deleterious physical and mental health consequences across the lifespan.<sup>5</sup>

Emotional abuse is the most prevalent form of childhood trauma. Verbal harassment against children, deprivation of love and care, mockery, humiliation, shouting, intimidation, reprimand, waiting for more than the age of the child, nicknaming, and comparison with other children such as pleasant or caring by the caregivers exposure to non-attitudes and behaviors cause emotional abuse.<sup>6</sup>



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Physical abuse and physical harm to children aged <18 by their parents or their environment should be harmful. This damage and obedience by pushing, burning, biting, and punishing cause violence to the child.<sup>7</sup>

Child neglect is a complex social problem with serious consequences. In a considerable number of cases, child neglect occurs owing to a lack of parent psychological health to give appropriate care (e.g., depression, intimate partner violence, health condition of a family member, etc.) or lack of social support to help them meet their child's needs.<sup>8</sup>

It has been determined that children with childhood trauma exhibit many problems such as psychiatric conditions, anger, susceptibility to crime, and antisocial orientation. In addition, childhood traumas can sustain their negative effects on individuals who experience trauma throughout life and cause psychiatric conditions in adulthood.<sup>9</sup>

The aim of our study was to determine the relationship between childhood traumas and crime. Thus, it will be possible for preventive actions to be taken before people become prisoners or detainees.

## Methods

### Data and Measures

The study was deemed appropriate by the Gelişim University Ethics Committee (Approval Date: December 15, 2016; Approval Number: 2016-28) and consent approval of the Anamur T Type Prison 2017/794 Ministry Communication File and the Ministry of Justice General Directorate of Criminal and Detention Houses numbered 5729 2265.-204.06.03-E.517/53245 was received.

Our study was carried out in Anamur (Mersin) Prison. Of 325 persons who were detained or convicted of drug offenses, sexual offenses, assault, and intentional manslaughter, this study was conducted with 313 participants who voluntarily agreed to participate in the study and who were aged between 18 and 65 years (34.84 [SD = 11.27] years). Thirteen participants whose questionnaires were considered invalid were excluded from the evaluation, and a total of 300 participants were evaluated.

This research was designed as a screening model, and an easy sampling method was used for sampling.<sup>10</sup> After completing the sociodemographic information form prepared by the authors in accordance with our study objectives, the scales were applied to the participants.

### MAIN POINTS

- In our study, it was found that childhood traumas were associated with criminal behavior.
- The presence of a relative who was convicted in the family, although a significant proportion of the individuals, such as 1/3, did not cause a significant difference in childhood traumas.
- Individuals who were imprisoned have higher degrees of physical abuse and sexual abuse.
- It was seen that the total scores of emotional abuse and childhood traumas were significantly higher in divorced prisoners than other groups.

## Scales Used

**Sociodemographic Data Form:** Demographic characteristics of individuals such as educational status, marital status, financial status, substance abuse obtained with open- and closed-ended questions were filled in our questionnaire (Table 1).

**Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ):** This assessment tool provides a retrospective and self-reportative assessment of sexual, physical, and emotional abuse and emotional and physical neglect. CTQ was developed by Bernstein et al<sup>11</sup> and consists of 28 questions. Formerly, Turkish adaptation and validity and reliability studies in Turkish form were conducted by Şar et al,<sup>12</sup> and Cronbach's alpha value was 0.93 for all subjects (Table 2 and Table 3).

**The Violence Tendency Scale (VTS):** VTS was developed in 1995 by Gökalp et al as cited in the research conducted by the Prime Ministry Family Research Institution on violence within the family and social area. In study of Prime Ministry Family Research Institution, scale's basic structure was redesigned, and its content validity was ensured.<sup>13</sup> Cronbach's alpha value for internal consistency was found to be 0.83. Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients of the scale items ranged from 0.82 to 0.84.<sup>14</sup>

### Statistical Analysis

The data obtained from the study were analyzed using the IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences 21.0 program (IBM Corp.; Armonk, NY, USA). Descriptive statistical methods were used to evaluate the data.

As a result of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, it was found that the scores of the scales were not distributed normally, so Mann-Whitney U test and Kruskal-Wallis H test were used to compare the parameters between two groups. The relationship between variables was analyzed using Spearman's correlation analysis.

**Table 1. Distribution of Sociodemographic Variables of Participants (n = 300)**

Variables	f	%
Educational level		
Elementary school leaver and lower	38	12.7
Primary school graduate	121	40.3
Abandoned high school	58	19.3
High school graduate and above	83	27.7
Marital status		
Single	128	42.7
Married	126	42.0
Divorced	46	15.3
Previous arrest status		
Yes	141	47.0
No	159	53.0
A close convict in the family		
Yes	107	35.7
No	193	64.3
Use of substance (alcohol, smoking, marijuana)		
Yes	192	64.0
No	108	36.0

Abbreviation: f, frequency.

**Table 2. Investigation of the Relationship between the Scores of the Subscales of CTQ and VTS with Spearman's Correlation Analysis**

CTQ scale	VTS	
	P	r
Emotional abuse subscale	0.001	0.343
Physical abuse subscale	0.001	0.298
Physical neglect subscale	0.004	0.164
Emotional neglect subscale	0.585	-0.032
Sexual abuse subscale	0.001	0.271
CTQ total	0.001	0.312

Abbreviations: CTQ, Childhood Trauma Questionnaire; VTS, Violence Tendency Scale.

**Table 3. Investigation of the Relationship between the Scores of the Subscales of CTQ and VTS by Regression Analysis**

	R	R <sup>2</sup>	%	t	F	P
Emotional abuse	0.33	0.11	32.8	5.99	35.97	< 0.01
Physical abuse	0.29	0.08	28.5	5.13	26.34	< 0.01
Physical neglect	0.19	0.04	3.5	3.29	10.84	< 0.01
Emotional neglect	0.02	0.00	1.8	-0.30	0.09	< 0.01
Sexual abuse	0.25	0.06	25.2	4.50	20.26	< 0.01
CTQ total	0.33	0.11	33.2	6.08	37.20	< 0.01

Abbreviations: CTQ, Childhood Trauma Questionnaire; VTS, Violence Tendency Scale.

## Results

It was found that the scores of the physical neglect scale in individuals who dropped out of primary school or had below primary school education and those who graduated from primary school were significantly higher than the scores of those who graduated from high school and above ( $U = 1,211.00, P = 0.040$ ;  $U = 3,513.00, P = 0.001$ ;  $P < 0.001$ ).

The scores of emotional abuse and childhood trauma scales from individuals who were divorced were significantly higher than the scores from single individuals ( $U = 2,273.00, P = 0.019$ ;  $U = 2,231.00, P = 0.015$ ) or married individuals ( $U = 2,123.50, P = 0.006$ ;  $U = 2,150.00, P = 0.010$ ).

Physical abuse and sexual abuse scores of individuals who were previously imprisoned were higher than those of others who were not previously imprisoned ( $U = 9,284.00, P = 0.010$ ;  $U = 9,766.00, P = 0.028$ ).

There was no statistically significant difference between the scores of emotional abuse, physical abuse, physical neglect, emotional neglect, sexual abuse, and childhood trauma scores and whether the individuals were using substances such as cigarette or alcohol ( $U = 9,739.00, P = 0.370$  for emotional abuse;  $U = 10,224.50, P = 0.833$  for physical abuse;  $U = 10,062.50, P = 0.671$  for physical neglect;  $U = 9,797.50, P = 0.428$  for emotional neglect;  $U = 10,239.00, P = 0.838$  for sexual abuse;  $U = 9,596.50, P = 0.284$  for childhood trauma).

### The Mean Scores of Individuals on the VTS

The mean score of the individuals' tendency to be violent was 39.06 (SD = 14.05). This means that the prisoners are at the borderline of low tendency and middle tendency for violence.

## Discussion

In our study, it was found that childhood traumas were associated with criminal behavior. There was a significant relationship between

childhood traumas and the tendency to be violent, and childhood traumas had an effect on the tendency to be violent (11%). However, there was no statistically significant relationship between the VTS and other variables. violence tendency scores were considered as a mediating variable that is affected by childhood deficit traumas.

Additional studies have shown that individuals who were abused or neglected during childhood are far more likely to commit a violent act than those who did not.<sup>15,16</sup> Some studies showed that the serious, violent, and chronic offenders were 13 times less likely to have no ACEs.<sup>17,18</sup> Other studies conducted on male and female inmates both found that these individuals had a history of trauma in their childhood.<sup>19,20</sup> It has been reported in many studies that individuals may exhibit high levels of criminal behavior later in life when faced with childhood traumas at an early age.<sup>21-28</sup>

Children whose parents exhibit criminal behavior appear to have an increased risk of displaying criminal behavior themselves.<sup>29-34</sup> It is shown that incarcerated household members raise the serious, violent, and chronic risk by 58% and 119%,<sup>19</sup> but in our study, the presence of a relative who was convicted in the family, although this was represented by a significant proportion of the individuals such as 1/3, did not cause a significant difference in childhood traumas. This may be due to the fact that in our working group, there are also convicted individuals for various offenses-so their crime types may not be the same-and detainees whose crimes have not yet become absolute.

In our study, individuals who were imprisoned had higher degrees of physical abuse and sexual abuse. Similar results were obtained in another study.<sup>35</sup> In addition, it is stated that multiple traumatic experiences with at least two trauma types are more common than a single trauma type, and the most common combination is physical and sexual abuse and neglect.<sup>36</sup>

We saw that the majority (40.3%) of prisoners and inmates who were participants in this study are primary school graduates. In a similar study, the majority of convicts or prisoners were found to have primary and secondary school education.<sup>37</sup> Crime level decreases significantly as education level increases.<sup>38,39</sup> In our study, it was seen that the scores of the individuals who graduated from primary school education and those of individuals who dropped out of primary school and below from the physical neglect scale were significantly higher than the scores of those who graduated from high school and above. It is thought that physical neglect on the one hand deprives individuals of education, decreases their social functioning, and leads to crime.

We found that there was no statistically significant difference in the scores of traumas from the individuals according to whether they used cigarettes, alcohol, or substance. However, other studies pointed out that abuse of illegal substances significantly increased the number of crimes committed by people who were criminally active.<sup>2,15,40</sup> In addition, it has been pointed out that individuals with multiple ACEs have more substance abuse.<sup>2,28</sup> Our studies' differentiation may be due to the fact that we evaluated cigarette, alcohol, and substance use in the same category, whereas cigarette smoking is common in ordinary people, and we differentiate them in terms of levels of use.

In our study, it was seen that the total scores of emotional abuse and childhood traumas were significantly higher in divorced pris-

oners than in the other groups. This may be due to the fact that individuals who are divorced are prone to violence and aggression such that they cannot conduct the marriage owing to severe childhood traumas. In some studies, it is stated that unmarried people commit and repeat more crimes than married ones.<sup>41, 42</sup> Relatedly, some studies have investigated whether there is evidence for the intergenerational continuity of child sexual abuse, specifically.<sup>43-47</sup> Therefore, their misbehavior may end the marriage.

In our study, it was seen that of the prisoners and detainees, 141 (47%) previously went to prison. Similar rates are seen in other studies too.<sup>23, 39</sup> It is also noteworthy that the vast majority of individuals who were reimprisoned have already committed the same crimes as they did before.<sup>23</sup>

If psychiatric conditions and violence tendency of individuals with childhood trauma are detected, it may be possible for preventive actions to be taken before these people become prisoners or detainees. Accordingly, it is important to increase access to education as a preventive intervention as well as to identify and rehabilitate children suffering from trauma.

The scope of this study is limited only to Mersin, Anamur T Type Prison prisoners. It is thought that the studies to be carried out across the country with a larger sample group will be beneficial for the illumination of the area.

**Ethics Committee Approval:** Ethics committee approval was received for this study from the Ethics Committee of Gelişim University (Approval Date: December 15, 2016; Approval Number: 2016-28).

**Informed Consent:** Informed consent was obtained from the patients who participated in this study.

**Peer-review:** Externally peer-reviewed.

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