

Sleep partially mediates the link between adverse childhood experiences and delinquency

By Dr Jessica K Edwards

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) can be traumatic or highly stressful events, and are associated with numerous mental and physical health problems. A recent study has now investigated the mechanisms underlying the apparent link between ACEs and high rates of delinquency in children in foster care, with a specific focus on sleep. The researchers conducted interviews with >500 maltreated children (aged 9-11 years) currently in foster care and their carers. They asked the participants to report on exposure to ACEs, sleep problems, engagement in delinquent acts, symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and current psychotropic medication use. More than 30% of the youths reported engaging in at least one delinquent act, and >20% caregivers reported that their foster children had sleep problems. After controlling for various factors, including age, placement type and length of time in placement, the researchers found that sleep partially mediated the association between ACEs and delinquency. Specifically, sleep problems accounted for ~7-9% of the large effect of ACEs on delinquent acts across levels of ACEs exposure. The researchers explain that determining the risk factors for delinquency in children in foster care is vital to reduce later juvenile justice-system involvement. Sleep problems should be assessed in this population and foster caregivers should help establish good sleep hygiene in children as one strategy to help reduce delinquency.

Referring to:

Hambrick, E.P., Rubens, S.L., Brawner, T.W. & Taussig, H.N. (2018), Do sleep problems mediate the link between adverse childhood experiences and delinquency in preadolescent children in foster care? *JCPP* 59: 140-149. doi: 10.1111/jcpp.12802.

Study Implications

Professor Erin Hambrick outlines some of the key implications from her study data:

Clinical practice:

“Both sleep problems and delinquent behaviours are prevalent amongst preadolescents in foster care, perhaps due to the high rates of adverse childhood experiences in this population. Screening for both sleep problems and delinquent behaviours in children living in foster care prior to when they reach adolescence, when more severe and frequent delinquent acts are often observed in this population, may result in more successful remediation of both problems.”

Service development/delivery:

“When screening for and planning to intervene on sleep problems for youth in foster care, providers should be aware of “foster care specific” risk factors for sleep problems. These include high rates of post-traumatic stress and autonomic hyperarousal, changes in sleep routine, sleep hygiene, and the sleep environment due to transitioning to new living situations, and the child’s perceived safety in their new sleep setting.”

Recommendations for further science:

“It is important for future studies to determine whether improving sleep problems results in decreased delinquency amongst youth in foster care.”

