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Melissa Ann. Tell  
*Smith College*

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THE ROLE OF NEGLECT AND DISORDERED ATTACHMENT IN THE CHILDHOOD OF  
ADOLESCENT MALE SEX OFFENDERS

A project based upon an independent investigation, submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of Social Work

Melissa Tell

Smith College School for Social Work  
Northampton, Massachusetts 01062

2010

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This thesis is dedicated in loving memory to my father, Alan Reed Tell, who passed away April 19, 2010.

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Melissa Tell

The Role of Neglect and Disordered  
Attachment in the Childhood of  
Adolescent Male Sex Offenders

ABSTRACT

Sexual abuse by adolescent males continues to be a serious problem that receives little recognition and attention in research. While a majority of sexual offenses are committed by adults, roughly 20% are committed by adolescents (Barbaree, 2006). Over 45% of adolescent males in residential treatment begin sexually deviant behaviors before the age of 12 (Burton, 2000). Similarly, while maltreatment and attachment is mentioned in research on adolescent sexual offenders, few researchers have studied the role of emotional and physical neglect on the lives of adolescent sexual offenders. In this sample physical abuse and poverty were both significant predicting the number of victims that adolescent sex offenders perpetrated against, while poor attachment with a caregiver and the experience of emotional neglect were not.

## Literature Review

While emotional and physical neglect of children is a menacing and ever-present part of society, it remains un-noticed and unaccounted for in research (Debowitz, 1999). The authors of the National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-3) reported that in 1993, nearly 3 million children were maltreated or endangered (Wilson, 2000). Of these maltreated children, 70% experienced neglect. Presently, the overwhelming focus of child maltreatment research, theory, and practice is on abuse, rather than neglect (Debowitz, 1999; Tower, 1996; Venet et al, 2009). This lack of focus on neglect is especially present in research on male adolescent sex offenders (Daverson & Knight, 2007).

Neglect is a concept that is inextricably entwined with society's current views and its definition relies heavily on the context of the time and place in which we live (Debowitz, 1999; Tower, 1996). For this reason, defining neglect is a challenging task, which may, in part, explain the lack of research on childhood neglect in comparison to research on physical abuse. Given the differing views of what consists of neglect, many definitions exist for this term. For the purpose of this study, a definition given by Wolock and Horowitz (1984) will be used. These authors define neglect as, "the failure of the child's parent or caretaker who has the material resources to do so, to provide minimally adequate care in the areas of health, nutrition, shelter, education, supervision, affection or attention, and protection" (Wolock & Horowitz, 1984 p531). Debowitz (1999) asserts that "failure" is the crucial word within this definition. Of the forms of maltreatment, the key difference between neglect and abuse is that neglect is an act of omission, while abuse is one of commission (Debowitz, 1999).

The concept of child neglect can be further broken up into three categories: physical, educational, and emotional neglect (Debowitz, 1999; Tower, 1996). In this paper, I will focus on

the least researched of these three: emotional neglect. It is important to understand the factors that contribute to increased levels of neglect, as well as the outcome that neglect may have on development. Researchers have found that children from lower socio-economic status homes experienced greater levels of neglect (Cappelleri, Eckenrode, & Powers 1989; Slack, Holl, McDaniel, Yoo, & Bolger 2004; Venet et al 2009). This may in part be due to additional stressors placed on parents who are of a lower socio-economic status. Another salient factor to consider is the age that the neglect occurred. Infants who are neglected exhibit more disorganized attachment, while a neglected preschooler's attachment style becomes more avoidant. This could be because an infant's primary interaction is with their parent or caregiver, making neglect by their primary caretaker more salient for the infant. In contrast, a preschooler also has attachments outside of the caregiver relationship, making neglect by the caretaker less pronounced (Venet et al 2009).

Researchers have shown that neglect oftentimes leads to lasting negative effects on a victims' life. For example, people who are neglected as children display less social competence than their peers, severe academic delays (Salzinger 1984; Venet et al 2009), delayed language development, and difficulty appraising social situations (Davies 2004). Victims who are neglected also display more attachment problems than those who grow up in stable homes without neglect (Venet et al 2009). When distinguishing the effects of neglect, researchers often discuss the role of attachment. Attachment can be defined as, "an affectional tie that one person ... forms between himself and another specific one- a tie that binds them together in space and endures over time" (Ainsworth, Bell, & Stayton, 1971, p. 50). Attachment and object relations' researchers assert that the early mother-child relationship serves as the basis for all future interpersonal and interactive experiences. In other words, the ability to form affectional



ties in childhood serves as a basis for all later relationships and experiences of the self. This same idea has often been applied when researching adolescent male sexual offenders. Problems with attachment may even be part of the etiological makeup of sexual aggression for some youth as they attempt to get attachment needs met with others, fail, and then approach younger children (Rich, 2003).

### *Neglect, Abuse, and Later Crime*

The relationship between neglect and adolescent sex offenders is rarely addressed in current research. Given this lack of research on adolescent sex offenders, the role of neglect in the lives of adult offenders will also be reviewed despite the many differences in these populations. In studying adult offenders, it is also important to compare violent and non-violent offenders to understand any differences in behavior trajectories.

There are many conflicting results in studies comparing the maltreatment histories of violent and non-violent adults. For example, some researchers have found that abuse and neglect are equally prevalent in violent and non-violent offenders (Mersky & Reynolds, 2007). There is also strong support that neglect and physical abuse in the childhood often overlap (Stith et al 2009; Weeks & Widom, 1998). However, researchers have also produced studies that confirm the relationship between childhood maltreatment and an increase in later violence (English, Widom, & Brandford 2002; Mersky & Reynolds, 2007), although these results are not always statistically significant (Rivera & Widom, 1990). Other researchers have found no significant differences between abused and neglected children and the crimes they later commit (Mersky & Reynolds 2007; Weeks & Widom 1998). The differences in the findings of these researchers' therefore warrants further exploration as to whether there is a connection between childhood neglect and later offending.

### *Neglect, Attachment, and Sexually Violent Adults*

The childhood of adult sex offenders is often compared to that of adult non-sexually violent offenders as a way to understand the effect of childhood experiences on the outcome of offenses (Craissati, McClurg, & Brown 2002; Haapasalo & Kankkonen, 1997; Simons, Wurtele, Durham 2008; Weeks & Widom 1998). In doing so, one can observe the prevalence of neglect and its contribution to various criminal behaviors. Family backgrounds of both sexual and non-sexual offenders are filled with instances of neglect, violence, and disruption (Craissati, et al., 2002; Haapasalo & Kankkonen, 1997; Lee, Jackson, Pattison, and Ward 2002).

Although maltreatment is prevalent in both adult sexual offenders and adult non-sexual offenders, there may be discrepancies in the types of maltreatment experienced between the two groups. For example, when comparing adult male sex offenders and non-sexual offenders in prison, sex offenders reported experiencing more childhood psychological abuse (specifically being threatened and ridiculed by parents), than the non-sexual offenders (Haapasalo & Kankkonen, 1997; Lee, et al., 2002).

Adult sex offenders have reported experiencing many childhood adversities; the experience of emotional neglect is often reported in this population (Lee, et al., 2002). Adult male sex offenders have also reported that rejection and isolation by parents was more common than physical abuse (Haapasalo & Kankkonen, 1997). Although these authors reported an increased experience of neglect and abuse in the childhood of adult male sex offenders, researchers caution against assuming adverse childhood experiences such as neglect are causally related to sexually aggressive offending (Haapasalo & Kankkonen, 1997; Lee, et al., 2002).

In addition to neglect, many adult sexual offenders report poor attachment with one or more parents (Craissati, et al., 2002; Simons, et al., 2008; Weeks & Widom 1998). The

developmental experiences of adult male sex offenders often include inadequate levels of "optimum bonding" with at least one parent, as well as insecure, avoidant, and anxious parental attachments (Craissati, et al., 2002; Simons, et al., 2008). In addition to poor parental bonds, researchers have found that "affectionless control" as a parenting style was most often reported in the childhood of adult male sex offenders (Craissati, et al., 2002). This parenting style is characterized by neglectful parental care as well as intrusive, rejecting, and abusive control (Craissati, et al., 2002). This suggests that factors such as developmental experiences combined with personality traits interact to increase the chances of sex offending by adults (Simons, et al., 2008).

#### *Neglect, Attachment, and Adolescent Sex Offenders*

As stated previously few studies of relevance have been conducted on adolescent male sexual offenders. The vast majority of adolescent offenders do not go on to offend in adulthood, suggesting that adolescent sex offenders as a population have discrepancies in characteristics as well as offending behavior trajectories (Lambie 2006). However, clearly some do go on to offend as adults (Marshall, Fernandez, Marshall, & Serran 2006). For those that do sexually offend in adulthood, many sexual offense related problems often first emerged in adolescence (Marshall, et al., 2006).

Adolescent sex offenders as a group frequently grew up in homes characterized by inadequate, neglectful, or abusive parental care (Manocha & Mezey 1998; Deranek & Gilman 2003), all of which serves to disconnect attachment bonds with parents (Manocha & Mezey 1998). While poor attachment patterns in childhood are not enough to form a direct link to later criminal behavior, attachment difficulties do contribute to many problems in functioning (Marshall, et al., 2006). Researchers have noted that many male adolescent sex offenders are

socially isolated and disconnected from their peers (Rich, 2003; Weinrott, 1996). This isolation may in part be due to a lack of knowledge learned from caregivers about relationships. The use of sexual assault or aggression by these adolescent offenders may result from impaired attachments and may be an attempt to live out and access their relationship needs (Rich, 2003).

While other factors including lack of moral development may contribute to the actions of adolescent sex offenders, attachment bonds and lack of empathy are often present in adolescent sex offenders and signal lowered social competence in this population (Rich, 2003). However, while social isolation and disconnection are common deficits amongst male adolescent sex offenders, it is no more prevalent in this population than other delinquents (Weinrott, 1996). Further, not all adolescent male sex offenders lack social skills and use the sexual offense as a means of gaining their relationship needs. In fact, many use their social skills to aid in the grooming of their victims (Lambie 2006). These discrepancies serve as a reminder that attachment difficulties alone are not sufficient as a direct link to later criminal behavior (Rich, 2006).

While researchers have begun to look into parental attachments and the prevalence of overall neglect in the lives of sexual and violent offenders (Manocha & Mezey 1998), there is still little to no research concentrating specifically on the relationship between emotional neglect and adolescent sex offenders. While researchers have not studied this relationship, many have recognized the need for more research in this area (Daversa, & Knight, 2007; Simons, Wurtele, Durham 2008; Jonson-Reid & Way 2001).

Taking into account this gap in the research surrounding neglect in general and specifically in relation to male adolescent sex offenders, the research question for this study is: What is the relationship between emotional neglect in the childhood of adolescent sex offenders

and the number of victims they perpetrate against? In such an analysis many of the variables discussed in the above review of current literature will be considered including socioeconomic status, attachment, and the experience of both physical abuse and neglect in childhood.

## Methods

### *Participants*

After obtaining approval from the appropriate source, data were collected from six residential facilities in a Midwestern state, using a cross-sectional quantitative comparison design. Surveys were administered in small groups of 8-10 adolescents using multi-page paper and pencil surveys. Participants were kept separate in order to keep others from viewing their answers, which helped to ensure their responses remained confidential.

Compensation was not provided to individuals who participated in the study. Some of the participants struggled with reading, (n=8, 2.6%). The surveys were privately read aloud to these participants by trained graduate research assistants while the individuals privately marked their answers. Of the potential respondents, approximately 82% agreed to fill out the surveys. No data was obtained on non-responders.

The original sample size consisted of 351 adolescent males incarcerated for sexual offenses. Those youth who indicated that they did not have sexual abuse victims were considered non-sexual offenders reducing the sample by two. The Millon Adolescent Clinical Inventory (MACI) validity and reliability rules were applied to the sample to compensate for potential social desirability and all youth whose MACI scores did not conform to the validity criteria of the MACI (Millon, 1993). This reduced the sample by an additional 17 youth who were removed from any further analysis.

After this reduction of the sample size, the sample (N=332) was an average of 16.70 years of age (SD=1.64 years). The sexually abusive youth disclosed sexually abusing from 1 to

49 victims (M 2.83, SD=4.42) with 50.1% reporting one victim and the rest more than one victims.

In relationship to race, the largest response group, as is typical in most similar such studies, was Caucasian (47%), followed by African American (27.1%), Other (7.2%), Hispanic (6.9%) and Native American (6.0%) with 5.7% Missing (not responding).

### *Measures*

The Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ) (Bernstein & Fink, 1998) is a 37-item scale that provides a brief and relatively noninvasive screening of traumatic experiences in childhood using a 5-point frequency scale ranging from 1 (never true) to 5 (very often true). The CTQ includes five subscales: physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, physical neglect, and emotional neglect. For the purposes of this paper, the subscales of physical ( $\alpha = .76$ ) and emotional neglect ( $\alpha = .92$ ) were examined.

The *Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment* (IPPA) (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987) is an adolescent self report measure that assesses the quality of attachment with the mother, father, and peers in regard to perceptions of affective and cognitive working models, psychological security, trust, communication, and anger. The IPPA is scored using reverse-scoring and produces three attachment measures pertaining to each bond – mother, father, and peers. The measure has strong internal reliability and validity (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987). Chronbach's alpha was acceptable for all of the scales with the exception of peer alienation which was not used in further analysis (See Table 1).

Non-standardized questions about poverty (0-1) and number of victims (open ended) were also used in the study.

Table 1

## Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA) Inter-Item Reliability

IPPA Scales	Trust Cronbach's Alpha (n=321)	Communication Cronbach's Alpha (n=321)	Alienation Cronbach's Alpha (n=321)
Mother	.94	.90	.79
Father	.95	.92	.78



## Results

Using simple hierarchical linear regression the variables were entered in one block to assess for their relationship to the number of sexual abuse victims of the youth. The model was significant ( $F(236) = 2.65, p = .003$ ) and accounted for 11.5% of the variance in the number of victims. Physical abuse and poverty were also significant. The remaining variables, including emotional neglect and all the attachment scales were not significant. These variables when entered in various attempts to get a time order by blocks or stepwise and remained in the equation with nearly the same Beta and p values indicating a robust finding (see Table 2). A more parsimonious model with just the two significant variables resulted in an  $F(288) = 9.84, p < .001$  accounting for 6.4% of the variance in the number of victims (see Table 3).

Table 2: Regression table (variables sorted by p value) Predicting Number of Sexual Abuse Victims (N=332).

### Model 1

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>β</i>
Poverty	1.263	.700	.131*
CTQ Physical Abuse	.130	.052	.208*
IPPA Alienation from Mother	.172	.139	.259
IPPA Attachment with Mom	.213	.138	1.367
IPPA Attachment with Father	-.036	.094	-.263
IPPA Communication With Mother	-.226	.151	-.570
IPPA Trust with Mother	-.245	.155	-.709
IPPA Trust with Father	.065	.104	.217
IPPA Communication with Father	.015	.123	.044
CTQ Emotional Neglect	.003	.039	.007
IPPA Alienation from Father	.001	.086	.002

\*  $p < .05, R^2 = .115$

Table 3: Regression table (variables sorted by p value) Predicting Number of Sexual Abuse Victims (N=332). Model 2.

Variable	<i>B</i>	SE <i>B</i>	<i>β</i>
Poverty	1.110	.548	0.123 *
CTQ Physical Abuse	.107	,036	0.183 *

\*  $p < .01$ ,  $R^2 = .64$

## Discussion

This analysis uncovered several interesting findings. Results from this study indicated that many adolescent sex offenders have experienced increased levels of poverty in childhood. Growing up in low-income neighborhoods with poverty adds increased levels of stress to a family including such “poverty related stressors” as economic strain, family transitions, violence exposure, and discrimination. For adolescents who grow up in a family stricken with poverty, often there is an increase in family-conflict due to this poverty related stress (Wadsworth & Berger 2006). It is possible that this added stress, although an unlikely cause of offending may have exacerbated an already risk filled situation increasing the likelihood for the adolescents in this current study to sexually offend.

Another possible reason that growing up in poverty remains a significant variable may be due to a lack of supervision that comes with the added stress of living with little to no income. Authors of a report from the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) (2008) indicated that children with a fulltime, year-round employed parent comprise more than half of the low-income population (NCCP, 2008). Many parents living in poverty must hold two or more jobs to help make ends meet. This, along with the increased numbers of single parent homes living in poverty may result in more hours of unsupervised time for these adolescents. According to the authors of the NCCP report (2008), 67 percent (15.5 million) of all children living in the United States with a single parent live in low-income families. In their research, McCormack, Hudson, & Ward (2002) reported that sex offenders in their study described their childhood as having low levels of supervision. These additional stressors as well as a lack of resources may have provided more unsupervised opportunities for the male adolescents in the current sample to sexually offend.

It is important to note however, that while poverty is significant within this study, it does not indicate a direct causal link between poverty and adolescent sexual offenders. Not all adolescents who experience poverty will go on to sexually offend. Few researchers have studied the prevalence of poverty in the lives of adolescent sex offenders. To further understand the impact of poverty on this group, future researchers should examine poverty and its effect on other variables such as amount of supervision given to both sex offenders and non-sex offenders living in poverty.

In addition to poverty, physical abuse was also predictive of the number of victims. This is in agreement with other researchers who have also found increased levels of physical abuse within this population (Haapasalo & Kankkonen, 1997; Manocha & Mezey, 1998). For an adolescent sex offender who experienced physical abuse and childhood trauma, sexual offending may act to give the individual a feeling of control that they have previously lacked. In order to overcome the vulnerability of the physical abuse, some adolescent males may turn to sexually offending as a means of gaining back some power that was lost or never experienced. This may help to explain the connection between the experience of physical abuse in childhood and some adolescent males going on to sexually offend.

In addition, exposure to physical abuse as a child may lead to a negative self-perception for an adolescent sex offender. These internalized negative core beliefs may serve to reinforce the adolescents' negative behavior causing them to act out these bad behaviors that they have previously been "punished" for. In other words, the physical abuse may lead them to believe that they are a bad person and they may begin to live up to the negative expectations of those around them and turn to sexually offending.

Unexpectedly, the experience of emotional neglect did not predict the number of. While there are no known studies specifically related to emotional neglect and adolescent sex offenders, there is research indicating that neglect of all kinds has played a role in the lives of many adult and adolescent sex offenders (Craissati, et al., 2002; Deranek & Gilman 2003; Haapasalo & Kankkonen, 1997; Lee, et al., 2002; Manocha & Mezey 1998). In their research, McCormack, Hudson, & Ward (2002) indicated that adult sex offenders reported experiencing high levels of neglect in childhood. While this sample also experienced a lot of neglect, this variable simply did not predict the number of victims. Neglect may just not be predictive of victims or may not be so in isolation.

Similarly, alienation, distrust, and a lack of attachment to a parental figure did not predict the number of victims. Past researchers have assumed that sex offenders often use the sexual offense as a means of getting attachment needs met (Marshall, et al., 2006; McCormack, et al., 2002; Rich 2003). An individual who has not had positive attachments met by a caregiver may turn to a victim to receive this needed attachment (Lambie 2006; McCormack, et al., 2002; Rich, 2003). However, this analysis did not indicate that this was the case for the adolescent sex offenders examined in this study.

Taking into account all of the variables studied; number of victims, poverty, physical abuse, emotional neglect, and a lack of attachment, some general conclusions can be drawn. It seems that the outward or external forms of maltreatment and suffering such as physical abuse and poverty, had more direct, or perhaps just more measurable impact than a “lack of” positive experiences such as the absence of attachment and the experience of neglect.

As mentioned in the above review of the literature on neglect, neglect is separated from other forms of maltreatment in that it is a “failure” or an “act of omission” rather than

“commission” (Debowitz, 1999). So too, is a lack of attachment a “failure” to meet the needs of an individual. Further research on these variables is called for.

Examining Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943) may help to further conceptualize the findings that indicate poverty and physical abuse are significant variables while neglect and lack of attachment are not. Maslow (1943) wrote that the most “basic” of human needs are physiological. This most fundamental of needs; to satisfy hunger and thirst as well as a need for adequate air and shelter must first be fulfilled in order for one to begin to think about safety needs. These “safety needs” include a desire or need for structure, feeling trusted and protected by those around you, and a desire for familiarity. Once these needs are met, one can begin to think about love, self-esteem, and finally self-actualization (Maslow, 1943). When poverty and/or physical abuse are present, even these most basic of needs; physiological and safety needs are not always met. These unmet needs can result in severe effects on a child. While emotional neglect and attachment do prevent an individual from fully experiencing love, self-esteem, and self actualization, they do not necessarily prevent an individual from getting there basic needs met. This difference may be helpful in understanding these results.

#### *Clinical and Research Implications*

The results of this study indicate that various forms of childhood maltreatment do have distinct effects on the number of victims perpetrated against. Therefore, interventions used to treat male adolescent sex offenders should take into account the childhood and the background of each person, and should be tailored to fit the specific needs of that individual.

Further, this research helps to reinforce the need for early intervention and a focus on helping those individuals living in poverty as well as children who experience various forms of maltreatment. While not all children living in these conditions will go on to sexually offend, it is

important to address this issue in order to work towards preventing this and other problems from occurring.

It is also important to continue research on the various forms of neglect in general; and with sex offenders, as this is an oft forgotten topic. This is possibly due to its culturally bound definition as well as the struggle to define and understand these “acts of omission” (Debowitz, 1999). Since neglect is hard to define and also easy to ignore, this topic also becomes challenging to understand, verify, and research. Given these limitations it would be beneficial to further define neglect in more universal terms. Similarly, it would be helpful to create better tools for helping to identify and detect when neglect is present.

### *Limitations*

While this study concluded several important results, there were limitations that should be addressed in future research. This sample consisted only of male adolescent sex offenders incarcerated in a Midwestern state. In order to see if the results can be generalized to others outside of this sample, it would be helpful to include both females as well as individuals living in other regions throughout the United States. In any research it is important to recognize diversity and to acknowledge that it is impossible to generalize any results to the entire population. Despite this, it is important for researchers to do their best to broaden the scope of research to include a more accurate representation of the population as a whole.

Another important limitation not to be overlooked is that this study was conducted using individuals living in residential treatment facilities. This could have had an effect on the results in a number of ways. Because they are living in residential treatment facilities, the youth may feel obligated to participate. In the same way, they may also feel hesitant to answer accurately for fear that their responses may have a negative impact on their stay at the residential treatment

facility. While the MACI reliability and validity tests were used to prevent this, it is still important to note this possible limitation. By only including adolescent males currently living in residential treatment facilities, the study may miss other important sexual offenses, as well as those individuals that committed lesser sexual crimes, and those who haven't been caught.

### *Conclusion*

Due to the lack of research on the role of neglect in the childhood of adolescent sexual offenders, in this research I aimed to discover if there is a connection between emotional neglect and the number of victims an adolescent sex offender perpetrates against. In addition, other literature based variables were studied including poverty, physical abuse, and attachment to parents. The results of this study indicate that poverty and physical abuse were significant when related to the number of victims an adolescent sex offender perpetrates against. Interestingly, both emotional neglect and attachment with parents (or lack of) did not have a significant finding. From this, we can determine that various forms of maltreatment can have an effect on individuals in varying degrees, but more research is needed to explore how these childhood experiences effect future offending. Replication of this research is warranted to continue to explore this often neglected issue. In addition, it would be beneficial to study a wider scope of issues related to neglect and sex offenders to determine if the experience of neglect affects other aspects of the offense and other potentially related variables.



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