Author’s response to reviews

Title: Describing associations between child maltreatment frequency and the frequency and timing of subsequent delinquent or criminal behaviors across development: Variation by sex, sexual orientation, and race

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Author’s response to reviews:

Thank you to both of the reviewers for their thoughtful comments again. We’ve responded point by point below.

Joshua P. Mersky (Reviewer 2): Thank you for the opportunity to review this manuscript again. The revisions have strengthened it some degree, though several issues warrant further attention.

Background
First, the revised title, which simply adds the words "across development" does not resolve confusion related to the paper's purpose. In the subtitle, it is still unclear whether the "when" and "how much" refers to the independent or dependent variable. A title that more clearly describes the study's purpose would be preferred.
Response: We have changed the title to: Describing associations between child maltreatment frequency and the frequency and timing of subsequent delinquent or criminal behaviors across development: Variation by sex, sexual orientation, and race. Our intent here was to make clear the timing order of the exposure and outcome so that it’s clear which is the independent and dependent variable.

Regrettably, I must reiterate my previous critique of the manuscript's claims regarding self-report data and the implication that they are superior to administrative data. It is well established that both administrative and self-report data have strengths and limitations. Held separately, both present a partial view of the phenomenon. One of the concerns with survey data that is germane to this study is the potential for common methods bias, an issue that has been known for 60 years (see Campbell & Fiske, 1959). The major issue here is that analyzing self-reports of both maltreatment and offending can inflate the correlations between the two. Here is a relevant paper in this substantive area that discusses this issue:

And here is another paper that presents a more general discussion of the limitations of self-report data:


Aside from these critiques, which should be added to the limitations section, the claims regarding the strengths of self-report data are simply unnecessary. As the authors note, the is a major prospective, longitudinal study of a nationally representative sample. That's all that needs be said.

Response: We have shortened and simplified this paragraph. We have also stated explicitly now that there are pros and cons to the two methods for collecting maltreatment data (and cited the Shaffer et al paper that the reviewer shared above). Note that neither of the papers the reviewer shared really compares the advantage of self-report data to administrative data as the retrospective and prospective data in both of these papers are still self-report. Note, we do still believe that self-reported data increases the likelihood of delinquent behaviors being shared and this is shown with the higher rates of risk behaviors found in AddHealth compared to other national studies. This is particularly true for minor things that kids either didn’t get caught doing or for which they got caught but never dealt with law enforcement.

Adding the study's research questions/hypotheses is helpful. Thank you. However, research question 1 should be divided into two questions, one that focuses on the frequency of offending (i.e., how much) and another that focuses on the timing or onset of delinquency (i.e., when).

Response: These research questions are appropriate for the analyses used. The how much and when answers are provided in the same set of results and the how much varies across development. We also do not want to edit the research questions that were funded by OJJDP. However, in order to address the reviewer’s comment, we have re-phrased the hypothesis to more clearly pull out those two components. If the editor would prefer we leave the question and/or hypothesis as it was originally phrased, we can remove this edit.

Discussion

The authors devote inordinate attention to the purported strengths of the study in paragraphs 2-4 of the discussion. Much of this content can be omitted entirely and that which is retained should come after a discussion of the study's limitations. Aside from the organizational advantages to doing so, this is preferable stylistically because it helps to avoid the appearance of self-advocacy. The discussion should, instead, move swiftly into a presentation of the study's central findings and key inferences, which begins in paragraph 5.

Response: We have moved these paragraphs to after the limitations and shortened them.

The discussion of results presented in paragraph 5 would be strengthened by indicating that these findings replicate a long line of research. Provide citations accordingly.

Response: We have added this in and added additional citations.

Similarly, paragraph 6 should convey whether the demographic differences uncovered in this study comport with previous research.

Response: We have added in a recent cite from this reviewer describing differences in associations between maltreatment and delinquency by gender.
The second half of paragraph 7 is speculative and only loosely related to the data at hand.
Response: We have removed this part of that paragraph and have rephrased some of the key idea for the conclusion as a next step.

Paragraph 8 pertains to research question 1, not question 2. It should be moved to another location earlier in the discussion. This will enhance the flow between what are now paragraphs 7 and 9 of the discussion. In addition, the citations provided in paragraph 8 do not support the claims made. The specific papers cited (e.g., references 42-44; 45,46) do not represent an entire body of literature. Again, the authors are overestimating the extent to which this study is distinctive and the importance of demonstrating its distinctiveness. As a means of advancing the science in this area, it would be preferable to take the opposite approach and compare the findings from this study to other studies that are similar. There are many. Here is a sampling:


Response: We have moved what was originally paragraph 8 up to be in the “research question 1” section. We have included the Widom citation as an example of previous research that DOES explore this association into adulthood. The other citations are all still focused on adolescence and young adulthood (one of the papers goes to age 22 but the other two are focused on juvenile delinquency), which is the point we’re making here. We’ve added them in as well to more effectively capture the state of the literature as it is now.

Paragraph 9 would also be strengthened by comparing the study results to previous studies that have tested differences by race/ethnicity and sexual orientation.
Response: We have added a few cites here.

The limitations section is sparse, particularly when juxtaposed against the amount of attention paid to the study's strengths. As noted in my previous review, the low internal consistency reliability of the outcome measures should be acknowledged. As should the limitations of self-report data. Plus, the dataset isn't old at all. Wave IV data collection took place in 2008, and the most recent wave of data collection occurred from 2016-2018.
Response: We have added these in and commented on the age of the data.

Minor edits
The phrase "shed light" is used four times. Synonymous phrasing could be used to replace some of these instances.
Response: We have edited this. Thanks for catching that.
It is unclear why the colloquial phrase "boys will be boys" is invoked. The terminology itself seems dated and, more importantly, the associated inferences lack a concrete connection to the study's hypotheses and results.
Response: We have removed this.

The lengthy paragraph at the end of the discussion on p. 12 needs to be divided into multiple paragraphs.
Response: We shortened paragraphs that were too long by either cutting text or separating out different concepts (or both!).

Monica Malta (Reviewer 3):
Thank you for the opportunity to review your manuscript again. The revisions addressed almost all my critiques, and I have just a few comments to improve your manuscript:

ABSTRACT
Results: include a brief description of your sample (N, gender, ethnicity…) + key findings from Table 2
Response: these have been added to the abstract.

MANUSCRIPT
The background is just too long (2.5 pages), please summarize it.
Response: This comment is similar to the comments from reviewer 1 above. In response, we’ve shortened or moved some of the paragraphs in the background section. This should address this reviewer’s comments.

Discussion: The phrase "boys will be boys" is cited two times, a problem already identified in my previous review. The authors should avoid this kind of statement, particularly in a study with adolescents AND 12% self-identified as LGBTQ+. Gender roles might influence key aspects being analyzed on your manuscript, but this sentence is not adequate. Try to explain your hypothesis without phrases that might reinforce prejudicial, stereotyped behaviors.
Response: We’ve removed this phrase. We meant this to be addressing your exact critique here but that clearly was not coming across that way and so we’ve removed it.

Overall the discussion is too long. For instance, there is no need to use so many paragraphs (1 to 4) explaining your study strengths. You should focus the discussion on comparing your findings to previous studies conducted with similar populations, acknowledging your limitations and finish with future research directions, based on your study findings.
This is similar to the first reviewer’s comments above and like he suggested, we have addressed this by shortening and moving the study’s strengths and reorganizing the discussion to follow both of their recommendations.