

The Effects of Childhood Abuse on Young Adult Cohabiting Relationships

Research Questions

- Are young adults who experienced abuse in childhood more likely to enter cohabitating relationships?
- Does the association vary by gender?

Significance

- Americans today are more likely to cohabit prior to and after marriage than ever before (Cherlin et al., 2004).
- Relationships in early adulthood are highly unstable, and young adults are forming higher order unions—the rise in serial cohabitation (Cohen & Manning, 2010; Lichter et al., 2010).

Background

- Childhood abuse can lead to early onset of sexual activity, riskier sexual activity, and multiple partners (Davis et al., 2000).
- Abuse beginning in childhood can predispose women toward more frequent sexual unions and multiple relationships (Loeb et al., 2002; Noll et al., 2003).
- Both men and women who experience abuse are more likely to report higher rates of cohabitation (Colman and Widom, 2004).

Hypothesis

- People who experience abuse in childhood are more likely to enter cohabitating relationships in young adulthood.
- Women who experience abuse in childhood are more likely than their male counterparts to enter into cohabitating relationships.

Data and Sample

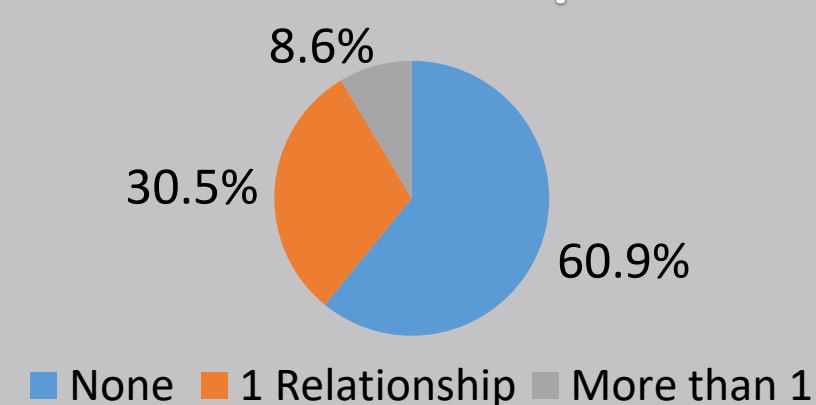
- National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health)
- Wave 3 (2001-2002) public use data (N=4882)
- Respondents were aged 18-28 years old

Dependent Measure

Number of Cohabiting Relationships

- First asked whether they had lived with someone in a marriage-like relationship for one month or more.

Figure 1 Distribution of Cohabiting Relationships

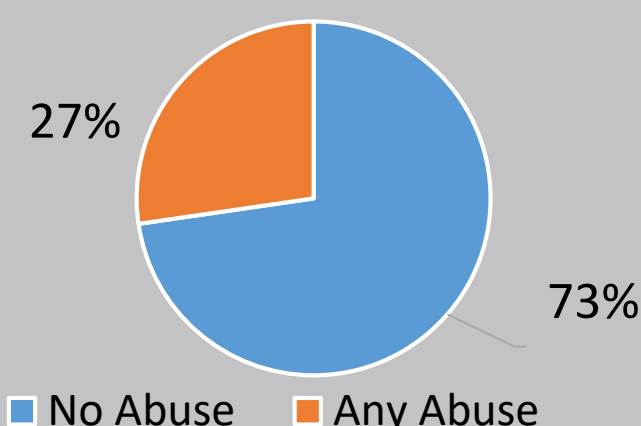


Independent Measure

Child Abuse

- Any physical or sexual abuse (0 = no abuse, 1 = any abuse)
- Based on two questions: "By 6th grade, how often had your parent or adult care-giver (a) slapped, hit, or kicked you or (b) touched you in a sexual way?"

Figure 2 Distribution of Childhood Abuse



Control Measure

Gender

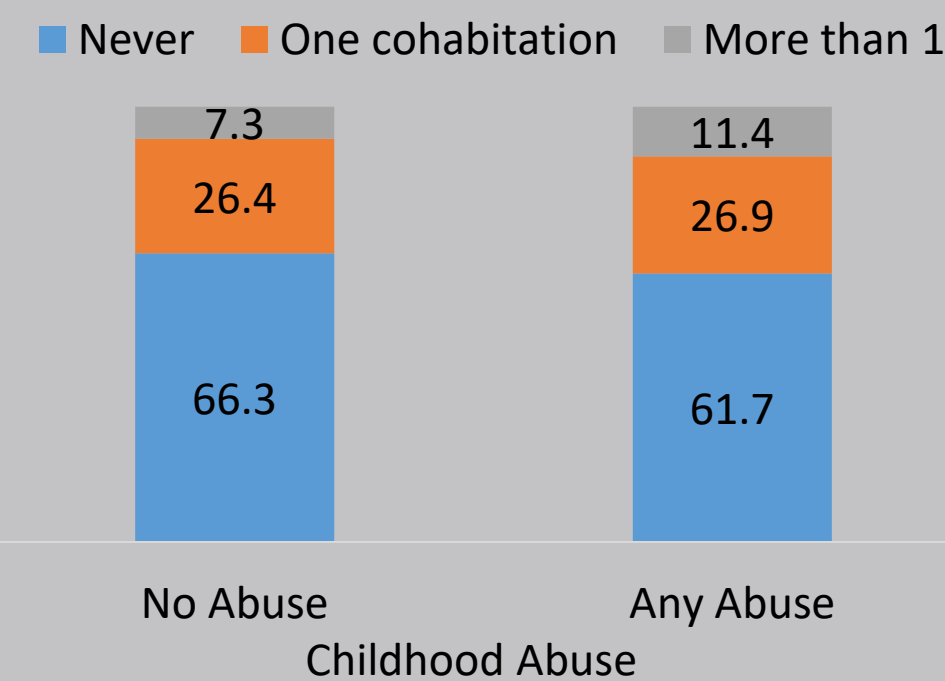
- Male 46%
- Female 54%

Analysis

- Cross tabulation and Chi-square test using SPSS

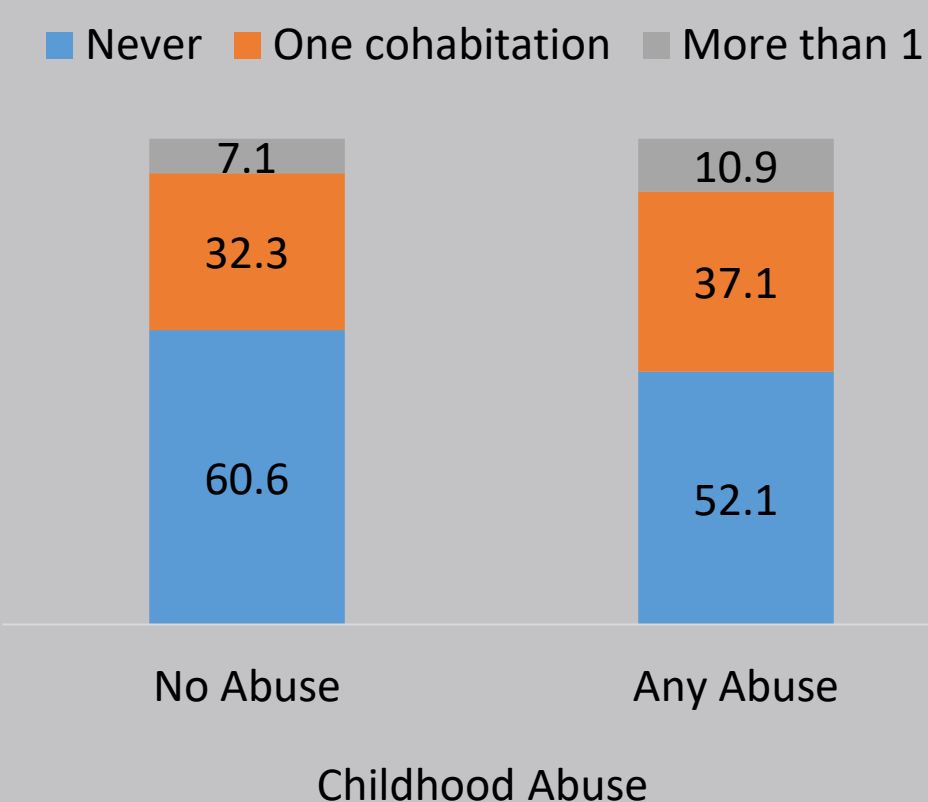
Results

Figure 3 % Distribution of the Number of Cohabiting Relationships By Childhood Abuse for U.S. Men



The Chi-square test suggests that the differences are statistically significant at $p < .01$ level for men.

Figure 4. % Distribution of the Number of Cohabiting Relationships By Childhood Abuse for U.S. Women



The Chi-square test suggests that the differences are statistically significant at $p < .001$ level for women.

Summary of Findings

- Both men and women who experienced abuse in childhood were more likely to have more than one cohabitating relationship than those who did not experience abuse.
- In regards to gender, for women the relationship between childhood abuse and adult cohabitating relationships seems to be stronger and more statistically significant than that of men.

Policy Implications

- This study suggests that more efforts should be made in order to address childhood sexual and physical abuse and the impact it has on adult relationships.

References

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