THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PHYSICAL AND
SEXUAL ABUSE AND DRUG USE IN A SAMPLE
OF JUVENILE DETAINEES IN FLORIDA AND
A SAMPLE OF COMMITTED YOUTHFUL
OFFENDERS IN COLORADO*

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ABSTRACT

The relationships between child physical and
sexual abuse and illicit drug use are little
understood and underinvestigated. Data gathered from
a study of youths located in two different
institutions for detained (Florida) and committed
(Colorado) youthful offenders permitted an
examination of this issue. The results indicate the
youths' physical and sexual abuse experiences are
significantly and positively related to their use of
illicit drugs. The implications of these findings
for further research are drawn.

INTRODUCTION

The prevalence, causes, concomitants, and
consequences of the physical and sexual abuse of

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children constitute an increasingly important and little-understood set of issues confronting behavioral science and clinical researchers (Finkelhor, 1979, 1984; Gelles, 1979; Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz, 1980). Information that is available indicates the profound significance of children's experience of abuse on their developmental outcomes.

For example, physical abuse often results in fractures which require hospitalization; and many of these injuries cause trauma which is associated with later brain injury (Solomons, 1979), cerebral palsy (Nelson and Ellenburg, 1978; Mackeith, 1974), and mental retardation (Martin, Beezley, Conway, and Kempe, 1974; Sandgrund, Gaines, and Green, 1974). Learning problems have also been identified in large numbers of abused children (Applebaum, 1977), as well as such behavior problems as distractibility (Friedrich, Einbender, and Luecke, 1983) and aggression (Blumberg, 1979). Many child abuse victims have problems relating to others and the community in salutary ways. Their failure to thrive (Cupoli, Hallock, and Barness, 1980; Cupoli, 1984) can be evidenced in high rates of delinquency and crime (Hunner and Walker, 1981; Straus, 1984; Alfaro, 1981; Brown, 1982; Paperny and Deisher, 1983), and abuse of children as adults (Groth, 1979; Langevin, Day, Handy, and Russon, 1983; Straus, 1983).

As Cupoli (1984:88) has noted, sexually abused children "have specific problems related to the sexual nature of the abuse, and related to the awful insult to the child's developing trust." Silbert and Pines (1981) report that sexual abuse serves as an antecedent to prostitution. Similar findings have been reported by James (James, 1980; James and Meyerding, 1977), Janus, Scanlon, and Price (1984) and Tjaden, Wainberg, Garrett, and Embree (1986).

Our knowledge about the relationship between child abuse and drug use is at the stage our understanding regarding the association between child abuse and delinquency was ten years ago. Although a connection has been observed between child abuse and drug use, particularly illicit drug use, in clinical settings, there is a dearth of empirical research documenting this relationship. The limited research that has been completed on this topic has uncovered results that are consistent with the hypothesis that the more juveniles are abused, the more likely they