

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

This paper was written by Dr Rosie Teague and Professor Paul Mazerolle, now of Griffith University, with assistance from Dr Margot Legosz and Dr Jennifer Sanderson of the CMC.

## THE RESEARCH

The study described in this paper was part of a large and comprehensive study of 480 offenders serving community corrections orders in Queensland, which was conducted by the CMC in 2003–04. The major report of that study is being released at the same time as this paper, which addresses one of the specific research questions posed by the study.

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# Childhood physical abuse and adult offending

Are they linked, and is there scope for early intervention?

## Summary

**The study described in this paper examines the relationship between physical abuse during childhood and offending (both official and self-reported) among 480 male and female offenders serving community corrections orders in Queensland.**

**This paper examines whether offending rates differ between respondents who had been abused during childhood and those who had not, and whether the relationship, if it exists, is magnified or mitigated by certain characteristics or experiences.**

**The results reveal that physically abused offenders report higher rates of violent, property and total offending than non-abused offenders and that certain experiences (e.g. parental support) can minimise the negative consequences of physical abuse.**

**The paper discusses practical options and opportunities for minimising or preventing the criminogenic consequences of physical child abuse on offending pathways across the life course.**

## Background

Even using the most conservative estimates, it is clear from a large body of research that a significant proportion of children suffer abuse and neglect (e.g. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2005; Bureau of Justice Statistics 1990, 1993; Creighton 2004; National Child Protection Clearinghouse 2004). Reported prevalence rates within the general population have ranged from 7 per cent (Stewart, Dennison &

Waterson 2002a, 2002b) to 21 per cent (Cawson et al. 2000), depending on the measures used and the populations sampled. The growing awareness of the prevalence of abuse has been accompanied by concerns about its consequences.

There is evidence that abused children are more aggressive than non-abused children, (e.g. Dodge, Bates & Pettit 1990), experience more internalising behaviour problems (e.g. Salzinger et al. 1991) and have higher levels of impaired social functioning (Salzinger et al. 1993). In addition to the more immediate effects of abuse, there appears to be a strong link between growing up in an abusive home and a range of problems in later life, including an increased risk of mental health problems (Shonkoff & Phillips 2000), teenage pregnancy (Kelley, Thornberry & Smith 1997) and abuse of alcohol and other drugs (National Institute on Drug Abuse 1998). Extensive research has also demonstrated a strong link between childhood experiences of abuse and higher rates of offending behaviour in later life (e.g. Smith & Thornberry 1995; Stewart, Dennison & Waterson 2002a, 2002b; Weatherburn & Lind 1997; Widom & Maxfield 2001; Zingraff et al. 1993).

*Research has shown a strong link between abuse in childhood and offending in later life.*

Although rates of various types of offending are increased among groups of maltreated individuals by around 20–40 per cent (Smith & Thornberry 1995; Widom & Maxfield 2001), many of those who have experienced abuse do

not offend in later life (Widom 1989a, 1989b), in part because they manage some of these experiences in more constructive ways. Various protective factors may prevent the onset of problem behaviour, or at least limit its severity. These include good problem-solving skills, supportive, caring parents and a favourable school climate. Conversely, there are other factors that can heighten, rather than reduce, the vulnerability created by abuse. These include insecure attachment, school failure and peer rejection (Developmental Crime Prevention Consortium 1999).

This study examines the prevalence of childhood physical abuse among a sample of offenders serving community corrections orders in Queensland. We acknowledge that high-risk groups such as the offenders in the sample are likely to have experienced various forms of maltreatment; however, physical abuse is the only aspect of child maltreatment examined in this paper.

Preliminary research findings have indicated that physical abuse affects males and females differently. Although females are slightly less likely than males to be victims of physical abuse (e.g. National Child Protection Clearing House 2004), two studies have found that being a victim of physical abuse is a significant predictor of violent offending for females but not for males (Herrera & McCloskey 2001; Widom & Maxfield 2001).

While the effects of physical abuse have been comprehensively examined among a range of samples, there are few studies examining its effects within a community corrections population, and none in Australia. This study therefore examines:

- ▶ what relationship exists between physical abuse and later offending behaviour (using both official and self-reported offending data)
- ▶ whether this relationship varies by gender
- ▶ whether any factors function as protective influences in reducing adult offending

- ▶ what preventive opportunities exist to reduce the criminogenic consequences of physical child abuse.

## The current study

The data for this study were drawn from a larger project examining the life experiences of people serving community corrections orders in Queensland. The Crime and Misconduct Commission (CMC) undertook the project in cooperation with Queensland Corrective Services (QCS). Each offender participated in a detailed face-to-face structured interview, which focused on a range of experiences across the life-course, including early life experiences such as education and family relationships and later life experiences such as juvenile and adult offending, peer support, employment, substance abuse, physical and mental health problems, and treatment and program involvement. Information about unwanted sexual experiences, exposure to violence, victimisation and cultural issues was also collected during the interviews, as well as a range of demographic information. Additional demographic and criminal history information was obtained from QCS records.

The participants were offenders serving intensive correction or probation orders through QCS area offices between September 2003 and February 2004. A representative sample of 25 area offices from urban and rural areas was chosen from geographically accessible locations and offices that had either large numbers of offenders serving intensive correction and probation orders or an over-representation of Indigenous offenders. Interviewers requested all offenders who came into the area offices for a scheduled meeting with their community corrections supervisor to participate in the study. Female and Indigenous offenders were over-sampled, to ensure that there would be sufficient numbers to permit meaningful analysis. The total number of offenders asked to participate was 562.

Of the 562 people approached, 82 (14.6%) refused to participate. No significant differences were found between participants and refusers on a range of demographic variables.

The average length of an interview was 76 minutes, and each one took place in a private place at the community corrections offices.

Interviews were completed with 480 offenders, comprising 292 males (60.8%) and 188 females (39.2%). Of these, 98 (20.4%) identified themselves as Indigenous Australians. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 69 years (mean = 29.35, SD = 9.48). Levels of education were low, with 276 participants (58.0%) having left school at the end of Year 10 or earlier. Levels of unemployment were high, with 313 participants (65.2%) currently unemployed or receiving benefits. Two hundred and thirteen participants (44.4%) had no prior convictions in Queensland, 91 (19.0%) had one prior conviction, 72 (15.0%) had two prior convictions and 104 (21.6%) had three or more prior convictions.

The measure for physical child abuse used in the study was based on a modified version of Straus's Conflict Tactics Scale: Parent-Child Relationships (CTSPC) (Straus & Hamby 1997). Respondents were asked to indicate how frequently each of their parents had used certain strategies when they were angry or upset with them, including the following:

- ▶ 'slammed me against the wall'
- ▶ 'kicked, bit or hit me with a fist'
- ▶ 'grabbed me around the neck and choked me'
- ▶ 'beat me up by hitting me over and over as hard as he/she could'
- ▶ 'threatened me with a knife or gun'.

The measure for physical abuse was assessed in various ways, including:

- ▶ prevalence of physical abuse, which gauges whether or not the participant reported any instances of physical abuse perpetrated by either parent

**Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the sample (n = 480)**

	n (%)	Mean (and SD)	Range
Age		29.35 (9.48)	17.6–68.8
Gender:			
male	292 (60.8)		
female	188 (39.2)		
Indigenous	98 (20.4)		
Family structure:			
two-parent	157 (32.7)		
other structure	323 (67.3)		
Reported physical abuse	238 (49.6)		
Number of officially recorded convictions		1.54 (2.21)	0–19
Number of self-reported adult offences:			
violent		14.96 (19.53)	0–100
property		41.67 (48.76)	0–227
sexual		0.35 (1.41)	0–15.5
total		69.88 (73.98)	0–377 <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Such high rates of reported offending are not surprising, given the nature of the sample.

- ▶ multiple exposure to physical abuse, which gauges whether respondents had been victims of abuse perpetrated by two parents or by one parent, or had not been abused
- ▶ frequency of physical abuse, which gauges the frequency of exposure to maternal and paternal physically abusive incidents
- ▶ prevalence of extreme levels of physical abuse, which is a measure to assess low, moderate and high levels of exposure to physical abuse across respondents.

Additional variables were assessed:

- ▶ **Adult offending behaviour** — based on official data (e.g. convictions) and self-reported data, to assess the prevalence and frequency of:
  - › violent crime
  - › property crime
  - › sexual crime
  - › drug crime.
- ▶ **Parental (maternal and paternal) support during childhood** — assessed using a modified version of the Parental Bonding Instrument Care Scale (PBI) (Parker, Tupling & Brown 1979). The scale asks respondents separately about support they received from their mothers and

fathers, with responses recorded using a four-point scale ranging from ‘very often’ to ‘hardly ever’. A high score on this scale indicates high levels of parental support.

- ▶ **Non-academic school attachment** — based on a composite variable created from responses to three questionnaire items asking respondents if they liked going to school: ‘because of my friends’, ‘to get away from home’, or ‘other’. Responses to the ‘other’ category included a variety of non-academic reasons such as ‘to meet girls’. Responses to each question ranged from ‘strongly disagree’ to ‘strongly

agree’. A four-point composite variable ‘non-academic attachment’ was created, with high scores indicating that respondents were attached to school for a range of non-academic reasons.

- ▶ **School suspension or expulsion** — assessed using a dichotomous variable indicating whether or not respondents had ever been suspended or expelled from school. The variable was coded as 1 (at least one suspension or expulsion) or 0 (never suspended or expelled).

Table 1 summarises the key demographic characteristics of the sample, as well as information about physical abuse and adult offending behaviour.

## Study results

Information about the relationship between physical abuse and offending behaviour, including an assessment of whether offending rates differ between abused and non-abused respondents and/or by gender, is presented below. The study assesses whether the relationship between abuse and offending is magnified or neutralised when certain characteristics or experiences in families and school are present.

### Prevalence of physical abuse

Table 2 shows the prevalence of physical abuse during childhood among study participants. Almost half of the

**Table 2. The prevalence of physical abuse across demographic subgroups (n = 480)**

	No physical abuse (%)	One abusive parent (%)	Two abusive parents (%)
Total sample	50.4	34.0	15.6
Gender			
male	46.2	36.0	17.8 <sup>a</sup>
female	56.9	30.9	12.2
Ethnicity			
Indigenous	53.1	27.6	19.4
non-Indigenous	49.7	35.6	14.7
Family structure			
two parents	54.8	33.1	12.1
other structure	48.3	34.4	17.3

<sup>a</sup>  $p < .05$

respondents (49.6%) reported being victims of physical abuse perpetrated by either one or both parents. There were significant differences in the prevalence of physical abuse by gender, with 53.8 per cent of males and 43.1 per cent of females being victims of one or both parents' violence. Of those respondents who reported that they had been victims of physical abuse perpetrated by one parent, 41 (28.9%) reported maternal physical abuse only and 101 (71.1%) reported paternal physical abuse only.

**There were significantly more males than females who had been subjected to physical abuse by their parents.**

No differences were detected in the prevalence of maltreatment by Indigenous status, and the interaction between gender and Indigenous status was not significant, meaning that Indigenous males and females were at the same risk of experiencing abuse as non-Indigenous males and females. Neither the effect of family structure (intact versus non-intact families) nor the interaction between gender and family structure was significant, which suggests that males and females in intact families are at the same risk of experiencing abuse as males and females living in alternative family structures, at least in this population.

### Links with offending behaviour in adulthood

Table 3 presents information about the relationships between physical abuse during childhood and aspects of criminal offending behaviour in adulthood. The prevalence of self-reported violent, property and total offences was found to be significantly higher among physically abused offenders than among non-abused offenders. No significant differences were found between the two groups for the prevalence of officially reported offending or for self-reported sexual offences. This pattern of differences was replicated for the frequency of offending: physically abused respondents reported more frequent engagement in violent, property and total offences than non-abused respondents, but no significant differences were observed for the frequency of self-reported sexual offences or officially recorded offending.

The research also explored whether the relationship between childhood physical abuse and adult offending differed for male and female respondents (results not shown). The patterns observed were similar to those demonstrated within the total sample, with both males and females at significantly increased risk of violent and overall offending in the presence of abuse, but no significant increase in risk for either officially recorded offending or self-reported sexual offending. Property offending was

the only offending type where there were gender differences in risk. A history of childhood abuse increased females' risk of participation in property offending by around 20 per cent but raised males' risk by only about 2 per cent.

### Does greater frequency of exposure to physical abuse in childhood lead to more offending behaviour?

Experiencing more severe and persistent physical child abuse may increase the risks for offending because the negative consequences of abuse may have a cumulative effect (e.g. the dose response or cumulative risks model of Smith & Thornberry 1995). In this way, an excessive accumulation of risks involving exposure to physical child abuse could lead to negative outcomes in a more or less linear fashion — in other words, more risk equates with more offending (Agnew 1992; Appleyard et al. 2005; Linsky & Straus 1986).

An alternative view of this relationship is that deleterious outcomes such as offending arise through crossing a particular threshold, beyond which the negative consequences of an additional abusive experience are much stronger and have a much more dramatic impact (cf. Appleyard et al. 2005).

The relationship between childhood physical abuse and later offending was investigated by examining whether higher levels of exposure to physical abuse were associated with a higher prevalence and/or a higher frequency of offending. Respondents were classified by the severity of the abuse they received (levels of abuse were classified as extreme above the 80th and 90th percentiles on the frequency variable).

As can be seen in Table 4 (facing page), severe levels of physical abuse were significantly associated with higher prevalence of violent and total offending. While there was some evidence of an increase in property offending as the severity of abuse increased, this relationship was not statistically significant. Significant relationships were

**Table 3. Relationships between childhood physical abuse and the prevalence and frequency of adult offending**

	Official offending (QCS data)	Self-reported offending			
		Violent	Property	Sexual	Total
		<b>Prevalence of offending (%)</b>			
No physical abuse	54.5	71.9	84.1	8.4	92.1
Any physical abuse	56.7	86.0	91.3	9.7	98.3
<i>Chi-squared</i>	0.23	14.11***	5.53*	0.23	9.49**
		<b>Frequency of offending (mean)</b>			
No physical abuse	1.61	10.07	33.92	0.33	53.52
Any physical abuse	1.46	19.74	49.53	0.37	86.09
<i>T statistic</i>	0.74	-5.52***	-3.48**	-0.31	-4.82***

\*\*\* p < .001; \*\* p < .01; \* p < .05

not found between the severity of physical abuse and the prevalence of either officially recorded offending or self-reported sex offending. A more marked pattern of differences between abused and non-abused groups was observed when the frequency of offending was analysed. For every offending type except officially recorded offending, respondents reporting extremely high levels of abuse (above the 90th percentile) reported committing about twice as many offences as did those who did not report a history of physical abuse. The frequency of violent offending was around three times higher for the victims of extreme levels of physical abuse than for respondents with no reported history of abuse. There was no relationship between the severity of abuse and the frequency of officially recorded offending.

### Exploring protective and criminogenic influences

The final stage of this research examined whether the negative consequences (e.g. increased criminal involvement) of

experiencing physical child abuse are minimised or exacerbated when certain protective conditions or criminogenic influences are present. Four sets of comparisons were conducted to examine the influence of parental support (maternal and paternal), as well as experiences and events at school. It was

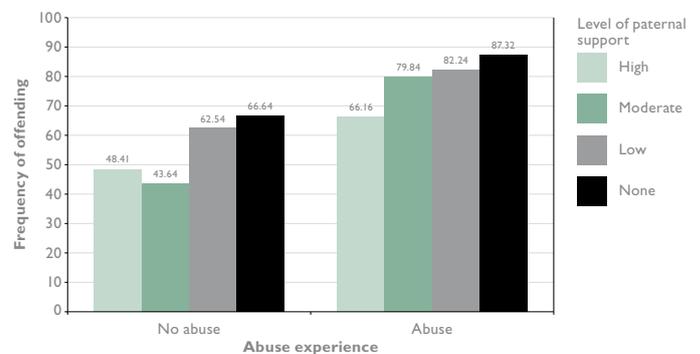
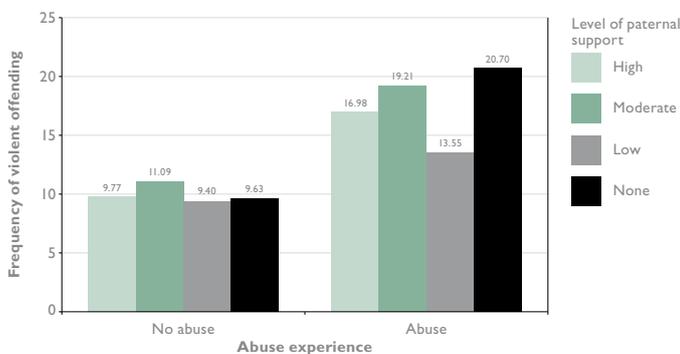
expected that the criminogenic consequences of experiencing physical child abuse would be decreased when parental support was available, and increased when negative events in school, such as being expelled, occurred. The results are shown in Figures 1–8 (see below and on next page).

**Table 4. Relationship between the severity of childhood physical abuse and the prevalence and frequency of adult offending**

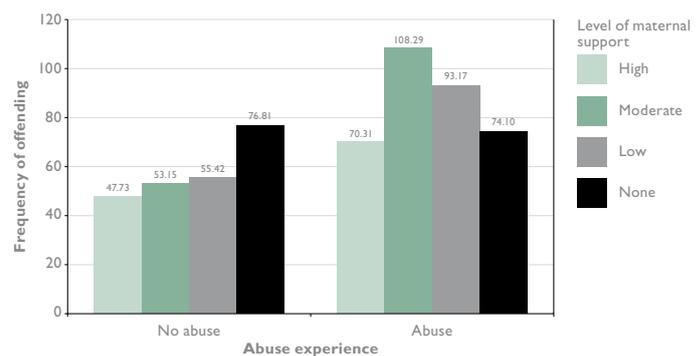
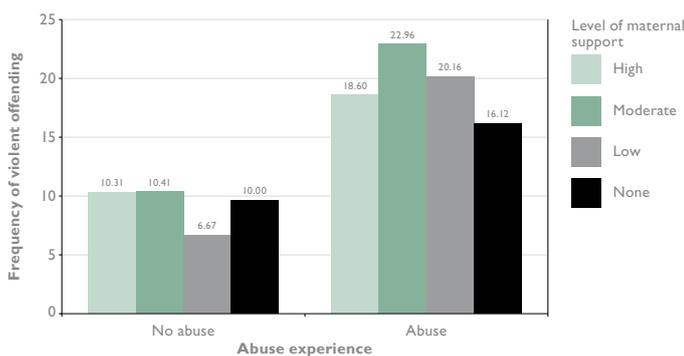
Level of physical abuse	Official offending (QCS data)		Self-reported offending			
			Violent	Property	Sexual	Total
			<b>Prevalence of offending (%)</b>			
None	54.5		71.9	84.1	8.4	92.1
< 80th percentile	55.3		84.9	92.4	9.6	96.7
80–89th percentile	57.6		86.4	89.4	9.1	98.5
≥ 90th percentile	57.7		87.0	91.7	10.4	100.0
<i>Chi-squared</i>	<i>0.36</i>		<i>14.22**</i>	<i>5.87</i>	<i>0.31</i>	<i>10.45*</i>
			<b>Frequency of offending (mean)</b>			
None	1.61		10.07	33.92	0.33	53.52
< 80th percentile	1.36		13.28	37.51	0.27	62.15
80–89th percentile	1.48		17.60	52.51	0.26	89.43
≥ 90th percentile	1.56		29.38	62.15	0.60	113.28
<i>F statistic</i>	<i>0.30</i>		<i>22.09***</i>	<i>7.84***</i>	<i>1.00</i>	<i>15.12***</i>

\*\*\* p < .001; \*\* p < .01; \* p < .05

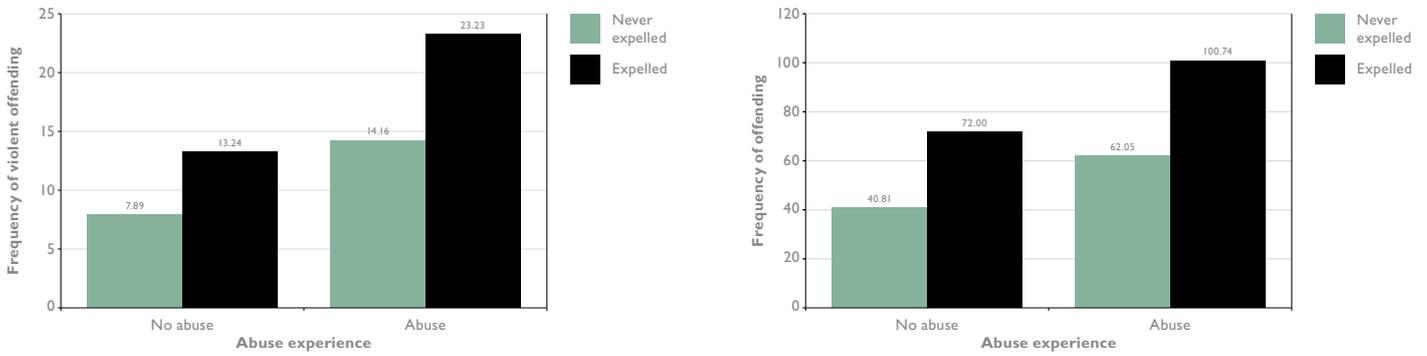
**Figures 1 and 2. Protective influences of paternal support**



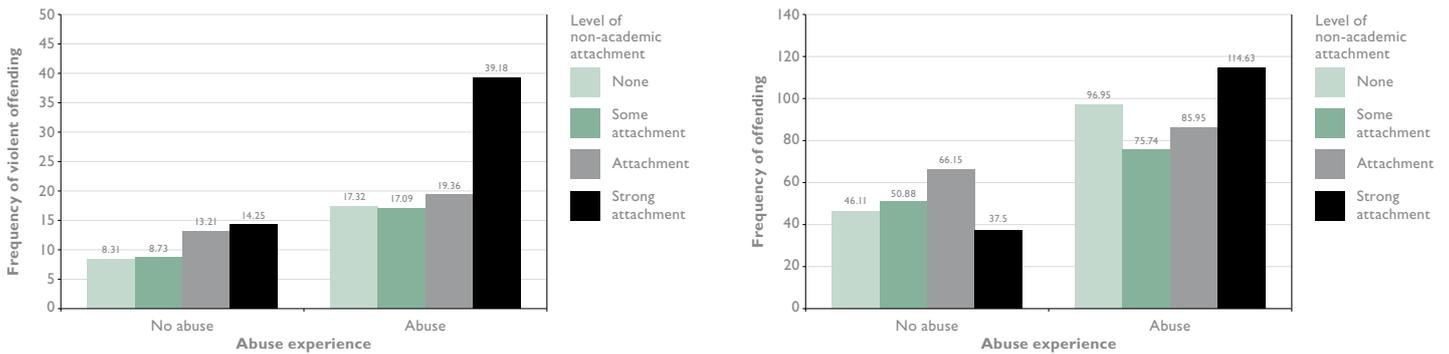
**Figures 3 and 4. Protective influences of maternal support**



**Figures 5 and 6. Criminogenic influences of being expelled from school**



**Figures 7 and 8. Criminogenic influences of non-academic school attachment**



The relationships shown in Figures 1–8 demonstrate the competing influences of protective parental support and negative school experiences. For example, whereas it is clear that paternal support protects against the criminogenic consequences of abuse (Figures 1 and 2), in that it minimises participation in violent and general offending, the same cannot be said for maternal support (Figures 3 and 4).

Experiences in school also provide opportunities to magnify or accelerate the negative consequences of physical child abuse. For example, among respondents with a history of physical child abuse, being expelled from school appears to increase the frequency of offending behaviour, including violence (see Figures 5 and 6). This illustrates the importance of keeping youth at school, which is a key socialising institution for young people.

***Among those with a history of physical abuse as children, being expelled from school appears to increase the frequency of offending behaviour.***

Finally, among respondents with a history of physical child abuse, being attached to school for non-academic reasons (e.g. to spend time with friends) appears to enhance the criminogenic consequences of abuse. In other words, being heavily attached to school gives people with a history of physical abuse an opportunity to spend time with peers — presumably deviant peers — and helps to exacerbate criminal offending behaviour (see Figures 7 and 8).

***Being attached to school for non-academic reasons tends to exacerbate criminal offending behaviour.***

## Summary of results

This study has demonstrated the following:

- ▶ Around half of the study participants reported a history of childhood physical abuse, which is similar to the range of prevalence rates reported by prior studies of prison populations (e.g. Ekstrand 1999; Hockings et al. 2002; Johnson 2004; Weeks &

Widom 1998a, 1998b) but is around two to five times higher than rates reported among the general population (Bureau of Justice Statistics 1993; Cawson et al. 2000; Mazza et al. 1996).

- ▶ The rates of childhood physical abuse for males and females are consistent with those found in previous studies (e.g. Ekstrand 1999; Hockings et al. 2002; Johnson 2004; Weeks & Widom 1998a, 1998b). The finding that significantly more males than females had a history of physical abuse is consistent with findings of a gender difference among victims of substantiated cases of abuse (e.g. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2005; Department for Education and Skills 2004; Trocme & Wolfe 2001) and self-report surveys among nationally representative samples (Cawson et al. 2000; Bureau of Justice Statistics 1993).
- ▶ No significant differences in prevalence rates were found for ethnicity. This finding is inconsistent with rates of child abuse substantiations among the general population, which are significantly

higher for Indigenous children (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2005). Unfortunately there are no Australian self-report studies comparing Indigenous and non-Indigenous respondents' experiences of physical abuse, which could have provided a more valid comparison for the present study. This study used a very select high-risk sample of Indigenous and non-Indigenous offenders who are likely to share the high-risk backgrounds that are commonly associated with abuse.

- ▶ No significant differences in prevalence rates were found for family structure, which is also likely to be related to the high-risk nature of the sample. Other studies have indicated that economic disadvantage can account for many of the differences observed between single-parent and intact families (Amato & Keith 1991).
- ▶ In contrast to a range of previous studies, this study found no relationship between physical abuse and rates of official offending. This is perhaps not surprising, given that the sample consists entirely of offenders, which makes group differences harder to detect.
- ▶ No association was found between physical abuse and sexual offending.
- ▶ The study revealed a relationship between physical abuse and self-reported violent, property and total offending, as in previous studies (Smith & Thornberry 1995; Widom & Maxfield 2001). Respondents with a history of childhood physical abuse had significantly higher rates of violent, property and total offending than did respondents with no history of physical abuse.
- ▶ As levels of abuse increase, so too do levels of violent, property and total offending increase. The study also found that, while respondents with a history of any physical abuse are at increased risk of offending, an increase in the intensity of abuse experienced is also accompanied by increases in levels of offending.

- ▶ Having higher levels of paternal support acted as a protective factor for respondents with a history of physical abuse. Maternal support did not have the same protective effect.
- ▶ Being suspended or expelled from school, and being attached to school for non-academic reasons (e.g. to spend time with peers), were significant vulnerability factors, with both increasing the likelihood of offending among respondents with a history of physical abuse.

## Limitations of the study

Readers should be aware of some limitations of this study, including the following:

- ▶ It uses data from a sample of relatively high-risk offenders, and the focus on such a homogeneous sample may magnify the relationship between physical abuse and offending behaviour — in part because exposure to childhood physical abuse is high in this population, but also because other forms of social dysfunction are prevalent.
- ▶ The study utilises official data, but also relies to a great extent on self-reported information from respondents. Self-reports are very useful for undertaking social research but can also introduce bias in relation to recall problems and under-reporting, although prior research confirms that the correlation between official crime indexes and self-reports is generally very high (Hindelang, Hirschi & Reis 1979; 1981).

## Implications for prevention

This study has a number of implications for prevention and early intervention.

It is important to reinforce the point that these findings confirm results from other studies of convicted offender populations regarding the high levels of exposure to physical abuse and its criminogenic

consequences. There are many reasons why preventing physical abuse should be a priority for governments and the general community alike, not least of which are its deleterious consequences and its potential to exacerbate criminal offending pathways.

The study's findings draw attention to the importance of schools as socialising institutions for youth, as well as the importance of parental support — in particular support from a father figure.

Past research has demonstrated the unique role of attachment to school for academic reasons in preventing delinquency (Gottfredson 2001), and in reducing longer-term offending outcomes (Thornberry, Moore & Christenson 1985). Strategies that keep youth in school, and at the same time enhance the attachment and commitment by youth to school for academic reasons, should help to minimise offending outcomes for youth, whether or not they have a history of abuse.

It may well be that many respondents in this population have limited exposure to father figures. For those who do have paternal support, however, this appears to be an important influence and strongly protective. Paternal support may well also have additive importance, in terms of providing the support of both parents within the context of intact families — which is an issue not explored in this study.

In short, preventive strategies that incorporate or promote the provision of parental support would be expected to further insulate or protect youth from the negative and criminogenic consequences of experiencing physical abuse during childhood.

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*The study's findings show the importance of schools as a socialising influence, as well as the importance of parental support — particularly the support of a father figure.*

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