

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



**Focus:**  
Multiple  
Branches

## Childhood Antecedents of Incarceration and Criminal Justice Involvement Among Homeless Veterans

Tsai, J., & Rosenheck, R. A. (2013). Childhood antecedents of incarceration and criminal justice involvement among homeless veterans. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 83(4), 545-549. doi:10.1111/ajop.12050

**SUMMARY:** Researchers assessed whether family instability, childhood conduct disorder, and childhood abuse were correlated with criminal justice involvement or incarceration in a sample of homeless Veterans. Childhood conduct disorder was associated with both criminal justice involvement and incarceration. Family instability and childhood abuse were not associated with either outcome.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- Forty percent of Veterans had experienced child abuse.
- Veterans reported being incarcerated for an average of 9.3 months in their lifetime.
- After controlling for other variables, childhood conduct disorder was correlated with incarceration, criminal charges, and convictions.
- After controlling for other variables, childhood family instability and childhood abuse were not associated with criminal justice involvement or incarceration

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer support programs for Service members with a history of conduct issues or childhood abuse to reduce the risk of future trouble with the law
- Provide education to military parents regarding effective discipline skills to prevent child abuse among military personnel
- Distribute information to military families about conduct disorders and ways to promote positive development and cope with behavioral issues

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend screening for childhood conduct disorder at accession
- Recommend providing families of incarcerated Service members with services designed to promote family stability
- Recommend education for professionals working with military families who have a child coping with conduct or behavioral issues

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## METHODS

- Data were collected from a combined national observational data set and experimental data set from Veterans participating in the housing support program between 1992-2003.
- A convenience sample of Veterans was interviewed once prior to enrollment in the housing support program, and again every three months thereafter for one year.
- Validated survey instruments were used to assess childhood conduct disorders, criminal histories, and childhood family instability.

## PARTICIPANTS

- The sample included 1,161 homeless Veterans.
- The average Veteran age was 42.9 years old (SD = 8.0 years).
- Nearly all Veterans were men (95%); a large proportion of participants were Black (48%).
- Service branch data were not provided.

## LIMITATIONS

- The study does not test for a possible correlation between childhood abuse and either childhood conduct disorder or family instability, which could influence the results.
- The cross-sectional research design does not allow for causal inferences to be made.
- The population consists of a convenience sample that may not be representative of homeless Veterans in general.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Examine indirect pathways between childhood abuse/family instability and involvement in the criminal justice system
- Consider whether children with conduct disorder may be more attracted to the structure and discipline of military life
- Explore which situational stressors interact with childhood conduct disorders to increase the risk of criminal justice involvement among Service members

## ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



For more information about the Assessing Research that Works rating scale visit:  
<https://reachmilitaryfamilies.umn.edu/content/assessing-research-that-works>