

Study links child abuse, high school dropout

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Children who have been victims of violence are more likely to drop out of high school before graduation than their peers, according to a new study co-authored by a Duke scholar.

Girls who had experienced childhood [violence](#) were 24 percent more likely to drop out, while boys who had experienced violence were 26 percent more likely to drop out than their peers.

One in five people in the United States drop out of high school before graduation, which decreases their lifetime earning potential by 20 percent. Yet there has been little previous research into the link between being a victim of violence before the age of 16 and dropping out of [high school](#).

The study, "Child Abuse, Sexual Assault, Community Violence and High School Graduation," was published in the November issue of the journal *Review of Behavioral Economics*.

The researchers used data from the National Comorbidity Survey Replication and the National Survey of American Life to create a sample set of 5,370 females and 3,522 males. The sample was restricted to people born in the United States to create a more consistent data set.

Within the sample of more than 8,800 respondents, 34 percent of [women](#) and 29 of men reported being the victim of some sort of violence before age 16. Twenty-one percent of women reported sexual assault as opposed to 6 percent of men.

"Actually, we were stunned by the magnitude of the violence directed against young women and young men," said William A. Darity, professor at Duke's Sanford School of Public Policy, director of the Samuel DuBois Cook Center on Social Equity and a co-author of the study.

"Moreover, these assaults are not confined to any social class, racial, or ethnic group," he said. "This is authentically an American problem. One of its manifestations is the negative effect on persistence in school for many of the victims."

Because most states require compulsory education until age 16, the study focused on the association of dropout with violence experienced between the ages of 1 and 15.

Dropout rates for people who experienced any type of violence before age 16 were compared with the rates for people who did not experience violence during the same time frame.

The researchers categorized violent experiences into three kinds: child abuse, sexual assault and [community violence](#). Community violence was defined as violence experienced outside the home, such as being mugged or beaten by anyone other than parents. Sexual assault included violence both within the home and in the community.

They found significant differences between men and women for the three types of violence experienced. Men suffered more from community violence, 12 percent versus 3 percent for women, while more women experienced sexual assault, at 21 percent versus 6 percent for men.

Women who suffered a combination of both sexual assault and child abuse were the most likely to dropout. Among men, the highest dropout rate was highest for those who were victims of both [child abuse](#) and community violence.

Male and female victims of home violence also left [school](#) early at a higher rate than their peers who did not report experiencing violence.

Surprisingly, victims of [sexual assault](#) who experienced no other violence were no more likely to drop out than their peers who were not victims. This held true among both males and females.

The study suggests that policies to reduce violence against children or assist children in coping with violence will have the additional benefit of lowering the national dropout rate.

More information: Timothy M. Diette et al, Child Abuse, Sexual Assault, Community Violence and High School Graduation, *Review of Behavioral Economics* (2017). [DOI: 10.1561/105.00000065](https://doi.org/10.1561/105.00000065)

Provided by Duke University

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