

Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms in Adolescent Males Adjudicated for Illegal Sexual Behavior

Abigail P. Winskowitz¹ and Kelli R. Thompson²

¹Undergraduate Student, Department of Psychological Sciences, Auburn University

²Assistant Research Professor, Department of Psychological Sciences, Auburn University

Trauma symptoms can vary between individuals for a multitude of reasons. Depending on the levels of exposure, types of trauma, and even the individual's coping mechanism, children and adolescents will interpret and respond to trauma in unique ways (Cohen, Mannarino, Deblinger 2016). Adolescents faced with trauma symptoms experience a vast change in personal worldview, as well as life trajectory if left untreated (Cohen, Mannarino, Deblinger 2016). Trauma symptoms can be triggered for a variety of reasons but often result in disruptions to caregiver attachment, as well as to therapeutic processes (Harrelson et al., 2017). In a recent meta-analysis, adolescents adjudicated with illegal sexual behavior (AISB) experienced higher rates of victimization, with 46% reporting some history of sexual abuse, compared to 16% of non-sex offenders (Seto, Lalumiere 2010).

Trauma exposure has been linked with the high rates of posttraumatic stress symptoms, indicating a need for trauma-informed care when working with this population (Copeland, Keeler, & Angold, 2007). Additionally, AISB had a higher prevalence of psychopathology, specifically symptoms of anxiety, with social anxiety being significantly higher, when compared to a non-sex offending population (Seto & Lalumiere, 2010). When screened for symptoms of traumatic stress disorders, nearly half a sample of AISB indicated at least one item related to suicidal ideation (Everhart Newman et al., 2018). Traumatic events are generally linked more with internalizing psychopathologies, such as anxiety and depressive disorders (Copeland, Keeler, & Angold, 2007). However, some links to externalizing symptoms have been found with some victimized groups experiencing more behavior problem scores (Tricket, 1998).

The current study examined differences in posttraumatic stress symptoms between a sample of AISB compared

to a sample of adolescents adjudicated for general delinquent behavior (AGDB). The participants (n = 199) were juveniles receiving court-mandated services at a secure residential facility. The AISB group was younger (mean age = 15.81 and 8th grade modal level) than the AGDB group (mean age = 17.20 and 9th grade modal level). The AISB was more likely to have witnessed domestic violence (31%) compared to the AGDB group (22%). The Trauma Symptom Checklist for Children (TSCC; Briere, 1996) was used to measure posttraumatic stress symptoms during a pre-treatment screener evaluation. A one-way ANOVA was used to test for significant mean differences on the TSCC scales across the grouping variable AISB versus AGDB.

Results, as seen in Table 1, indicated that AISB displayed more internalizing symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder, such as depression, anxiety, and hyperresponsivity. Additionally, AISB scored higher on scales of sexual fantasy related to trauma symptoms suggesting some type of defense mechanism unique to this group. Means and standard errors are displayed in Figure 1. Interestingly, while not statistically significant, the AGDB group scored higher on several measures of sexual concern and stress. These results highlight the importance of understanding and screening for the different ways trauma symptoms show up in individuals. Particularly for those that work with justice-involved youth, these differences can be used to model different treatment approaches for individual clients.

²Corresponding author: kelli.thompson@auburn.edu

Table 1. Results of one-way ANOVA analyses.

TSCC Subscales	<i>F</i> (1, 198)	<i>p</i> -value
Under Responsivity	0.78	0.38
Hyper Responsivity*	5.84	0.02
Anxiety*	12.05	0.00
Depression*	14.41	0.00
Anger	0.27	0.60
Post-Traumatic Stress*	6.04	0.02
Dissociation	2.71	0.10
Overt Dissociation	2.79	0.10
Sexual Fantasy*	6.06	0.02
Sexual Concerns	2.24	0.14
Sexual Preoccupation	1.92	0.17
Sexual Distress	0.74	0.39

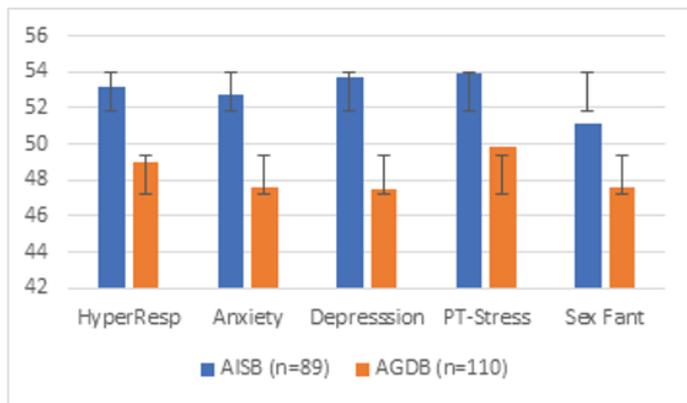


Fig 1. Means and standard errors of the main study variables.

Statement of Research Advisor

The current research was supported by a more than 20-year public-public partnership between the Alabama Department of Youth Services and Auburn University. These analyses were initially presented at the Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers Annual Conference in 2020.

- Kelli R. Thompson, Juvenile Delinquency Lab

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Authors Biography



Abigail Winskowicz is a senior-year student pursuing a B.A in Psychology at Auburn University. She hopes to continue her education in the field of psychology in graduate school. She is currently a research assistant in The Juvenile Delinquency Lab at Auburn University.



Kelli R. Thompson is an Assistant Research Professor in the Department of Psychological Sciences. Her research interests include the assessment and treatment of adolescents with illegal sexual behavior. She teaches a comprehensive healthy sexuality group at the Mt. Meigs facility. Undergraduate research mentoring remains a personal and professional focus.