

Exposure to Early Adversity Increases the Risk for Criminal Justice Involvement Later in Life

Casey J. Altomaro, B.A., & Kristine M. Jacquin, Ph.D.

INTRODUCTION

- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC; 2013) define adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) as traumatic events endured prior to age 18.
- Children who endure even one ACE are more likely to engage in deviant behaviors later in life (Edalati et al., 2017; Levenson & Socia, 2015; Willis & Levenson, 2016).

RELEVANCE

- In the USA, incarceration and recidivism rates are exceptionally high (Alper et al., 2018; Sawyer & Wagner, 2020).
- It is vital to recognize the influence of childhood maltreatment on the development of deviant and antisocial behaviors, especially because exposure to early adversity is not uncommon.
- About 61% of adults in America have endured at least one ACE, and 17% have experienced more than four (CDC, 2021).

CRIMINAL INVOLVEMENT

- Children exposed to ACEs have higher odds of criminal justice involvement (Humphrey & Van Brunschot, 2018; King, 2020; Maciel & Basto-Pereira, 2020).
- Adult offenders report higher average ACE scores than members of the general population (Levenson & Socia, 2015; Reavis, 2013; Stinson et al., 2016).
- Early adversity is linked with drug-related offenses (Sawyer & Wagner, 2020), sex crimes (Levenson & Socia, 2015), violent assaults (Hilton et al., 2016; King, 2020), and property crimes (Broidy et al., 2018).

FIGURE 1: Reavis et al. (2013)

Compared to a normative sample of adults ($N = 7970$), a forensic sample ($N = 151$) whose offenses included child abuse, domestic violence, sex crimes, and stalking reported significantly higher rates of childhood maltreatment (Reavis et al., 2013).

Percentage of ACEs Reported by Forensic and Normative Groups

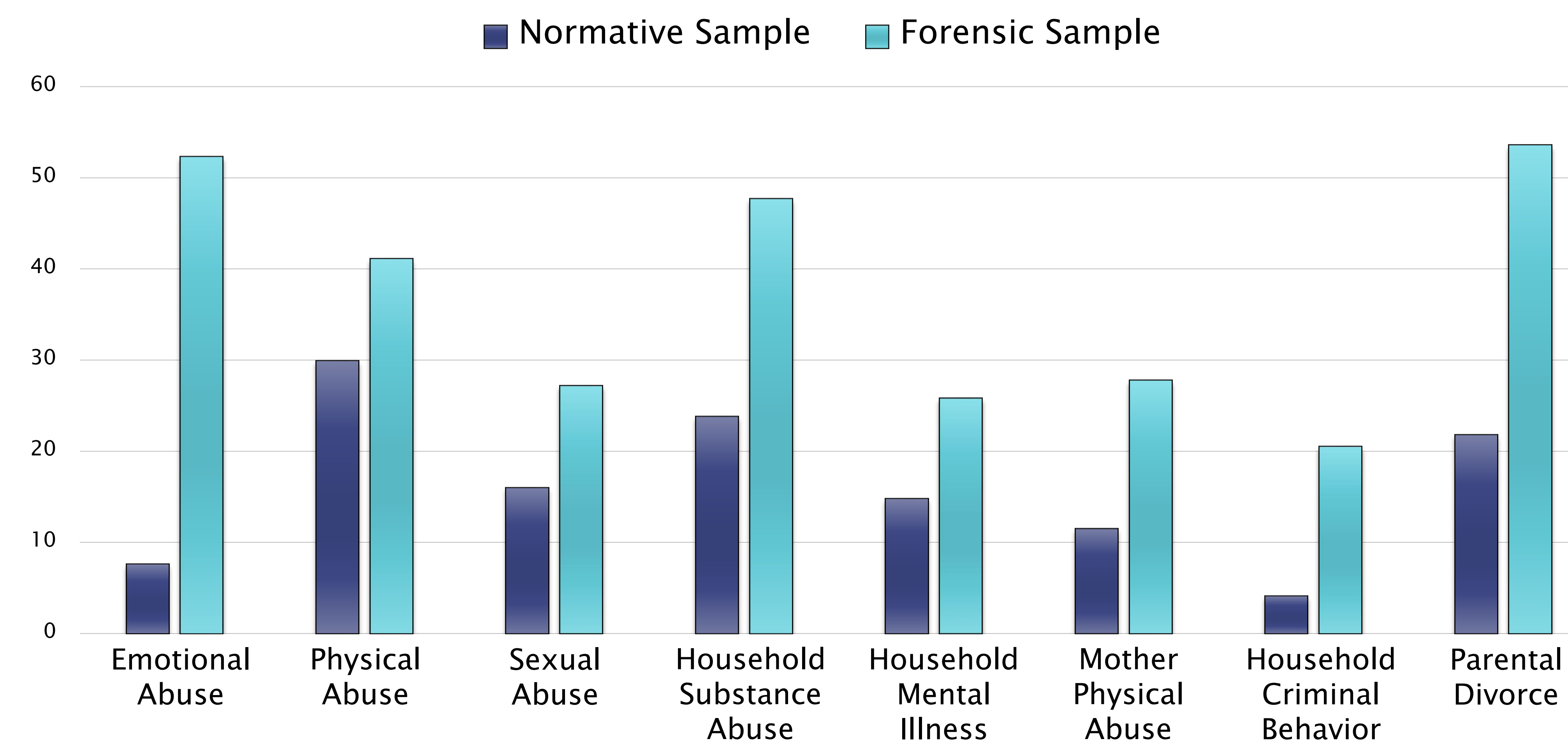
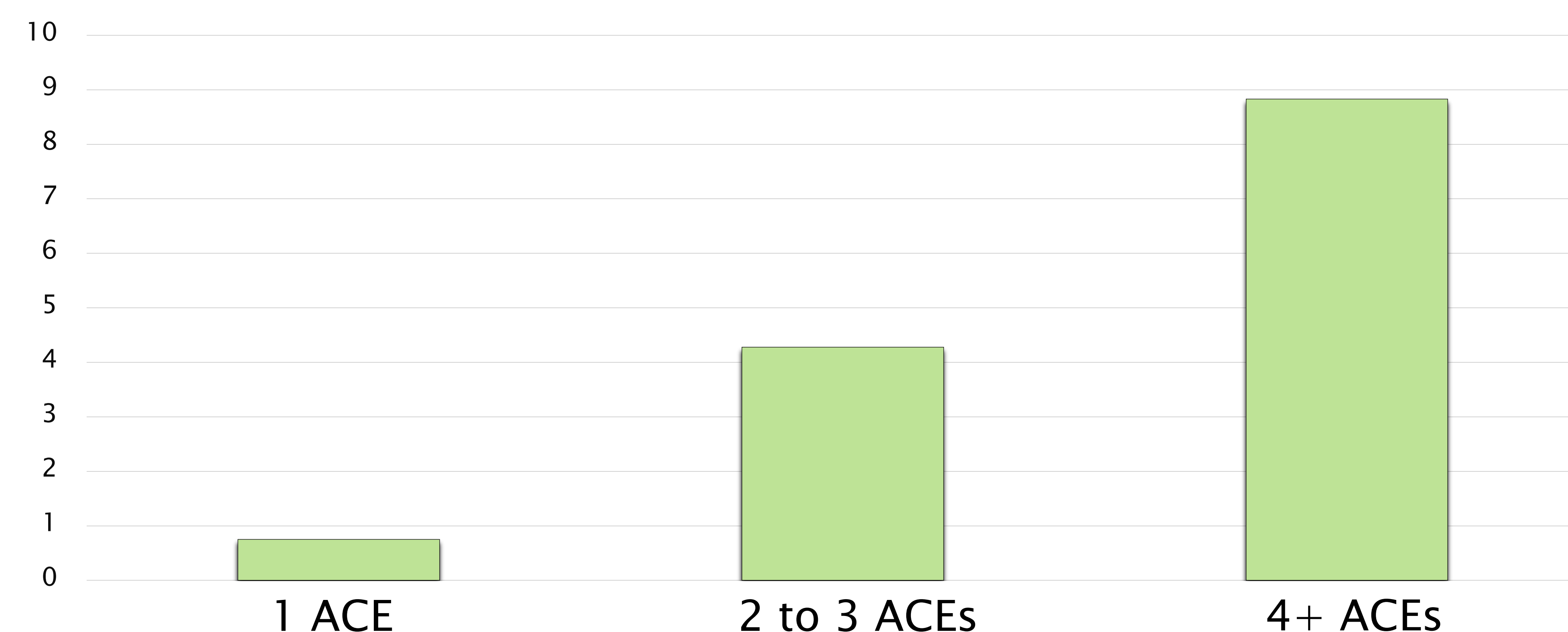


FIGURE 2: Bellis et al. (2013)

Compared to individuals reporting one ACE, those who reported two or three ACEs were four times more likely to have spent at least one night in prison in the past year. Those with four or more ACEs were eight times more likely (Bellis et al., 2013).

Odds of Having Spent a Night in Prison in the Past Year



RECIDIVISM

- ACE exposure is linked with earlier onset of deviancy, greater offense frequencies, and longer criminal careers (Craig et al., 2017; Humphrey & Van Brunschot, 2018; Stinson et al., 2016).
- Poly victimization and elevated ACE scores positively correlate with rates of criminal persistence and habitual offending (Craig et al., 2017; Edalati et al., 2017; Roos et al., 2016; Stinson et al., 2016; Willis & Levenson, 2016).

FORENSIC IMPLICATIONS

- Knowing the links between ACEs and delinquency can inform prevention interventions, facilitate improved family therapies, and encourage trauma-informed approaches to delinquency.
- Addressing maladaptive responses to ACE exposure can minimize distress among vulnerable individuals, lower victimization rates, and reduce burdens on the criminal justice system.
- Forensic psychologists and attorneys may use a criminal defendant's ACE history to understand their behavior and recommend mitigation in charges or sentencing.

RESOURCES

Bellis, M. A., Lowey, H., Leckenby, N., Hughes, K., & Harrison, D. (2013). Adverse childhood experiences: Retrospective study to determine their impact on adult health behaviours and health outcomes in a UK population. *Journal of Public Health*, 36(1), 81-91. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pubmed/>

Reavis, J. A., Looman, J., Franco, K. A. & Rojas, B. (2013). Adverse childhood experiences and adult criminality: How long must we live before we possess our own lives? *The Permanente Journal*, 17(2), 44-48. <https://doi.org/10.7812/TPP/12-072>