Prenatal Alcohol Exposure and Delinquent or Illegal Behavior

There has been a great deal of concern in recent years that prenatal alcohol exposure is related to delinquent behavior in adolescence and to criminal activity in adulthood. This conclusion is based largely on reports based on individuals who have already been referred for treatment for problem behavior or confined in correctional facilities. As part of the Emory Maternal Substance Abuse and Child Development (MSACD) Project longitudinal study, we interviewed alcohol-exposed adolescents and young adults in a sample from the Atlanta community about whether they were involved in illegal activities.

In this study, individuals participated in the study from the time they were born. Their mothers volunteered for the study during a prenatal visit. The study includes some young people whose mothers used alcohol during pregnancy, some whose mothers did not, and another contrast group who came into the study in adolescence and were enrolled in special education classes in high school. The sample was predominantly African-American and from a low socioeconomic status background.

Prenatal alcohol exposure was not related to illegal behavior or activities in this community sample. In the adolescent follow-up, we asked the teens whether they had ever participated in a number of delinquent activities such as stealing or vandalism. If they had, they were asked whether they had done so in the past year. There was no relationship between prenatal alcohol exposure and delinquent behavior. We also looked at other possible factors that might predict delinquent behavior. Three factors that were important were lower supervision by parents, higher adolescent life stress, and higher adolescent self-reported drug use.

When the young adults came back to our lab for evaluation, they were interviewed concerning participation in criminal activity. A preliminary look at the data showed no
relationship between prenatal alcohol exposure and their reports of criminal activity. They were also asked about interactions with the legal system. Prenatal alcohol exposure was not related to whether they had ever been in jail, whether they were on probation/parole, on number of charges resulting in convictions, or, if incarcerated, on the number of lifetime months spent incarcerated. Males were marginally more likely to report more convictions and significantly more likely to spend a longer time incarcerated than females.

In summary, we found few differences in reports of illegal behavior that were related to prenatal alcohol exposure group. In general, these reports were very similar to those of the non-exposed group from similar backgrounds and the special education contrast group in the study. In studies of individuals already in clinical treatment or in correctional facilities, it is likely that the impact of prenatal alcohol exposure is inflated when compared to this study of a community sample.

Reference:

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