CHILDHOOD VICTIMIZATION AND CRIMINAL BEHAVIOR: THE ROLE OF DIFFICULTIES IN EMOTION REGULATION

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INTRODUCTION

Childhood is an important developmental period during which an individual's life may be influenced by a wide range of factors (Wade et al., 2022), including experiences of **abuse** and **neglect**. These forms of victimization affect children's brain **development** and **behavior** (Jackson & Deye, 2015), relational skills (Basto-Pereira & Maia, 2019), and **emotional regulation** (Marques, 2020). Family cohesion, emotional expressiveness, and family conflict have been associated with maladaptive emotional regulation patterns in children and adolescents (Eickels et al., 2022). These **emotional regulation difficulties** may also contribute to negative emotional experiences and increase the likelihood of **criminal** or **delinquent behavior** (Garofalo & Velotti, 2017). Childhood challenges, including aggression, social isolation, and difficulties in emotion regulation, have been linked to both violent and nonviolent criminal behavior (Kalvin & Bierman, 2017).

AIMS: This study aimed to analyze the link between **victimization** experiences, **difficulties in emotion regulation**, and c**riminal and delinquent behavior** among adult individuals from the Portuguese population.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

This sample comprised **90 adults:** 21.1% men (*n* = 19) and 78.9% women (*n* = 71), aged 18 to 66 years. Most were Portuguese (*n* = 77, 85.6%), while the remainder reported dual nationality (*n* = 13, 14.4%). Regarding **educational level**, most participants had completed secondary education (*n* = 57, 63.3%), whereas 21.1% had completed a bachelor's degree (*n* = 19).

PROCEDURE

Data collection was conducted **online**, following a standardized **protocol**, with **informed consent** obtained from all participants. Data processing and analysis were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics. The study respected all ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association, 2024).

MEASURES

- **Sociodemographic questionnaire**: Assesses age, gender, and educational level.
- **Self-report Method for Measuring Delinquency and Crime** (D-CRIM; Basto-Pereira et al., 2015): Assesses violent and nonviolent criminal behaviors.
- **Portuguese Version of the Childhood Experiences Questionnaire** (ACE; Pinto et al., 2014)**:** Assesses adverse childhood experiences up to age 16. This study only assessed emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional neglect, and physical neglect.
- **Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale** (DERS; Gouveia et al., 2022): Evaluates six emotion regulation domains: Non-acceptance, Goals, Impulsivity, Strategies, Awareness, and Clarity.

RESULTS

CORRELATION ANALYSES

Our results showed a statistically significant **positive correlation** between:

- **Emotional abuse** and: physical abuse (*r* = .610, *p* = < .001), sexual abuse (*r* = .229, *p* = < .001), physical neglect (*r* = .307, *p* = < .001), emotional neglect (*r* = .711, *p* = <.001), and **lifetime criminal behavior** (*r* = .283, *p* = < .001).
- **Physical abuse** and: emotional neglect (*r* = .436, *p* = <.001), impulsivity (*r* = .258, *p* = .014), goals (*r* = .251, *p* = .017), awareness (*r* = .223, *p* = .035), clarity (*r* = .248, *p* = .018) and the total **DERS** scale (*r* = .232, *p* = .028).
- **Sexual abuse** and: physical neglect (*r* = .236, *p* = .025), impulsivity (*r* = .291, *p* = .005) and goals (*r* = .228, *p* = .031).
- **Emotional neglect** and: physical neglect (*r* = .343, *p* = < .001), **lifetime criminal behavior** (*r* = .224, *p* = .034), strategies (*r* = .274, *p* = .009), impulsivity (*r* = .316, *p* = .002), goals (*r* = .401, *p* = <.001), awareness (*r* = .306, *p* = .003), clarity (*r* = .261, *p* = .013) e and the total **DERS** scale (*r* = .344, *p* = < .001)
- **Childhood victimization** and: **lifetime criminal behavior** (*r* = .255, *p* = .015) and the total **DERS** scale (*r* = .349, *p* = .001).
- No statistically significant association was found between **difficulties in emotion regulation** and **lifetime criminal and delinquent behavior**.

Table 1. Correlations between ACEs, DERS, and D-CRIM (n = 90)

		1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.	13.	14.
1.	ACE EA	1	.61**	.23**	.71**	.31**	.89**	.09	.36**	.28**	.26*	.28**	.25*	.30**	.28**
2.	ACE PA		1	.17	.44**	.16	.72**	.04	.25*	.26*	.12	.22*	.25*	.23*	.19
3.	ACE SA			1	.19	.24*	0.02	.16	.23*	.29*	.03	.17	.11	.20	.12
4.	ACE EN				1	.34**	.84**	.18	.40**	.32**	.27*	.31**	.26*	.34**	.22*
5.	ACE PN					1	.26**	.02	.15	.05	.06	-.03	-.01	-.05	-.06
6.	ACE Total						1	.15	.42*	.36*	.25*	.30*	.28*	.35**	.26*
7.	DERS NA							1	.49**	.59**	.55**	.57**	.49**	.70**	-.08
8.	DERS GO								1	.84**	.60**	.87**	.78**	.92**	.12
9.	DERS IMP									1	.57**	.83**	.78**	.91**	.05
10.	DERS STRA										1	.59**	.53**	.73**	-.01
11.	DERS AWA											1	.86**	.94**	.10
12.	DERS CLA												1	.88**	-.06
13.	DERS Total													1	.03
14.	D-CRIM LT														1

*Note: **p < 0.001**; p < 0.005*; ACE EA = Emotional Abuse; ACE PA = Physical Abuse; ACE SA = Sexual Abuse; ACE EN = Emotional Neglect; ACE PN = Physical Neglect; DERS NA = Non-Acceptance; DERS GO = Goals; DERS IMP = Impulsivity; DERS STRA = Strategies; DERS AWA = Awareness; DERS CLA = Clarity; D-CRIM LT = Lifetime*

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, as well as physical and emotional neglect, often co-occur (Kim et al., 2017; Matsomoto et al., 2021). This may be attributable to shared familial and contextual risk factors, as child maltreatment often arises from the interplay of caregivers' individual difficulties, parental stress, mental health challenges, family violence, and adverse socioeconomic conditions (Austin et al., 2020). Research on polyvictimization also suggests that **violent**, **unstable family environments** with inadequate protection can expose children to **multiple forms of victimization**, simultaneously or over time (Radtke et al., 2024).

Our findings linked emotion regulation difficulties to emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, emotional neglect, and overall childhood victimization, consistent with prior research (Clinchard et al., 2026; Kumar et al., 2022). Emotion regulation develops through caregiver interactions that validate emotions, support co-regulation, and teach children to identify, tolerate, and manage feelings (Paley & Hajal, 2022). **Abuse**, **neglect**, or **inadequate emotional** support can limit these opportunities and **hinder adaptive responses to distress** (Kim et al., 2023).

Lifetime criminal and delinquent behavior was associated with **emotional abuse and neglect**, consistent with prior research (e.g., Lowe et al., 2016; Moreira et al., 2024). Such experiences may hinder adaptive emotion regulation and secure attachment (Doyle & Cicchetti, 2017). Similarly, Portuguese offenders who experienced more childhood adversities reported more criminal offenses (Matos, 2019). These difficulties may persist into adulthood, i**mpairing emotional and impulse control** and **adaptive responses** to interpersonal conflict (Warmingham et al., 2023). Challenges in emotion regulation, executive functioning, and social development may also increase vulnerability to externalizing and antisocial behaviors, including crime (Font & Kennedy, 2022).

In contrast to previous research (Kalvin & Bierman, 2017; Marques, 2020), our findings did not show a statistically significant association between lifetime criminal and delinquent behavior and emotion regulation difficulties. Although emotion regulation difficulties may increase vulnerability to impulsive and maladaptive behaviors, **criminal and delinquent conduct arises from multiple interacting factors**, including individual characteristics, social environment, peer influences, and socioeconomic circumstances (Ayano et al., 2024). Thus, emotion regulation difficulties alone may not fully account for involvement in criminal or delinquent behavior (Griffith et al., 2024).

Finally, our findings highlight the importance of considering childhood victimization and emotion regulation difficulties in psychological assessment and intervention. **Trauma-informed approaches** focused on emotion regulation may be relevant for adults with histories of childhood victimization, particularly when addressing factors associated with delinquent and criminal behaviors (Ren et al., 2026). Such interventions should prioritize strengthening emotional awareness, improving impulse control, and promoting adaptive coping strategies to manage emotional distress (Saccaro et al., 2024).

REFERENCES