Childhood Victimization and Adult Criminal Behavior

A graduate project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of Master of Social Work

By

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in collaboration with
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May 2016
The graduate project of Lauren Rowsey is approved:

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Dedication

Thank you to my Father, Mother and Brother for supporting me and believing in me.
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Abstract

Childhood Victimization and Adult Criminal Arrests

By

Lauren Rowsey

Master of Social Work

The purpose of this quantitative study is to explore the correlation between childhood sexual abuse and adult criminal arrests. The principle researchers utilized secondary public data from a longitudinal study from the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research. It was found that individuals who had a history of childhood sexual abuse have a higher number of criminal arrests than those who had not experienced childhood sexual abuse. This finding suggests that childhood sexual abuse could be related to adult criminal offenses. It is important to understand that when working with the adult populations, who have been arrested, the traumatic events that may have endured that may be affecting their lives. In addition, society may benefit by becoming more aware of the safety of children and the impact that such trauma can have later on in life.
Introduction

Problem Statement and Research Question

Childhood sexual abuse (CSA) and adult criminal behavior have been studied and linked together for decades now. The objective of this study is to gain more information about the relationship between children, both male and female, who have experienced sexual abuse, under the age of eleven, and the number of crimes that the individual ends up committing as an adult, over the age of eighteen. The purpose of this quantitative study is to use secondary public data to find the correlation between childhood victimization, in the form of child sexual abuse and the number of adult criminal offenses. The principle investigators’ research question is: Is there a correlation between childhood victimization in males, childhood victimization in females and adult criminal behavior?

Society may benefit from this study by becoming more educated as to why adults may come into contact with the justice system. The society may also become more aware regarding the crucial aspect of the safety of children. The social work community will benefit by having a better understanding of the correlation between childhood victimization and adult criminal behavior, as these individuals may be clients one works with in the future. In addition, social work professionals can become more knowledgeable about the possible traumas such individuals have faced and be able to better serve the potential clients. Furthermore, social work practitioners can start advocating for the safety of the children and start allowing communities, schools, parents, and children to be better informed about what is and is not acceptable behavior, and the steps that each individual can take with regards to preventing child
sexual abuse. Participants in the study will not directly benefit from this research study, as there is no recruitment involved due to the use of secondary public data.

**Literature Review**

Childhood victimization is a prevalent aspect in our society. Children who experience victimization, such as child sexual abuse (CSA) are more likely to commit juvenile and adult offenses, than those children who were not sexually abused (McGrath, Nilsen, & Kerley, 2011, p. 488). Finkelhor, Ormrod, Turner, and Hamby (2005) estimated that approximately “…one in twelve children” will be victims of sexual abuse in a given year and found that females were six times as likely to be victims of CSA than males. Glasser et al. (2001) found that although females are more likely to be victims of CSA, males will commit more violent crimes than females due to internalizing the abuse and not seeking help. In addition, Glasser et al. (2001) further indicated that the reason males commit more crimes is due to the higher rate of trauma experienced from CSA because males often feel as though there was something they should have been able to do in order for the abuse not to occur. Darby, Allan, Kashani, Hartke, and Reid (1998) Felson and Lane (2009) indicated that individuals who have experienced CSA have an increased rate at coming into contact with the justice system as a juvenile and/or adult.

Swanston et al. (2003), Gover (2004) and Hussey, Chang and Kotch (2006) conducted studies and found that individuals who experienced CSA were more likely to come into contact with the juvenile justice system than individuals who did not experience CSA. Siegel and Williams (2003) found that females were more likely to be arrested for running away, drug offenses and violent crimes, while Gault-Sherman, Silver and Sigfúsdóttir (2009) indicated that gender did not have an effect on whether an
individual was arrested for violent crimes, if the individual experienced CSA. Felson and Lane (2009) and Wijkman, Bijleveld, and Hendriks (2010) all found that children who were sexually abused were more likely to commit sexual offenses towards children, as an adult. The authors all agree that individuals, who experience CSA, do come into contact with the justice system; however, the way that one may come into contact varies amongst the studies which could be due to the methodological deficits that occur when conducting studies, such as how the variables are defined in each study.

Social leaning theory is a conceptual framework that will help guide the principal investigators study. Social learning theory focuses on how individuals learn, whether they learn through one another, direct observation, modeling or imitation and it also encompasses the cognitive, behavioral and environmental influences that explain human behavior (Bandura, 1977). Social learning theory has been utilized to help address the problem of child sexual abuse. Felson and Lane (2009) and Laws and Marshall (2003) draw on Bandura’s social learning theory and describe that children often model behavior that is observed. Thus, children who have been sexually abused will more likely engage in sexual offenses, whereas children who have been physically abused, are more likely to engage in violent behavior. In addition, Widom (1989) conducted a study in which she examined sexual victimization as a risk factor for further criminal activity and concluded that those children who were sexually abused/neglected were more likely to become delinquents and criminals. Furthermore, Bandura (1986) indicates that the longer a child is exposed to someone else’s behavior, the higher their level of observational learning. Sexual victimization is a result from learning and that learning is increased due to repetition and duration (Bandura, 1986). Burton, Nesmith and Badten (1997) suggest that
there is a significant correlation between children who have experienced sexual victimization and the number of individuals, who these children, end up sexually abusing as an adult.

The principal investigators of this current study are going to utilize social learning theory to help guide their study and analyze their variables. The independent variable focuses on whether or not children experienced sexual victimization and the dependent variable focuses on the adult criminal behavior that these children may have experienced. Social learning theory will assist in the idea of children who observe behavior often model behavior and therefore if a child experienced sexual victimization, which he or she ultimately observed, then he or she is more likely to model that behavior, and essentially commit a crime.

Swanson et al. (2003) and Glasser et al. (2001) identify that measuring CSA within studies can be difficult due to the wide variety of encounters one may have with CSA and that defining CSA varies from one researcher to another. Some researchers have broad definitions, while others have narrower definitions, which make comparing studies difficult. Also, the definition of “children” varies from study to study. In addition, how researchers measure CSA in studies also varies. Siegel and Williams (2003) utilized official records to determine whether an individual was a victim of CSA, while Gover (2004), Hussey, Chang, and Kotch (2006), Felson and Lane (2009), and Gault-Sherman, Silver, and Sigfusdóttir (2009) utilized self-reported surveys to determine whether one had been sexually abused as a child. Utilizing only police records does not account for those individuals who did not report CSA. Furthermore, when analyzing adult criminal offenses, researchers’ methods vary as well. By utilizing only police records, researchers
do not include those individuals who have experienced CSA, committed a crime and were not arrested, while utilizing self-reports may cause individuals to under report or over report CSA and offending. Finally, sample sizes, comparison groups and types of studies vary amongst researchers. Cross-sectional studies have been the most common type of study for this subject matter; however, longitudinal studies are preferred due to the ability to identify the sequencing of events with regards to CSA and offending, more accurately (Swanson et al., 2003; Felson & Lane, 2009). Researchers tend to form comparison groups that are not equivalent with other important variables in their study. When forming comparison groups, important variables, such as race, socioeconomic status, age, and gender need to be thought about, so the comparison group has equivalent variables, and the significant variable difference is abused versus non-abused individuals (McGrath, Nilsen, & Kerley, 2011).

In an effort address the current methodological issues that have existed in previous studies, the principal investigators’ of this current study are using more precise definitions with regards to the variables that are being analyzed. For example, the definition of “child” is being viewed as individuals who are eleven years old and younger; an “adult” is being viewed as eighteen or older. In addition, the principal investigators sample size is considered large compared to previous studies, having 908 individuals. Unfortunately, due to the vulnerability of our population, secondary-data is being used and therefore the official public records and being used and individuals who may have experienced sexual victimization and did not report it, will not be accounted for.
Methods

Participant characteristics.

Secondary data was used for participants.

Sampling procedures.

The sample size of the original study was 2,578 cases; however, the sample size used for the purpose of this research project was nine hundred and eight males and females, who were recruited from the county juvenile court and juvenile probation department's official records in the Midwest metropolitan area (Widom, 1990). There was no consent necessary since the data was available to the public and did not contain identifiable information about the individuals involved (Widom, 1990).

The subjects were individuals who were not only between the ages of 0 and 11 during the years of 1967-1971, but those who were recorded as victims of abuse in the juvenile probation department and juvenile court as well (Widom, 1990). In a study conducted by Widom (1990), the data was provided by the “Data Resources Program of the National Institute of Justice, Sociometrics Corporation.” The cases that will be used for analysis are only a portion of the cases from the original data set, which include individuals who have experienced at least one of the identified forms of sexual abuse.

For the initial data collection, from when the participants were between the ages of 0 and 11, criminal histories, from both adult and juvenile records, of cases with circumstances involving sexual abuse were compared with cases of individuals with no record of abuse, otherwise known as the control group. During the follow-up, after the participants had become adults, the collected data was from records of arrest at not only the local level, but the state and federal level as well (Widom, 1990).
There were no ethical issues for these principal investigators in terms of gathering the data as secondary data, was used for this project. The subjects recruited in the study stood for only a small percentage of abuse cases at the time the data was collected; one of the reasons being that, during that time, child abuse mandating reporting laws had not yet been passed (Widom, 1990). Another reason was that the majority of subjects were more toward the poverty-stricken end of the socioeconomic spectrum, and had more severe types of abuse occurrences is because of reporting biases (Widom, 1990). As with many longitudinal studies, the researcher also ran the risk of being unable to follow up with all initial participants due to factors that might result in a subject not being able to participate, years later, in the second portion of the study.

**Measures**

The principal investigators have identified the independent variable as whether or not the males and females were sexually abused between the ages of 0 and 11. The dependent variable is identified as the number of times those individuals were charged for crimes as an adult. According to the Widom (1990), there were no standardized instruments or common scales used for measure in the study since, in 1986 through 1989, she solely looked for whether or not there were reports of abuse from 1967-1971 in the lives of children between the ages of 0 and 11 in the Midwest Metropolitan Area, and whether or not those same 908 individuals had been arrested for adult criminal charges, as found in official records (Widom, 1990).

According to Widom’s (1990) study, the subcategories that fell under the umbrella of sexual abuse were: “fondling/touching in an obscene manner,” “sexual abuse with no specifics given,” “vaginal penetration with a penis,” “vaginal penetration with something
other than a penis,” “sodomy/anal penetration,” “forced to perform sexual acts,”
“evidence of sexually transmitted disease,” “evidence of sibling incest,” “forced to
perform oral sodomy,” “forced to submit to oral sodomy,” “evidence of parental incest,”
“exposing to child,” and “tried to entice into car.” Adult criminal behavior, however, was
expressed as crimes arrested for as an adult, ages 18 and older (Widom, 1990). In other
words, each occurrence of an arrest as an adult will be counted once as adult criminal
behavior.

**Research Design.**

Secondary public data, retrieved from the Inter-university Consortium for
Political and Social Research, will be used for the purpose of conducting this study. The
data is from a longitudinal study. The study was conducted in the format of a prospective
cohorts research design, which was coordinated with a corresponding control group
cohort (Widom, 1990). Individuals in the study were matched in a way where the main
difference between the individuals who were in the control group and those who were not
was whether or not the individuals were sexually abused between the ages of 0 and 11
(Widom, 1990). With this type of research design, data is gathered from all participants
using questions that are specifically designed by the researchers to acquire detailed and
accurate data about events from before the time the participants reached adulthood, in
order to gain knowledge about the correlation between child sexual abuse and adult
criminal behavior (Prospective and Retrospective Cohort Studies, 2015).
Results

The data was analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) program. Descriptive Analyses were conducted, using both Frequency and Descriptive tests. Frequency tests were done on categorical variables including group (non-abused and abused), gender (female and male), race (Black, White Hispanic, and Unknown), and year of birth (covering years 1950-1974). A descriptive test was done on the number of arrests, which was a continuous variable in the study.

Characteristics of Demographic Variables (N=1575)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Group</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-abused</td>
<td>667</td>
<td>42.3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abused</td>
<td>908</td>
<td>57.6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>798</td>
<td>50.6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>777</td>
<td>49.3</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Race</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>515</td>
<td>32.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>1041</td>
<td>66.1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>.3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Year of Birth</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950-1954</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.1</td>
<td></td>
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<td>1955-1959</td>
<td>442</td>
<td>28.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>1960-1964</td>
<td>713</td>
<td>45.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>1965-1969</td>
<td>389</td>
<td>24.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>1970-1974</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>1.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.1</td>
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</table>

| Number of Arrests  | 1.16| 3.47|

Table 1 (refer to Appendix) displays the descriptive analyses done with the variables in the study. Out of the 1576 subjects involved in the study, 667 (42%) of the
individuals were not sexually abused during childhood, between the ages of 0 and 11. The remaining 908 (58%) of the individuals had experienced a form of sexual abuse between the ages of 0 and 11. In terms of gender, there was almost an equal number of male and female subjects in the study, with 777 (49%) of the subjects being males and 798 (51%) being females. With regards to race, the majority of the subjects were White, comprising of 66% of the total subjects, followed by Blacks at 33% and Hispanics at less than one percent. One percent of the subjects' race was unknown. The subjects' year of birth was grouped in five year increments, starting at 1950 until the year 1974 (i.e., 1950-1954, 1955-1959, etc.). Nearly half (45%) of the subjects were born between the years 1960-1964. The mean number of arrests was relatively low for the sample size ($M=1.16$, $SD=3.47$).

Correlations Among the Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Variables</th>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Year of Birth</th>
<th>Arrests</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Group</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Gender</td>
<td>-0.013</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Race</td>
<td>0.092*</td>
<td>-0.003</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Year of Birth</td>
<td>0.012</td>
<td>0.072*</td>
<td>0.032</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Arrests</td>
<td>0.088*</td>
<td>0.262*</td>
<td>-0.066</td>
<td>-0.149*</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Significance at the 0.05 level

Table 2 (refer to Appendix) displays the correlations between the various variables provided in the study. The main purpose of this study is to find out whether or not there is a correlation between a history of childhood sexual abuse (between the ages of 0 and 11) and the number of adult criminal arrests. Chi-Square analyses were performed to examine the association between two categorical variables. There was a significant relationship between race and history of sexual abuse, $\chi^2 (1, N=1575)=15.908$, 
p=.001. Whites were found to have a greater history of childhood sexual abuse than any other race. There was no significant relationship between year of birth and history of sexual abuse, $\chi^2 (1, N=1575)=9.665$, p=.917. No significant-association was found between gender and history of sexual abuse, $\chi^2 (1, N=1575)=.255$, p=.614. Pearson’s Correlation showed a positive correlation between number of arrests and history of sexual abuse, $r=.09$, n=1575, p < .001, which means that the children with a history of sexual abuse had more number of arrests as an adult than those who had no history of childhood sexual abuse. Gender has a significant positive correlation with number of arrests, $r=.26$, n=1575, p<.001. Males were found to have more arrests then females. Race has a significant negative correlation with number of arrests, $r=.07$, n=1575, p=0.01. The results found that Whites had more arrests than Blacks, Hispanics, and those with races unknown. Year of birth has a significant negative correlation with number of arrests, $r=.15$, n=1573, p < .001. It was found that those born between 1954-1964, the older group, had more arrests than those born between 1965-1971, the younger group.

As indicated in the data, the principal investigators found that there is a higher correlation with males than females in regards to a history of childhood sexual abuse and the number of adult arrests. These results correspond with our initial hypothesis that there is a positive correlation between history of childhood sexual abuse and number of adult arrests.
Discussion, Implications, and Limitations

Discussion

The findings from this study mean that there may be negative long-term effects related to childhood sexual abuse. Not to say that childhood sexual abuse is the cause of why an individual comes into contact with the law, but having experienced this form of trauma as a child may be linked to the crimes committed later in life. Studies conducted by Swanston et al. (2003), Gover (2004) as well as Hussey, Chang, and Kotch (2006) found similar results and concluded that those who experienced childhood sexual abuse had a higher chance of coming into contact with the justice system than those who did not have such experiences as a child. Individuals with a similar history might go from being the victim as a child, to becoming the perpetrator as an adult, and therefore, receiving jail time for their committed crimes, which is consistent with the findings in Felson and Lane (2009) and Wijkman, Bijleveld, and Hendriks (2010) studies. This entails that in order to put an end to this cycle of “victim and perpetrator,” it might be beneficial to bring attention to an individual's past to understand their present behavior and, in this case, criminal record.

It was also found that Whites were most prone to being arrested as an adult when compared to the rest of the races in the study; however, this could be due to the lack of races other than Whites in the study, and so further speculation regarding this finding would not be comprehensive, and therefore, incorrect. To better understand how race plays a role in this study, further investigation would need to be done. In regards to gender, there was a higher correlation with males than with females in terms of which group had a higher number of arrests amongst the subjects in the study, even though there
were slightly more females who were sexually abused as a child. This finding is inconsistent with that of the study conducted by Gault-Sherman, Silver and Sigfúsdóttir (2009), which found that gender did not play a role on the quantity of adult criminal arrests in regards to individuals who were sexually abused during their childhood years. In its entirety, this study exhibits the fact that distress on emotional, physical, or mental levels might not immediately affect individuals who have experienced trauma such as sexual abuse; however, this distress may lead to behavior that negatively impacts the individuals' life in the future.

**Implications**

The findings of this study imply that certain childhood experiences, such as sexual abuse, may result in a higher chance of coming into contact with the justice system as an adult. It is important for social work practitioners to become knowledgeable about the different populations that one may work with and be able to empathize with the individuals. A social work practitioner working with adults in the criminal justice system may need to be able to be ready to explore childhood victimization if it comes up with the individual. In addition, starting early on to advocate and educate for the safety of children and what is and is not appropriate behavior is crucial. It is important that children feel comfortable to be able to tell an adult if he or she is being abused, so that the child can be in a safe and healthy environment. Furthermore, social work practitioners have an opportunity to explore more into this population by conducting research on the other effects that this population might encounter aside from being in the criminal justice system such as posttraumatic stress disorder or if the individual who experienced childhood victimization is drug or alcohol dependent. Also, researching the effects of the
rate of which the abuse occurred and for how long and if there is a difference between those individuals who were abused once versus those individuals who were abused multiple times across a year or two year period.

**Limitations**

There were a few limitations of this study. For example, this study included the sample size being majority of White individuals rather than an even number represented for all races. There were 1,041 Whites in the sample size, which comprised 66% of the total number of individuals. The secondary data utilized was from a densely White populated area and therefore the results may have differed if the principal investigators examined data from another area which was more evenly populated across races; or if another race was more prevalent in an area, such as Hispanic or Blacks, then the results may have reflected the number of arrests being associated with that race. In addition, the principal investigators identified that although there was a control group, individuals in that control group may have been victims of sexual abuse and did not report the abuse and therefore the control group may have been flawed.
Conclusion

The initial hypothesis was supported by the results from this study. It is crucial to take into consideration an individual's environment and upbringing and not let it be overshadowed by his or her biology. It can be helpful in regards to better understanding a friend, acquaintance, client, and so forth. When comparing the subjects from this longitudinal study, results showed that those who were sexually abused as a child had a higher number of criminal arrests as an adult than those who were not victimized. The literature supported these results. Due to these findings, the principle researchers concluded that having a history of childhood sexual abuse can be related to having criminal arrests as an adult. Social workers should be mindful of the potentially life-altering actions that can be made by individuals who have experienced trauma such as having been sexually abused as a child.
References


Appendix A

ADDENDUM – Childhood Victimization & Adult Criminal Behavior

Childhood Victimization & Adult Criminal Behavior is a joint graduate project between Lauren Rowsey and Ani Mkrtchyan. This document will explain the division of responsibilities between the two parties. Any additional information can be included in a separate document attached to this Addendum page.

Lauren Rowsey is responsible for all the following tasks/document sections:

- Composed the Literature Review Section by reading through articles based on the independent and dependent variable of study
- Identified any areas of need or improvement from my counter parts section by proofreading all of her drafts

Ani Mkrtchyan is responsible for all the following tasks/document sections:

- Composed the Methods section by utilizing the code book from the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) for our topic
- Identified any areas of need or improvement from my counter parts section by proofreading all of her drafts

Both parties shared responsibilities for the following tasks/document sections:

- Both parties identified topics of interest and decided on a Capstone topic
- Found secondary data using the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR)
- Downloaded SPSS database on the computer and inputted data (variables) into SPSS
- Descriptive Analyses were conducted, using both Frequency and Descriptive tests with SPSS (Chi-Square and Pearson Correlation tests)
- Planned consultations to discuss SPSS results were scheduled with our Committee Chair to assist in analyzing the results
- Tables were created to identify the findings precisely from the tests ran in SPSS
- Composed the Findings & Analysis Section based off the tables and consultations with our Committee Chair
- Identified key points of the research findings and analysis to create the Abstract
- All sections were reviewed and edited by both parties to ensure accuracy of information, findings, and grammatical errors
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