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# Reliability and validity of the psychopathy checklist: Youth version in a UK sample of conduct disordered boys

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## Abstract

The Psychopathy Checklist: Youth Version (PCL:YV) has been devised for use with adolescents. Although this measure has been validated in Canadian and US samples there are few reports on its validity in UK samples. We examined the validity of the PCL:YV in 115 adolescent males in secure care and young offender institutions. We found high reliability ratings. As predicted the PCL:YV correlated with indices of antisocial behaviour, and externalising pathology on the Child Behaviour Checklist (CBCL). The PCL:YV was a modest predictor of institutional violence and rule breaking behaviour at 3 month follow-up. The current findings support previous research that suggests that psychopathy is a construct that has reasonably consistent external correlates in juveniles and adults.

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*Keywords:* Psychopathy; Adolescents; Psychopathy checklist: Youth version; Reliability; Validity

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## 1. Introduction

The construct of psychopathy, which is characterised by a constellation of interpersonal, affective and behavioural characteristics, is now well established in the assessment of adult criminal

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offenders (Hare, 1998). In recent years, there have been a number of developments in the assessment of this construct in adolescents (Forth & Mailloux, 2000; Forth, Kosson, & Hare, 2004) but there are relatively few studies looking at its validity. Indeed, there has been significant debate about the utility and stability of this construct through the lifespan but particularly in adolescence (Edens, Skeem, Cruise, & Cauffman, 2001; Hart, Watts, & Vincent, 2002; Seagrave & Grisso, 2002; Skeem & Cauffman, 2003). Key concerns centre on the reliability and validity of current assessment tools, the developmental appropriateness of these measures and how closely the construct mimics that in adulthood. Some researchers (e.g. Frick, 2002; Lynam, 2002) argue that personality traits are relatively stable and that the external correlates of psychopathy are similar across the lifespan. Others (e.g. Edens et al., 2001; Seagrave & Grisso, 2002), suggest that as adolescence is a period of considerable developmental change, when individuals are more sensation seeking and impulsive; the assessment of “juvenile psychopathy” may result in a high false positive rate for psychopathy resulting in negative implications for the young person.

To date, the most extensively studied adolescent assessment of psychopathy is the Psychopathy Checklist: Youth Version (PCL:YV; Forth & Mailloux, 2000; Forth et al., 2004). As many previous studies cited in Forth and Burke's (1998) review of the field used earlier versions of this measure, it is now timely to look at the reliability and validity of the recently published PCL:YV (Forth et al., 2004). Little work has focused on the factor structure of the PCL:YV. Early studies suggested it had a two-factor structure (see Forth & Burke, 1998) similar to that reported in the initial adult literature (Harpur, Hare, & Hakstian, 1989). However, recent work in the adult literature has suggested that the Psychopathy Checklist-Revised may have a three-factor (Cooke & Michie, 2001), or indeed a four-factor structure (Parker, Sitarenios, & Hare, 2003). The factor structure of the recently published PCL:YV (Forth et al., 2004) has not yet been established but Kosson, Cyterski, Steuerwald, Neumann, and Walker-Matthews (2002) report that a three-factor model proved to be the best fit for their data.

As studies using earlier versions of the PCL:YV have used different cut-off points for the assessment of psychopathy there are no accurate international comparisons on prevalence rates. There is, however, evidence that youths with marked psychopathic traits are more prolific and violent offenders, have an earlier onset of antisocial behaviour (Forth, 1995; Gretton, McBride, Lewis, O'Shaughnessy, & Hare, 1995; Toupin, Mercier, Dery, Cote, & Hodgins, 1996; Brandt, Kennedy, Patrick, & Curtin, 1997; Spain, Douglas, Poythress, & Epstein, 2004), and greater levels of substance misuse problems than those without these traits (Mailloux, Forth, & Kroner, 1997; Forth & Burke, 1998; Murrie, Cornell, Kaplan, McConville, & Levy-Elkon, 2004; Corrado, Vincent, Hart, & Cohen, 2004).

Recent work also suggests that the current version of the PCL:YV is predictive of future offending (Corrado et al., 2004; Gretton, Hare, & Catchpole, 2004). As many of the reported validation studies have focused on Canadian or US samples we examined the validity of the PCL:YV in a sample of male young offenders in the UK. Specifically, we examined the relationship between PCL:YV scores and indices of psychopathology, antisocial behaviour and impulsivity, and examined the predictive validity of the PCL:YV for institutional violence and rule breaking behaviour at 3-month follow-up in incarcerated offenders. We hypothesised that we would find positive correlations between psychopathy scores and measures of impulsivity, antisocial and externalising behaviours. We also predicted that psychopathy score would significantly predict institutional behaviour at 3-month follow-up.

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