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Psychopathology and delinquency in adolescents: a descriptive and developmental perspective

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Abstract

The current article presents a review on psychiatric pathology in delinquent adolescents. The putative developmental significance of this co-occurrence is discussed within Moffitt's [Psychol. Rev. 100 (1993) 674] developmental framework on antisocial behavior. Articles on psychopathology in delinquent adolescents were retrieved through search engines (MEDLINE, Psychlit) and by exploration of references in those articles. Substantial evidence is at hand that delinquent adolescents have higher rates of externalizing and internalizing disorders when compared to adolescents in the general population. Although substantial limitations hamper interpretation of the findings, the marked similarities across a diversity of samples from different countries suggest that the findings are fairly generalizable. Evidence was found for differences in prevalence and developmental significance of psychiatric pathology between adolescent limited (AL) offenders and life-course persistent (LCP) offenders. Although psychopathology was more severe in LCP offenders, AL offenders still had significant and potential harmful levels of psychopathology. These findings emphasize the necessity of developing mental health services to delinquent adolescents and the necessity of adequate diagnostic and therapeutic interventions in these adolescents.

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1. Introduction

Antisocial behavior and delinquency by minors is a major public health problem. The extent of the problem is illustrated by the abundant attention it receives from politicians, media makers, mental health workers, and a variety of academics. Although decades of scientific research aimed at understanding the phenomenon of adolescent delinquency has resulted in the recognition of many environmental and individual risk factors (Frick, 1998; Rutter, Giller, & Hagell, 1998), the relationship with psychiatric pathology in particular remains largely unexplored. The current article aims at summarizing the existing knowledge on the overlap between delinquency and psychiatric pathology.

2. Selection of articles on delinquency and psychiatric pathology

Articles included as relevant for describing ‘psychiatric pathology’ in ‘juvenile delinquents’ are listed in [Table 1](#). Beforehand, inclusion criteria were defined as follows:

- The total sample had to be larger than 50 participants and
- A semistructured/structured interview and a standard classification system were required for making diagnoses.

Because most psychiatric disorders of childhood have rather low prevalences (below 10%), a minimum of 50 participants had to be included for studies to be reviewed. Although this is still a low number, it was anticipated that higher requirements would exclude valuable studies and result in a low number of studies that could be included.

Electronic databases (MEDLINE, Psychlit) were used to search for multiple combinations of criminality, delinquency, offenders, and related terms, and psychopathology, mental disorder, psychiatry, and specific disorder names. The detection of relevant articles was complicated because most search term combinations resulted in long lists of articles, e.g., delinquency AND psychiatric disorder resulted in 1797 references (MEDLINE with 0–18 age limit) and delinquency and depression in 164.

Therefore, each reference and abstract of a list was checked. Subsequently, references were taken from reference lists in the retrieved articles. Since this work was done very carefully and systematically, it seems likely that most relevant articles were discovered. However, the possibility that some were not detected cannot be fully excluded. A number of related articles will be mentioned and/or discussed throughout the text, but only articles meeting the inclusion criteria will be listed in [Table 1](#).

An attempt was undertaken to integrate findings on psychopathology in delinquents within a developmental framework. As an outline, the main developmental model on antisocial behavior in adolescents, the dual taxonomic model described by Moffitt (1993), was chosen. Since this model has adopted a multidisciplinary and holistic approach, it was considered most useful to this work.

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