

Sex differences in overt aggression and delinquency among urban minority middle school students

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Abstract

Given the recent debate over whether differential pathways to overt aggression and delinquency exist between boys and girls, this study examined sex differences in overt aggressive and delinquent acts along with potential differences in precursors (anger, self-control, family disruption) to antisocial behaviors among a sample of urban minority adolescents ($N = 1559$). Using a longitudinal design with data from 6th to 7th grade, results showed that girls had greater increases in rates of aggression relative to boys. Delinquency increased over time for both boys and girls, with boys consistently engaging in more delinquency. Girls and boys did not differ on the level of risk factors experienced except for a greater increase in anger over time for girls relative to boys. Across sex, anger and self-control predicted increases in both overt aggression and delinquency; family disruption also predicted increases in delinquency. Implications for subsequent studies on developmental process and preventive interventions are discussed. © 2006 Published by Elsevier Inc.

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1. Introduction

Research on the development of antisocial behavior, particularly overt aggression (physical and verbal aggression that is both direct and open) and delinquency, has been conducted primarily among boys. This is in part due to lower prevalence rates among girls. Recently however, studies have begun to address sex and gender differences in the etiology of antisocial behaviors and it has been proposed that the study of such differences can lead to a better understanding of the root causes of aggression and delinquency (Moffitt, Caspi, Rutter, & Silva, 2001). In light of recent research, debate has risen over the extent of sex differences in antisocial acts and whether there are differential pathways to both delinquency and overt aggression for boys and girls (Loeber & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1998; Moffitt et al., 2001; Zahn-Waxler, 1993; Zoccolillo, 1993). The current study extends this line of research by examining potential sex differences in the predictive validity of anger, self-control, and family disruptions on increases in overt aggression and delinquency among young urban adolescents.

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1.1. Sex differences in aggression and delinquency

That males demonstrate greater overt aggression and delinquency has been well established in the literature (e.g., Coie & Dodge, 1998; Eagly & Steffen, 1986; Hyde, 1984) with aggressive/delinquent behaviors observed to peak during adolescence (Coie & Dodge, 1998). National data (Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, 2004) show over two-fifths (41%) of high school boys report being in a physical fight at least once in the past year as compared to 25% of girls. In addition, 27% of high school boys report carrying a weapon to school whereas this behavior is reported by only 7% of high school girls. Rates of assault and gang membership among 12 to 16 year olds show similar differences, with 23% of boys and 12% of girls reporting assault and 6% of boys versus 3% of girls reporting gang membership (Snyder & Sickmund, 1999). However there is a growing sense that female delinquency and overt aggression is on the rise or, at least, that the difference between boys and girls is narrowing (see Odgers & Moretti, 2002 for a review).

Rates of delinquent behaviors and violence for females have shown an increase in recent years and are approaching the rates for males. From 1980 to 2001 juvenile arrests increased proportionately more for females than males. This is particularly true for violent crimes, with aggravated assault having increased by 24% for females, yet decreased by 21% for males. In addition, simple assault increased by 66% for females but only by 18% for males. Sex differences were also found in trends for less serious forms of delinquency, with vandalism having increased by 7% for females and decreased by 32% for males. Weapons possession decreased but with differential rates by sex: Only 8% for females and 37% for males (Snyder, 2003). Similar trends have also been found among Canadian adolescents (Leschied, Cummings, Van Brunshot, Cunningham, & Saunders, 2001; Odgers & Moretti, 2002).

While interest has recently turned to the development of aggression among adolescent girls, much of this work has been on indirect, relational or social aggression (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Galen & Underwood, 1997) and not on overt or physical aggression or delinquency. Further, the majority of studies that have examined physical aggression and delinquency among girls have used either cross-sectional data (DiNapoli, 2003; Salmivalli & Kaukiainen, 2004) and/or have included only high-risk girls (Brennan, Hall, Bor, Najman, & Williams, 2003; Herrera & McCloskey, 2001). The current study examined change in overt aggression and delinquency as boys and girls transition through their first year of middle school.

While both overt aggression and delinquency fall under the general rubric of antisocial acts and, according to Problem Behavior Theory (Jessor & Jessor, 1977), share a similar etiology, recent studies have found that some problem behaviors vary with sex of the child whereas others do not. Cheong and Raudenbusch (2000) found delinquency to vary with both age and sex, with older adolescents and boys exhibiting greater delinquency, whereas aggression was similar across age and sex categories. On the other hand, Broidy et al. (2003) found etiologic differences by sex for delinquency but not aggression. Therefore, despite their similarities, it is important to distinguish between aggressive and delinquent behaviors when examining potential differences between male and female children and adolescents.

1.2. Sex differences in risk factors

In their seminal study of antisocial disorder among a cohort of New Zealanders from birth to adulthood, Moffitt et al. (2001) found few sex or gender specific risk factors in the etiology of aggression or delinquency. Risk factors assessed in the study included maternal characteristics (such as mother's age at first birth, IQ, and mental health problems), family adversity, neurocognitive deficits, behavioral factors (e.g., temperament, hyperactivity, internalizing), and peer relationships. Overall, these risk factors predicted antisocial behavior in both girls and boys. However, boys experienced more cumulative risk factors than girls, thereby accounting, in large part, for their greater engagement in antisocial acts.

1.2.1. Family disruption

Moffitt et al. (2001) did find that family adversity was a slightly stronger risk factor for boys than girls. However, other studies have found that antisocial girls frequently come from homes without two residential parents and from homes with numerous parental changes (see Silverthorn & Frick, 1999 for a review). Claims have been made that home environment, including frequent disruptions in household structure, is a more important predictor of aggression for girls than boys, but these claims have not been well-tested (Kruttschnitt, Gartner, & Ferraro, 2002). The current study examines whether associations between a recent family disruption and overt aggression or delinquency are moderated by sex of the child.

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