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## Child Abuse & Neglect



# Delinquency, depression, and substance use disorder among child welfare-involved adolescent females



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### ABSTRACT

Although adolescents with delinquency are known to have higher-than-average rates of depression or substance use disorder (SUD), research on the topic is inconsistent. It remains unclear whether depression or SUD leads to delinquency, whether delinquency leads to depression or SUD, or whether there is bi-directionality. Utilizing the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (Wave I: 2008–2009; Wave II: 18 months later;  $N = 5872$ ), we used logistic regression to predict depression from delinquency (and vice versa), and SUD from delinquency (and vice versa). After inclusion of control variables, we found that females with minor theft in Wave I were more than 4 times as likely (adjusted odds ratio [aOR] = 4.34; 95% CI: 1.10–17.16) as females without minor theft to be depressed in Wave II, and those with public disorder in Wave I were almost 3 times as likely (aOR = 2.74; 95% CI: 1.03–7.30) as those without public disorder to have SUD in Wave II. Overall delinquency also predicted depression or SUD, and SUD predicted delinquency. Practitioners could address risk for depression or SUD among child welfare-involved adolescent females by focusing on overall delinquency or on specific types of delinquency (minor theft for depression and public disorder for SUD) and by offering interventions (e.g., cognitive-behavioral psychotherapy) that have been shown to be effective in preventing depression or SUD. In addition, with respect to our finding that SUD predicts delinquency among adolescent females, practitioners can help prevent delinquency by offering interventions (e.g., intensive outpatient treatments) that have well documented effectiveness in addressing SUD.

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Several theories of delinquency (Zembroski, 2011), including anomie, social structure, and strain theory, suggest that traditionally disadvantaged populations such as child welfare-involved adolescents can sometimes enhance their economic and social status by engaging in criminal activity. Such activity is often accompanied by substance use disorder (SUD) or depression (Angold, Costello, & Erkanli, 1999; Boesky, 2002; Capaldi, 1991, 1992; Capaldi & Stoolmiller, 1999; Coccozza and Skowrya, 2000; Greene et al., 2002; Steiner & Cauffman, 1998; Stoep, Evens, & Taub, 1997; Teplin, Abram, McClelland, Dulcan, & Mericle, 2002; Wasserman, McReynolds, Larkin, Fisher, & Santos, 2002; Wolff & Ollendick, 2006). However in relation to child welfare-involved adolescents or even among adolescents more generally, the ways in which delinquency relates to SUD or depression are unclear. For example, evidence suggests that early SUD can lead to delinquency (Brook, Whiteman, Finch, & Cohen, 1996), but other studies suggest that the opposite is true (i.e., delinquency can lead to SUD: Deitch, Koutsenok, & Ruiz, 2000; Elliott, Huizinga, & Menard, 1989; Kandel, Davies, Karus, & Yamaguchi, 1986). Similarly, some studies suggest that depression can lead to delinquency (Hawkins et al., 1998; Mallet, Stoddard-Dare, & Seck, 2009; Overbeek, Vollebergh,

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Meeus, Engels, & Luijpers, 2001), but other researchers make the opposite claim (Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992; Rohde, Lewinsohn, & Seeley, 1991). Still other investigators (Ge, Best, Conger, & Simons, 1996; Kofler et al., 2011; Lahey, Loeber, Burke, Rathouz, & McBurnett, 2002; Rohde et al., 1991; Weisner & Kim, 2006) examine two-way trajectories, such as the ways in which depression can lead to delinquency and vice versa. However evidence on this bi-directionality is mixed. Some studies (Guibord, Bell, Romano, & Rouillard, 2011; Hops, Lewinsohn, Andrews, & Roberts, 1990) found that delinquency predicts depression but not vice versa, but other studies (Beyers & Loeber, 2003) indicate that the reverse is true (i.e., depression predicts delinquency but not vice versa). Thus it is unclear whether depression or SUD leads to delinquency, or whether the opposite is true, or whether both are true.

Using the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being-II (NSCAW: Wave I: 2008–2009; Wave II: 18 months later:  $N = 5872$ ; National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect, 2011), our study sought to untangle relationships between delinquency, depression, and SUD among adolescents. We therefore used delinquency as an explanatory variable in some analyses and as an outcome in other analyses.

In addition, whereas most studies examine delinquency as a whole and its relation to depression or SUD, we sought to differentiate the specific types of delinquent behaviors (e.g., felony assault, minor theft) that most increase vulnerability for adverse outcomes. In other words, we focused on both overall delinquency and on specific offenses in order to address differences in choice to study one versus the other. For instance, even though overall delinquency is investigated frequently, some evidence (U.S. Department of Justice, 1991) suggests that types of specific offenses differ in males versus females. Similarly, one study (Colins, Vermeiren, Schuyten, & Broekaert, 2009) found that SUD was common in all types of delinquent behavior, but it was much more common among property offenders (present in 86%). Thus there is evidence to support focus on both general delinquency and on specific offenses. In relation to adolescents, we therefore hypothesized that some types of delinquent behavior are associated with depression or SUD to a greater extent than other types of delinquent behavior. Perhaps practitioners can address needs of youth with specific law violations as a way of complimenting service provision for delinquency as a whole. In short, without overlooking the problem of delinquency more generally, a focus on only a few high-risk delinquent behaviors might be especially helpful in efforts to proactively address adolescent depression or SUD.

Furthermore, our study differed from many studies on the topic by focusing on child welfare-involved youth. Because of reported maltreatment (i.e., allegations of child abuse or neglect) and because of the introduction of child welfare professionals into the lives of these children (i.e., increased access to practitioners in social service systems), child welfare-involved youth are likely to differ from the larger population of youth (largely without child abuse or neglect) or from youth in juvenile justice or child mental health systems (who may or may not have been involved in the child welfare system). Child welfare-involved youth have heightened rates of delinquency, depression, and SUD (Currie & Tekin, 2006; Mersky & Reynolds, 2007; Stuewig & McCloskey, 2005; Wall & Kohl, 2007).

## Gender differences and female delinquency

All of our analyses are gender-differentiated because of well-documented differences between male and female adolescents in depression, SUD, and delinquency. We present only our findings on females. Most males were not depressed, very few had both depression and delinquency, and SUD and delinquency were unrelated. These findings are in themselves interesting. In males, there does not appear to be an association between delinquency and either depression or SUD.

In relation to females, recent national statistics underscore growing crime rates among adolescents. For instance, between 1980 and 2000, arrests for young females have increased by 35% compared to an 11% decrease among young males (Snyder, 2002). Moreover, in relation to male adolescents with delinquent behaviors, studies suggest that a greater number of female counterparts have severe mental illness (Dakof, 2000; Espelage, Holt, & Henkel, 2003; McCabe, Lansing, Garland, & Hough, 2002; Myers, Burket, Lyles, Stone, & Kempf, 1990; Timmons-Mitchell et al., 1997; Ulzen & Hamilton, 1998). There is substantial deliberation about the extent to which knowledge generated from male-focused samples generalizes to female populations (Miller, Malone, Dodge, & the Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 2010). Although some scholars argue for the application of male-driven findings to female delinquent behaviors (Bloom, 2003; Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2004; Silverthorn & Frick, 1999), others suggest that existing models are inadequate to shed light on adolescent female behaviors (Fergusson & Horwood, 2002; Moffitt, Caspi, Rutter, & Silva, 2001).

Nevertheless, female delinquency is clearly an important problem that spans mental health, substance abuse, child welfare, and juvenile justice systems. Yet little is known about the relationship between delinquency, depression, and SUD among female adolescents, as most studies have focused on males only (Miller et al., 2010), and greater specificity is needed on how depression or SUD can lead to particular types of delinquent behavior (or vice versa) among young females with delinquency.

## Study purpose

Among child welfare-involved females, we sought to determine whether delinquency predicts depression or SUD, whether depression or SUD predicts delinquency, or whether there is bi-directionality. Given aforementioned findings on the bi-directionality of relationships between depression, SUD, and delinquency, we hypothesized that we would find the associations illustrated in our conceptual framework (see Fig. 1). We also conjectured that specific types of delinquent

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