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## The role of verbal intelligence in becoming a successful criminal: Results from a longitudinal sample<sup>☆</sup>

Cashen M. Boccio<sup>a,\*</sup>, Kevin M. Beaver<sup>a,b</sup>, Joseph A. Schwartz<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> College of Criminology and Criminal Justice, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL 32306-1127, USA

<sup>b</sup> Center for Social and Humanities Research, King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

<sup>c</sup> School of Criminology and Criminal Justice, University of Nebraska at Omaha, USA

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### ABSTRACT

Intelligence has been linked with success across a wide array of life domains. To date, however, relatively little research has examined whether intelligence may predict criminal success—that is, engaging in criminal behaviors, but escaping detection and arrest. The current study addresses this gap in the literature by examining the associations among verbal intelligence, criminal involvement, and criminal justice processing (i.e., arrest) using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health). Our findings reveal that verbal intelligence is associated with criminal justice processing, wherein individuals with higher verbal intelligence scores are more likely to avoid arrest for criminal behavior when compared with individuals with comparatively lower verbal intelligence scores. We discuss the implications of these findings for future research.

### 1. Introduction

Intelligence has emerged as one of the most consistent, robust, and strongest predictors of virtually every type of antisocial outcome. Research has revealed, for instance, an inverse relationship between IQ and self-reported criminal and delinquent behavior, such as drug use and physical violence (Fergusson, Horwood, & Ridder, 2005; Herrnstein & Murray, 1994; Latvala et al., 2009; Lynam, Moffitt, & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1993; McNulty, Bellair, & Watts, 2013). Not only is IQ related to self-reported behavior, it is also associated with official records of criminal justice contact, including being incarcerated, being sentenced to probation, and recidivating (Beaver et al., 2013; Ganzer & Sarason, 1973; Herrnstein & Murray, 1994; Moffitt, Gabrielli, Mednick, & Schulsinger, 1981; Richter, Scheurer, Barnett, & Kröber, 1996; Schwartz et al., 2015).<sup>1</sup> IQ has also been found to be related to measures of criminal conduct across different levels of aggregation, including neighborhood- and prison-level units of analysis (Bartels, Ryan, Urban, & Glass, 2010; Beaver & Wright, 2011; Diamond, Morris, & Barnes, 2012; McDaniel, 2006). Based on all of the available literature,

intelligence appears to be among the strongest predictors of criminal behavior.

Given the amount of research linking IQ to antisocial phenotypes, it is interesting that there has not been more research devoted to examining whether IQ contributes to being a successful criminal—that is, someone who engages in a crime, but successfully escapes detection and apprehension. Part of the reason for the lack of IQ research on this topic has to do with the fact that there has not been much research on successful criminals (McCall, 1978; Watters & Biernacki, 1989; Wright, Decker, Redfern, & Smith, 1993). This is somewhat surprising given that elusive criminals may be among the most dangerous by posing a serious threat to society (Lussier, Bouchard, & Beauregard, 2011). Given the lack of research on successful criminals, there is not an existing knowledge base to draw from in regard to the role that IQ might play in creating successful criminals. Even so, based on findings from multiple fields of study, there are at least three reasons to suspect that IQ would predict being a successful criminal.

First, and most straightforward, IQ has been shown to predict success in almost every domain of life. Whether it is a successful marriage,

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\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [cb13b@my.fsu.edu](mailto:cb13b@my.fsu.edu) (C.M. Boccio).

<sup>1</sup> Much of the existing research on the connection between IQ and criminal involvement has been focused on verbal IQ (Beaver et al., 2013; Ganzer & Sarason, 1973; Lynam et al., 1993; McNulty et al., 2013; Schwartz et al., 2015). However, previous research has also linked performance IQ, full-scale IQ, and other measures of cognitive ability (e.g., spatial reasoning and numerical reasoning) with criminal involvement and involvement with the criminal justice system (Fergusson et al., 2005; Lynam et al., 1993; Moffitt et al., 1981; Schwartz et al., 2015).

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earning a hefty salary, or securing a high-quality employment, IQ tends to be a key predictor, with higher IQ persons being, on average, more successful than lower IQ persons (Deary et al., 2005; Herrnstein & Murray, 1994; Schmidt & Hunter, 2004; Strenze, 2007; Zagorsky, 2007). While it may be somewhat odd to think of a criminal as being successful, there are certainly elements that would align with success in other areas of life. Success, for criminals, would entail engaging in a crime without being arrested. That is why offenders go to great lengths to conceal their identity, such as by wearing masks or trying to eliminate physical evidence that would tie them to a crime. Seen in this way, one measure of criminal success is whether the criminal was able to complete the crime and avoid detection and apprehension by the criminal justice system.

Most criminal offenses are committed relatively impulsively, without much forethought and planning (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). Perhaps this is part of the reason why rates of being a successful criminal are not higher than what they are. With that said, there are offenders who spend months planning their illegal offenses and approach crime with a significant amount of constraint (Keith, 1989; Raine et al., 1998; Singh & Siddiqui, 2011; Sommers & Baskin, 1993). White-collar offenders, for instance, likely spend more time coordinating their criminal acts than do impulsive violent offenders. Similarly, con artists and professional thieves also appear to spend more time thinking through the crimes to be committed that would be the most lucrative and yet would result in the lowest probability of arrest (Cherbonneau & Copes, 2006; Jacobs & Cherbonneau, 2014; Ouellet & Bouchar, 2016; Vieraitis, Copes, Powell, & Pike, 2015). The ability to plan a crime successfully, to estimate the odds of being apprehended accurately, and to execute the crime effectively would all hinge, in large part, on having a relatively high IQ. If these types of planned crimes result in a lower chance of being arrested, then it stands to reason that higher IQ offenders would be more successful at being a criminal than lower IQ offenders.

Second, findings from official crime data indicate that, while a significant amount of crimes are successfully solved, a vast amount of crime goes unsolved (Paré, Felson, & Ouimet, 2007; Roberts, 2008; United States Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2013). The fact that so many offenders are able to escape detection and arrest strongly suggests that something has to account for such variation. There are numerous possibilities that could be at play. Perhaps this variation is inherently built into the criminal justice system and it simply is not all that effective in identifying offenders (Keel, Jarvis, & Muirhead, 2009; Paré et al., 2007). Almost certainly, some of the variation is random, wherein criminals are more or less likely to be apprehended based on chance factors (e.g., a police officer driving by at precisely the same time a crime is occurring). But most applicable to the current study is that there are likely individual-level factors that explain at least some of the variation in the chances of being arrested for a crime. While there are certainly a wide range of potential individual differences that might explain this variation, perhaps the most likely one is IQ.

The argument that IQ might be linked to the probability of being arrested has been advanced previously and is widely referred to as the differential detection explanation (Feldman, 1977; Hirschi & Hindelang, 1977; Moffitt & Silva, 1988; Stark, 1975). The differential detection explanation argument posits that the reason that persons with lower IQs appear to be more criminal than persons with comparatively higher IQs is because they are more likely to be arrested for their crimes. Why?—according to this explanation, criminal offenders with lower IQs are less able to escape detection and thus are more likely to be processed through the criminal justice system than offenders with higher IQs (Hirschi & Hindelang, 1977; Moffitt & Silva, 1988). The evidence to date on this possibility has been somewhat mixed. Most studies have revealed results that are inconsistent with differential detection explanation (Hirschi & Hindelang, 1977; Moffitt & Silva, 1988); however, some studies have provided some support in favor of it

(Yun & Lee, 2013). If there is at least some differential detection that occurs as a result of IQ, then higher IQ offenders would ultimately be more successful at being a criminal when compared to their lower IQ counterparts.

Third, it is possible that IQ is related to being a successful criminal because the types of crimes committed may vary as a function of IQ. If criminals with lower IQs commit crimes with higher arrest clearance rates than offenders with higher IQs, then they will be more likely to be arrested. According to the most recent data, there is tremendous variation in arrest clearance rates by crime type (Paré et al., 2007; United States Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2013). Overall, 46.8% of all violent crimes and 19.0% of all property crimes were cleared by arrest in 2012 (United States Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2013). There is even significant variation within these two general crime types (i.e., property and violent). For instance, the arrest clearance rates for the violent crimes of murder and rape are 62.5% and 40.1% respectively, whereas the arrest clearance rates for the property crimes of larceny-theft and burglary are 22.0% and 12.7%, respectively (United States Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2013). What that necessarily means is that if IQ is related to the type of crime being committed, then arrest rates and, as a result, criminal success would likely vary across the IQ spectrum.

To date, however, there has been very little quantitative evidence bearing directly on the types of crimes committed by high-IQ vs. comparatively low-IQ offenders. The research that does exist is far from unequivocal and there does not seem to be much consistency in the pattern of results published on IQ and crime type. In one study, the findings revealed that high IQ offenders actually had a higher prevalence rate for most types of offenses when compared with a control group (Oleson, 2016). This same study also showed that there were not any significant differences between high IQ offenders and the control group on the seriousness of the crime that was committed. Of course, there are some types of crimes, such as white-collar crimes, where high IQ offenders are likely to commit the vast majority of crimes. When taken together, though, the results on the link between IQ and crime type do not provide any clear-cut evidence of a consistent association. But given the paucity of research on this topic, the possibility that IQ is related to crime type remains an open-empirical question and thus could potentially provide a reason why IQ is related to being a successful criminal.

The current study is designed to examine directly the potential association between IQ and rates of success for criminal offenders. To our knowledge, this is the first study to examine this issue in this way. Importantly, the goal is not to test the alternative explanations for the potential association between IQ and being a successful criminal; rather, the study is focused on establishing whether there is or is not an association. To address this possibility, we analyze data drawn from a longitudinal and nationally representative sample of American youth.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Data

This study uses data drawn from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health). Add Health is a longitudinal nationally representative sample of more than 90,000 American adolescents that was originally collected during the 1994–1995 school year. Three subsequent waves of data have been collected from a subsample of the original respondents over the last two decades (Udry, 2003). The first wave of the study, completed when respondents were between the ages of 12 and 21, asked questions covering a broad array of topics including family structure, daily activities, and delinquent involvement. Importantly, during the first wave, respondents were administered the Picture Vocabulary Test (PVT) test which assesses verbal intelligence. The second wave, administered one year after the

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