



Intelligence is associated with criminal justice processing: Arrest through incarceration [☆]



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ABSTRACT

Findings flowing from empirical research consistently indicate that IQ is associated with criminal involvement, with persons of relatively lower IQ being more likely to engage in various types of crime when compared with persons of relatively higher IQ. As with all research, however, there are a number of limitations with the existing literature that may bias the IQ–crime connection in unknown ways. Specifically, previous research has generally analyzed sub-samples drawn from non-nationally representative samples, has relied on a narrow range of criminal justice measures, has not fully examined whether the IQ–crime link is observed across demographic subgroups, and has not always ruled out the effects of potential confounds. The current study is designed to overcome the most serious of these limitations and offer new evidence of the link between IQ and criminal involvement. Analysis of data drawn from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) provides strong evidence indicating that IQ and crime are linked even after addressing various shortcomings of previous research. Limitations of the study are discussed and directions for future research are offered.

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1. Introduction

Criminal behavior is a relatively common occurrence in the US with crime rates hovering around 3345 per 100,000 persons

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during the past 5 years or so (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2010). Even though crime has been on a downward trend recently, rates of crime in the US far exceed those of virtually every other industrialized country. Annually, nearly 20 out of every 1000 US citizens are victims of some type of crime and nearly 5 out of every 1000 are victims of a serious violent physical offense (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2011). Besides the physical and emotional trauma that can result from criminal victimizations, there is also a tremendous financial toll that is shouldered by taxpayers. A recent analysis revealed, for instance, that each murder can cost the US approximately \$17.25 million with some estimates reaching \$24 million per murder (DeLisi et al., 2010). While murder has the highest associated costs, other violent crimes such as rape/sexual assault (\$240,776 per offense), aggravated assault (\$107,020 per offense), and robbery (\$42,310 per offense) also have

extremely high per offense costs (McCollister, French, & Fang, 2010). Overall, studies suggest that the annual cost of all crime in the United States likely exceeds \$1 trillion (Anderson, 1999). Given the serious implications that result from crimes—especially serious violent crimes—there has been a significant amount of research devoted to developing prevention and intervention programs that can reduce criminal involvement. Much of this effort has been by etiological research that attempts to uncover the causes of crime. Although a wide range of criminogenic factors have been identified that span multiple levels of measurement (Beaver & Wright, 2011), individual-level factors have emerged as some of the strongest and most consistent predictors of crime and other types of antisocial behaviors (Denno, 1990; Farrington, 1997; Herrenkohl et al., 2000).

Of all the individual-level factors that have been shown to be associated with crime, IQ has surfaced as one of the more commonsensical and often cited factors (Neisser et al., 1996). All else equal, persons who score relatively low on IQ tests are significantly more likely to have been arrested for an official crime, to self-report involvement in criminal behavior, and to also hold and endorse pro-criminal attitudes and values when compared with persons who score relatively higher on IQ tests (Gabielli & Mednick, 1980; Hirschi & Hindelang, 1977; Lynam, Moffitt, & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1993; McNulty, Bellair, & Watts, 2013; Moffitt, Caspi, Silva, & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1995; Moffitt, Gabrielli, Mednick, & Schulsinger, 1981). These associations are generally considered robust as they have been detected across a wealth of heterogeneous samples, using different measures of IQ, employing various methodological approaches, and analyzing the association with unique units of analysis (Diamond, Morris, & Barnes, 2012; Fergusson, Horwood, & Ridder, 2005; Levine, 2011; Moffitt & Silva, 1988). There are, however, a number of limitations with the existing literature that must be addressed in order to establish more convincingly that IQ is a criminogenic risk factor. Below, we identify and briefly discuss five of the more pressing shortcomings with the existing literature examining the IQ–crime nexus.

First, most of the samples that have been analyzed to test for the association between IQ and crime consist of prison inmates, psychiatric patients, sex offenders, or other non-nationally representative groups of people (Diamond et al., 2012; Guay, Ouimet, & Proulx, 2005; Hanson, Scott, & Steffy, 1995; Holland, Beckett, & Levi, 1981; Holland & Holt, 1975). The main exception to this rule, however, is the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) which consists of a nationally representative sample of males and females (McNulty et al., 2013). These data were analyzed by Herrnstein and Murray (1994) who detected a significant inverse association between IQ scores and criminal involvement (but see Cullen, Gendreau, Jarjoura, & Wright, 1997). Importantly, the NLSY79 data are somewhat outdated and the findings that were generated with this sample may not necessarily generalize to youth who were raised in the 1990s or 2000s. Without evidence generated from contemporary, nationally representative samples, it is difficult to establish whether IQ is (or remains) associated with criminal involvement in the general population during current times.

Second, the measurement of criminal involvement in most studies frequently relies on either official measures of arrest and conviction or self-reports that measure the frequency with which the respondent engaged in criminal behavior. While both

types of measurement strategies have been shown to be relatively valid and reliable (Brame, Fagan, Piquero, Schubert, & Steinberg, 2004; Krohn, Lizotte, Phillips, Thornberry, & Bell, 2011; Thornberry & Krohn, 2000), they are also both host to a number of limitations. For example, official crime reports only capture those crimes that led to the arrest and conviction of the criminal. Given that most crimes go undetected or unsolved by law enforcement (Booth, Johnson, & Choldin, 1977; Hindelang, Hirschi, & Weis, 1981; O'Brien, Shichor, & Decker, 1980), it is possible that IQ is associated with detection of criminal behaviors, but not the actual etiology of crime (Fischer et al., 1996; Herrnstein & Murray, 1994; but see Moffitt & Silva, 1988). Self-report surveys, in contrast, are host to reporting bias whereby subjects either intentionally or unintentionally misstate the number of crimes that they have committed over the examined time period (Krohn et al., 2011; Morris & Slocum, 2010). If IQ scores are systematically linked to reporting bias, then studies that use self-reports to measure the frequency of criminal involvement may produce biased results. An alternative to these two approaches is to use self-reports to measure contact with the criminal justice system. With this type of measurement, subjects are asked to report on whether they had been arrested, convicted, and/or incarcerated for any type of crime. By using this approach, it is possible to try to isolate the effects of IQ on being processed through the criminal justice system; an event that is unlikely to be misremembered or forgotten. Herrnstein and Murray (1994) used this measurement strategy, but their research is one of the key exceptions to the general rule of using either self-reports or official data. As a result, the IQ–crime association may be affected in unknown ways because of the measurement strategies that are typically used. More research using alternative measures of criminal involvement is needed to address this possibility.

The third main limitation with the existing literature is the failure to examine thoroughly whether the IQ–crime link is observed across race/gender subcategories. Both IQ and criminal involvement are known to vary significantly across races and between males and females (Bell, Willson, Wilman, Dave, & Silverstone, 2006; Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2003; Halpern & LaMay, 2000; Lauritsen, Heimer, & Lynch, 2009; Lynn, 2010; Rushton & Jensen, 2010). In respect to race, African Americans, for example, have IQ scores that are, on average, about 1 standard deviation below the IQ scores of Caucasians (Gottfredson, 2004; Rowe, 1994). At the same time, although African Americans make-up only about 13.6% of the population, they account for approximately 38% of inmates housed in federal and state prisons (Rastogi, Johnson, Hoeffel, & Drewery, 2011; Sabol, West, & Cooper, 2009). With respect to gender, empirical evidence has revealed that males and females differ in IQ scores, and that these differences emerge primarily in relation to verbal IQ scores and spatial IQ scores, with females scoring higher on the former and males scoring higher on the latter (Hyde & Linn, 1988; Voyer, Voyer, & Bryden, 1995). There are also tremendous differences in arrest rates between males and females, where male arrest rates are approximately 15 times higher than female arrest rates (Sabol et al., 2009). This male–female difference in arrest is most pronounced for serious violent offenses. What is interesting is that even though IQ and crime stratify by race and gender, there has been a paucity of research that examines the race/gender subcategories to determine whether the IQ–crime

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