



Language impairments among youth offenders: A systematic review



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ABSTRACT

Low levels of verbal intelligence have long been associated with risk for early onset antisocial behavior, however considerably less is known about the deficits in specific language skills that may characterize antisocial youth. Youth offenders represent a particularly high priority group for research into such deficits, as the juvenile justice system involves a range of high-stakes situations that rely upon the application of language skills. Our aim was to conduct a systematic review of the evidence currently available regarding the discrete language skills of youth offenders, spanning structural, pragmatic, expressive and receptive language domains. Seventeen studies meeting search criteria were identified, 16 of which reported on independent samples. Findings from these studies provide considerable evidence that youth offenders perform poorly on language measures relative to age matched peers. Study results are examined in relation to three key questions: (1) How strong is the association between language impairments and youth offending? (2) Are some language skills or modalities more impaired than others in youth offender populations; and (3) What biopsychosocial factors have been shown to influence the relationship between language impairments and youth offending? Implications for policy and practice are discussed, along with directions for future research.

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1. Introduction

In most western societies youth offenders comprise a small proportion of the population who are associated with disproportionately high rates of social disadvantage (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2014). Contact with the juvenile justice system exposes these youth to a range of experiences (police interviews, court proceedings, therapeutic intervention programs) that draw heavily on expressive and receptive language skills (Lavigne & Van Rybroek, 2011). However, there is growing evidence, particularly from Australia (for example, Snow & Powell, 2011a), the United Kingdom (for example, Bryan, Freer, & Furlong, 2007), and the United States (for example, Davis, Sanger, & Morris-Friehe, 1991), that youth offenders are likely to lack the capability to effectively negotiate such high-stakes language rich situations. Language difficulties may therefore carry major consequences for these youth, by impacting their ability to accurately receive information conveyed to them (for example, legal rights and responsibilities; Rost & McGregor, 2012), or affecting their ability to clearly express information to others (for example, in consultation with legal representatives; Lavigne & Van Rybroek, 2014). Oral language skills are also fundamental to the transition to literacy in the early years of school, so deficits that are not addressed will manifest as academic difficulties during the school years (Snow & Powell, 2011b). Evidence of language impairments in

youth offenders stands to inform the strategies by which juvenile justice and related agencies engage with this high-risk population, however such evidence has been slow to emerge. The major aim of this review was to identify, synthesise, and evaluate, current research evidence concerning associations between language impairments and youth offending.

1.1. Definitions

Youth offenders (juvenile offenders; delinquents) are individuals who have committed criminal acts that have resulted in the imposition of community-based or custodial court orders. Most societies respond to the developmental immaturity of these youth through a juvenile justice system that caters to ages approximately 10 to 18 years (Doolan, 1991; Minister of Justice and Attorney General, 2013; Richards, 2011). Statistics from Australia (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2014), Canada (Munch, 2012), England and Wales (Youth Justice Board, 2014), New Zealand (Ministry of Justice, 2010), and the USA (Puzzanchera & Hockenberry, 2013) reveal that males constitute about three quarters of youth offender populations. In western societies Caucasian youth predominate in juvenile justice statistics. However, certain racial and ethnic groups are disproportionately represented. Notably Indigenous youth, in Australia (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2014), Canada (Munch, 2012), New Zealand (Ministry of Justice, 2010), and the USA (Puzzanchera & Hockenberry, 2013), and black youth, in England and Wales (Youth Justice Board, 2014), and the USA (Puzzanchera & Hockenberry, 2013). Before coming into

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contact with the juvenile justice system, many youth offenders have grown up in circumstances of socio-economic deprivation, been placed in out-of-home (foster) care, and experienced academic disengagement and/or lack of success (Loeber & Farrington, 2000; Maschi, Hatcher, Schwalbe, & Rosato, 2008). Research also reveals that executive function deficits (Beaver, DeLisi, Vaughn, & Wright, 2010), intellectual impairment (Haysom, Indig, Moore, & Gaskin, 2014), mental health problems (Anckarsäter et al., 2007), substance abuse (Lennings, Kenny, & Nelson, 2006), and traumatic brain injury (Moore, Indig, & Haysom, 2014), appear at higher rates in youth offender samples than in the general population. When they come into contact with the juvenile justice system, youth offenders may be assessed and provided with services in accordance with the Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) model (Bonta & Andrews, 2007). This model is based on the principle, and supported by evidence (Dowden & Andrews, 1999), that a reliable match between offender risk and service provision will maximise reductions in recidivism.

Despite the vulnerabilities highlighted in the previous paragraph, youth offenders are required to negotiate a justice system that is highly reliant on language skills. These skills are the auditory-verbal (listening and talking) competencies that individuals gradually acquire from infancy onwards. Language skills can be broadly divided into two categories. Structural skills are rules that relate various levels and combinations of sound to meaning, and include the form (phonology, morphology, syntax) and content (semantics) of language (Paul & Norbury, 2012). Pragmatic skills encompass appropriate use of language in social situations, such as rules of conversational interaction, cultural conventions of language use, and construction of logical narratives. (Bishop, 2000; de Villiers, 2004). When examining language, it is usual to distinguish receptive (comprehension) skills from expressive (speaking) skills, as these represent different modalities of language use (Larson & McKinley, 1995). While language skills usually develop in a steady trajectory, acquisition can be disrupted as a result of biological and/or environmental factors (Paul & Norbury, 2012; Tomblin, 1996). The language difficulties that may result from such disruption can impact one, or a combination of skill domains (Larson & McKinley, 1995), and are estimated to affect 5 to 10% of the general population (Tomblin, 1996). If detected during the developmental period, language difficulties attract a variety of labels, including, but not limited to, specific language impairment (SLI), developmental language disorder (DLD), and language learning impairment (Bishop, 2014).

1.2. Developmental perspectives on language and offending

The acquisition of both language skills and social cognition are grounded within caregiver-child attachment during development, and influenced by socio-economic status (SES). Research indicates that children with secure attachment relationships have greater competency in language skills than those with insecure attachment (van IJzendoorn, Dijkstra, & Bus, 1995). Further, evidence suggests that the attachment-language relationship is mediated by interactive experiences. These are of particular relevance for individuals from low SES backgrounds whose caregivers may be less likely to communicate in ways that contribute to language development (Hoff, 2003). Similarly, studies emphasise the role that poor parental supervision and management techniques play in the development of antisocial in children (Sousa et al., 2011). Research suggests that low SES is associated with caregiver-child interaction patterns, such as inconsistent use of discipline and reduced use of effective monitoring, that are associated with delinquency (Sampson & Laub, 1994). Therefore, not only are low SES backgrounds over-represented in the developmental experiences of youth offenders (Maschi et al., 2008), these have also been linked to less enriched early language environments (Roy, Chiat, & Dodd, 2014).

The importance of developmental experiences is also reflected in the theoretical explanations of an association between language impairments

and antisocial behavior. Redmond and Rice (1998) investigated two contrasting theoretical frameworks in their research involving analysis of parent and teacher ratings of the socio-emotional development of 17 children with specific language impairment (SLI) and 20 non-SLI age-matched peers (ages 6 and 7 years). Their findings, and evidence from other research involving children with SLI (for example, Fujiki, Brinton, & Todd, 1996), support the Social Adaptation Model (SAM). This model suggests that some youth with language impairments develop antisocial behavior because their limited language skills create difficulties processing and negotiating social interactions. However, these authors emphasise that their findings do not exclude an alternative framework for understanding language-behavior associations—the Social Deviance Model (SDM). This model posits that innate psycho-emotional impairment influences the development of appropriate language skills, potentially due to a common underlying cognitive impairment. Evidence supporting the SDM can be found in research involving examination of language impairments in children with diagnosed socio-emotional disorders (for example, Camarata, Hughes, & Ruhl, 1988), and research revealing that children with SLI produce similar scores on socio-behavioral measures to psychiatric populations (for example, Baker & Cantwell, 1987). In addition to explanations similar to those investigated by Redmond and Rice, Bishop (1997) discussed a third potential theoretical framework for understanding language impairment-antisocial behavior associations. The Limited Processing Model conceives of both language and social difficulties developing on the basis of more general cognitive constraints which impact the development of both skills. Bishop suggested that evidence to support this view can be found in research into the pragmatic language skills of young people with SLI (for example, Bishop & Adams, 1991). While theoretical models provide a possible basis on which to interpret relationships between language and behavior, evidence does not support a universal explanation for the association. The multifactorial and interconnected nature of linkages between communication and social competence (Brinton & Fujiki, 2005) mean that these three theorised pathways and possibly others play a role in explaining comorbidity between language and behavior difficulties in some particularly at-risk individuals.

Evidence of the existence of a relationship between language impairments and antisocial and delinquent behavior is, however, well established. Cross sectional studies reveal significant language impairments in youth excluded from school (Clegg, Stackhouse, Finch, Murphy, & Nicholls, 2009), youth with conduct disorder (Gilmour, Hill, Place, & Skuse, 2004), and institutionalized, antisocial youth (Warr-Leeper, Wright, & Mack, 1994). Similarly, longitudinal studies reveal an increase in antisocial problems with age among those with diagnosed language impairments (Beitchman et al., 2001; Lindsay & Dockrell, 2012). Notably, one study revealed that language impairment at age 5 predicted self-reported adolescent delinquency (Brownlie et al., 2004). These findings are reinforced by research into verbal ability (an individual's ability to use language to analyze and solve problems) in youth offenders. Studies have shown that youth offenders display substantially poorer verbal intelligence quotient (VIQ) than performance intelligence quotient (PIQ) scores on Wechsler scales, indicating a specific deficit in cognitive skills related to language (Cornell & Wilson, 1992; Culbertson, Feral, & Gabby, 1989; Romi & Marom, 2007).

1.3. Key questions for the current review

The research outlined above demonstrates clear associations between language impairments and antisocial behaviors, as well as low verbal ability and youth offending. In order to more precisely characterise the relationship between discrete language skills and the extreme antisocial behavior characterised by youth offending, this review will address three research questions. Firstly, how strong is the association between the presence of language impairments and youth offending? Secondly, is there evidence that some language skills or modalities are

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