



Socioeconomic status and antisocial behaviour among children and adolescents: A systematic review and meta-analysis



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Socioeconomic status (SES) is a major correlate of antisocial behaviour.
- Higher family's social status relates to lower levels of conduct problems.
- Informant and behavioural subtype moderate this relationship.
- Studies lack the consistency of antisocial behaviour conceptualisations.

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ABSTRACT

Previous research on the association between socioeconomic status (SES) and child and adolescent antisocial behaviour has produced mixed findings showing variation in the strength of association. This systematic review and meta-analysis aimed to summarise evidence on the relationship between socioeconomic status and broadly conceptualised antisocial behaviour, investigating variation across a range of antisocial subtypes and other potential moderators, including age, sex and informant. We identified 133 studies containing data suitable for effect size calculation, and 139 independent effect sizes were analysed (total N = 339868). The global meta-analysis showed that lower family socioeconomic status was associated with higher levels of antisocial behaviour. Moderation analyses revealed this relationship was stronger where callous–unemotional traits were the outcome, and where antisocial behaviour was reported by parents or teachers rather than self-reported. The relationship between family SES and antisocial behaviour, however, was independent of higher-level constructs such as national income inequality. These results indicate that SES can be considered a robust correlate of broadly conceptualised antisocial behaviour but the strength of this relationship may depend on the antisocial subtype under investigation and the design of the study.

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1. Introduction

The relationship between SES and child and adolescent mental health is not well-established and research has produced mixed findings, particularly in the area of child and adolescent antisocial behaviour. Antisocial behaviour is a heterogeneous concept encompassing physically aggressive behaviours such as fighting and bullying; rule-breaking behaviours such as lying, stealing, vandalism, arson and running away from home; oppositional behaviours, including irritability and headstrongness; and more severe behaviours associated with lack of empathy and guilt. The construct of antisocial behaviour spans many disciplines, including sociology, criminology and psychology, with numerous context-dependent definitions, labels and assessment methods. For example, criminologists often focus on delinquency and violent or property offending described as a violation of legal or social norms. Psychologists and psychiatrists are more focussed on psychosocial functioning, often using the clinical symptom areas of Oppositional-Defiant Disorder and Conduct Disorder (*American Psychiatric Association, 2013*). Despite these distinct approaches and research traditions, antisocial subtypes show substantial overlap, for example with rule-breaking behaviours often being described as delinquent. The heterogeneity of operationalisations of antisocial behaviour creates problems for meta-analytic studies aiming to summarise evidence on antisocial behaviour (*Rhee & Waldman, 2002*).

Across definitions, antisocial behaviour is associated with high social, interpersonal and financial costs, not only to affected families and communities but across society (*National Institute for Health & Care Excellence, 2013*). The annual average financial cost per family of severe antisocial behaviour during childhood (i.e., symptoms within a psychiatric range) was estimated at £15382 in 1999 (inflation corrected for 2013, approximately £23260 and €29256), with 37% of the burden taken by families (*Knapp, Scott, & Davies, 1999*). As such, antisocial behaviour poses a significant challenge to policy-makers in many developed societies.

Numerous studies have found that children from low-SES backgrounds show higher prevalence rates or mean symptom counts of behavioural problems (*Amone-P'Olak, Burger, Huisman, Oldehinkel, & Ormel, 2011; Costello, Compton, Keeler, & Angold, 2003*). However, this relationship between SES indicators and antisocial behaviour measures has not always been reported and its strength has substantially varied across studies. Previous reviews have addressed the relationship between SES and child development (*Bradley & Corwyn, 2002*) and one other study has conducted a meta-analytic review (*Letourneau, Duffet-Leger, Levac, Watson, & Young-Morris, 2013*). This meta-analysis only included studies that employed composite measures of SES, such as the Hollingshead's Index (*Hollingshead, 1975*), and therefore excluded many studies that relied on a single SES indicator, such as family income or parental education. Consequently the review identified only eight studies, all addressing aggression, and reported overall a small significant relationship with SES (Hedges's $g = .06$). To date, therefore, a systematic and comprehensive meta-analysis of the relationship between SES and antisocial behaviour that includes all SES indices and can address the heterogeneity in antisocial behaviour has not been conducted. Here we summarise findings concerning the relationship between SES and child and adolescent antisocial behaviour, addressing both the broad antisocial construct and more specific antisocial subtypes. Given the comprehensive nature of this meta-analysis, heterogeneity within the results is expected. Therefore, certain study and sample

characteristics that might moderate the strength of the SES–antisocial behaviour relationship were investigated as follows:

1.1. Sex

Significant sex differences in antisocial behaviour, with boys having higher prevalence rates or symptom levels than girls, have been consistently reported in the literature (*Lahey et al., 2000; Maughan, Rowe, Messer, Goodman, & Meltzer, 2004; Odgers et al., 2008*). More recently, it has been suggested that sex may act as a moderator of the relationship between SES and antisocial behaviour (*Letourneau et al., 2013*). However, evidence concerning this potential moderation effect is scarce and inconsistent, with a significant detrimental effect of low SES in increasing the likelihood of antisocial behaviour having been found in boys but not girls (*Veenstra, Lindenberg, Oldehinkel, De Winter, & Ormel, 2006*) but also in girls but not boys (*Henninger & Luze, 2013*). It remains unclear both whether, and how sex moderates the relationship between SES and antisocial behaviour, and a comprehensive study is needed.

1.2. Age

Age of onset remains one of the best established methods to characterise the heterogeneity within antisocial behaviour, based on *Moffitt's (1993)* differentiation between the 'life-course persistent' (LCP) and 'adolescence-limited' (AL) antisocial subgroups. The two groups are hypothesised to have distinct aetiology, developmental course, and prognosis. Recently it has been argued that differences between the two groups are more quantitative than qualitative (*Fairchild, Goozen, Calder, & Goodyer, 2013*), as argued in *Moffitt's* original theory formulation. Later taxonomy studies indicated that there may exist an additional group of childhood-limited antisocial behaviour that does not persist into adolescence; the group consists of the so-called 'recoveries'-individuals who desisted from antisocial behaviour (*Moffitt, Caspi, Dickson, Silva, & Stanton, 1996; Moffitt, Caspi, Harrington, & Milne, 2002*). These three subgroups have rarely been operationalised in research on the relationship with SES. Nonetheless, age remains logically correlated with the original LCP and AL distinction (i.e., younger children must be early-onset and older children are a combination of early- and late-onset antisocial behaviour). Previous research suggests that age may moderate the relationship between SES and antisocial behaviour (*Letourneau et al., 2013*), and behavioural genetics studies showed that effects of environmental factors on antisocial behaviour decrease with age (for example, *Burt & Neiderhiser, 2009*). As such, it could be hypothesised that the strength of the relationship between SES and antisocial behaviour might decrease as children get older. This, however, has not been examined in relation to a wide range of antisocial subtypes.

1.3. Antisocial subtypes

Heterogeneous operationalisations of antisocial behaviour may be responsible for many discrepancies between studies. It remains unclear whether these behavioural subtypes show similar associations with SES or whether they moderate the nature or magnitude of the relationship. One classification system common to many disciplines differentiates between aggressive and non-aggressive antisocial behaviours; both psychological and criminological constructs map on to this classification. Previous research suggests there exist meaningful etiological

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