



Psychopathy and violent misconduct in a sample of violent young offenders



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ARTICLE INFO

Available online 24 June 2015

ABSTRACT

Purpose: Most prior research on psychopathy and institutional misconduct/violence occurs with adult samples and comparatively less is known about the nature of this relationship among serious, violent juvenile offenders. **Methods:** A subsample of 159 male serious and violent offenders interviewed in custody facilities in British Columbia, Canada as part of the Vancouver Incarcerated Serious and Violent Young Offender Study were used. Bivariate, ROC-AUC, and Poisson regression models examined the association between psychopathy and violent misconduct and exposure to violence with different specifications and separately for Caucasian and Aboriginal youth. **Results:** Overall, youth with stronger symptoms of psychopathy evince more misconduct, are more violent, and break more institutional rules than their less psychopathic peers; however, the effects are relatively small, and ROC-AUC models reveal generally unimpressive classification accuracy.

Conclusions: Although psychopathy is a risk factor for violent misconduct, its effects are measurement-variant (e.g., total scores, factor scores, and item scores) and differ for Caucasian and Aboriginal serious offenders.

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Introduction

Psychopathy is a personality disorder characterized by a suite of affective, interpersonal, lifestyle, and behavioral deficits that are significantly associated with diverse externalizing behaviors and allied dysfunction in social roles (e.g., relationship problems, family strife, educational failure, unemployment, and receipt of public assistance). The basic traits of psychopathic personality—narcissistic, irresponsible, antagonistic, impulsive, callous, stimulation seeking, manipulative, low self-regulation—comport well with the personality and behavioral functioning of many of the more serious delinquent and criminal offenders not only in the United States (Vassileva, Kosson, Abramowitz, & Conrod, 2005; Vaughn & DeLisi, 2008; Vaughn, Howard, & DeLisi, 2008), but also worldwide, including Canada (Corrado, Vincent, Hart, & Cohen, 2004; Lee, Vincent, Hart, & Corrado, 2003; Rice, Harris, & Cormier, 1992; Vincent, Vitacco, Grisso, & Corrado, 2003), Sweden (Grann, Långström, Tengström, & Kullgren, 1999), England, Germany, Belgium, Spain, and Portugal (Hare, Clark, Grann, & Thornton, 2000). In sum, the construct of psychopathy is intimately connected with the construct of criminality.

As such, the prevalence of psychopathy in correctional populations, especially violent prison inmates, is dramatically higher than the general

population. Moreover, the prevalence of symptoms associated with psychopathy is significantly higher among violent prisoners than those in the general population. Correctional clients including prisoners are more likely to score in the clinical range (e.g., >30 on the PCL-R; Hare, 2003) than persons in the community, with the most serious and violent prisoners scoring towards the upper-bound of the PCL-R (Kiehl, 2014). This means that prisoners—namely adult inmates—who tend to have higher scores on the PCL-R and other instruments, are prone to commit more misconduct while in confinement (for a review, see Edens, Magyar, & Cox, 2013).¹ Indeed, Arbodela-Flórez (2007, p. 375) observed,

“The tendency of psychopaths to display violent and disruptive behavior often leads authorities to make them targets for prompt attention and special measures. Psychopaths consume large amounts of resources in policing, application of justice and special management in correctional systems, including long-term dispositions and incapacitation measures.”

Although the relationship between psychopathy and antisociality generally is established (Corrado, Roesch, Hart, & Gierowski, 2002; DeLisi, 2009; DeLisi & Piquero, 2011; Hare, 1996; Hare & Neumann, 2008), comparatively less is known about the linkages between psychopathic personality among juvenile offenders and their institutional misconduct.² These studies are reviewed next.

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Institutional misconduct and psychopathy among juveniles

Drawing on diverse sources of data, a modest number of prior studies have examined the interrelationships between psychopathic traits, institutional misconduct, and prison violence among adolescent inpatients and serious juvenile offenders (cf., DeLisi, Neppl, Lohman, Vaughn, & Shook, 2013; McDermott, Edens, Quanbeck, Busse, & Scott, 2008; McDermott, Quanbeck, Busse, Yastro, & Scott, 2008). Based on a sample of severely delinquent boys between ages 13 and 19 who were committed to a residential training facility, Brandt, Kennedy, Patrick, and Curtin (1997) reported significant correlations between psychopathy as measured by the PCL-R and major verbal infractions, major physical infractions, total major infractions, the ratio of negative to positive reviews, and placement in close observation in an intensive supervision program. Drawing on a sample of 160 incarcerated youth between the ages of 14 and 16, Skeem and Cauffman (2003) examined the predictive validity of psychopathy for institutional misconduct using the Psychopathy Checklist: Youth Version (PCL: YV; Forth, Kosson, & Hare, 2003) and the Youth Psychopathic Traits Inventory (YPI; Andershed, Kerr, Stattin, & Levander, 2002). Using ROC-AUC models, they found significant albeit modest linkages between psychopathic features and various forms of institutional misconduct. The PCL: YV total score was predictive of disciplinary action and prison violence. Moreover, YPI total score was predictive of any misconduct, violent/aggressive forms of misconduct, and property/substance infractions. Affective and lifestyle facets of psychopathy were particularly associated with misconduct.

In their review, Edens, Skeem, Cruise, and Cauffman (2001) noted a moderate association between psychopathic traits and institutional misconduct with a correlation of approximately .30. In their analyses of 72 adolescent psychiatric inpatients, Stafford and Cornell (2003) found that patients with higher psychopathy scores on the PCL-R displayed more reactive aggression and more instrumental aggression than those with lower scores on the PCL-R. Murrie, Cornell, Kaplan, McConville, and Levy-Elkon (2004) reported similar correlations in their study of 113 adolescents males admitted to the Reception and Diagnostic Center of the Virginia Department of Juvenile Justice. They utilized four measures of psychopathy (the PCL: YV, staff ratings and self-report versions of the Antisocial Process Screening Device [APSD], and the Millon Adolescent Clinical Inventory [MACI]) and four measures of institutional misconduct including violence while incarcerated, assault with a weapon, assault where the victim required medical attention, and instrumental violence while in custody. Significant correlations were found for each of the four instruments and all forms of institutional violence; however, only PCL: YV scores were significantly associated with all forms of violence.

Substantively similar linkages have also been demonstrated between psychopathic traits, institutional violence, and rule breaking among adolescent males in secure care and young offender institutions in the United Kingdom (Dolan & Rennie, 2006), adolescent males in outpatient sex offender treatment in Canada (Gretton, McBride, Hare, O'Shaughnessy, & Kumka, 2001), and in other samples of institutionalized youth in the United States (Hicks, Rogers, & Cashel, 2000; Spain, Douglas, Poythress, & Epstein, 2004). Finally, Edens and Campbell (2007) conducted a meta-analysis of 15 samples of institutionalized youth that encompassed 1,310 participants. The weighted mean correlations between psychopathic traits and institutional misconduct ranged from $r_w = .24$ for total misconduct, $r_w = .25$ for institutional aggression, and $r_w = .28$ for physical violence, with larger effects found among published studies.

To summarize, numerous prior investigators have shown that detained and institutionalized youth demonstrating higher scores on symptoms of psychopathy are significantly likely to engage in institutional misconduct. However, there are measurement effects where some measures consistently link psychopathy to misconduct (e.g., the PCL: YV) whereas other measures indicate more equivocal and at times, null effects.

Current aim

Most of the research examining psychopathic delinquents and their institutional misconduct utilizes samples from the United States and participants who are Caucasian or African American. The current study extends this literature by utilizing an enriched sample of serious and violent male delinquents the majority of whom are Caucasian or Aboriginal. In addition, the analytical approach centers on violent misconduct and youth who commit violent misconduct at the extremes of the offending distribution measured at the 96th percentile.

Method

Participants and procedures

The current data are a subsample of 159 male serious and violent offenders interviewed in custody facilities in British Columbia, Canada as part of the Vancouver Incarcerated Serious and Violent Young Offender Study. Most of the youth received dispositions for violent or sexual offenses, such as murder, rape, and armed robbery. The index offense for two-thirds of the sample was for an act of violence. Of those whose index offense was not violent, 90.6% reported having committed a prior violent offense. Official information was collected from court and corrections files as well as CORNET, an integrated system used for tracking all offenders in provincial institutions within British Columbia. Self-report information was collected through confidential interviews between the youth and a trained research assistant. PCL: YV ratings were completed by trained researchers based on a series of interviews as well as available file information.

Dependent variables

Violent Misconduct is an additive term comprised of prison fights, prison retaliation, and prison weapons carrying ($M = 6.14$, $SD = 1.89$, Range = 3–12). A dichotomous term describing those at the 96th percentile for violent misconduct was also used ($n = 12$, 7.54%).

Exposure to Violence Scale (Hochstetler & DeLisi, 2005) is a 5-item measure of whether the offender witnessed inmates being victimized or assaulted during confinement ($\alpha = .65$). Exemplar items include “I often witnessed another inmate being sexually assaulted,” and “I often witnessed another inmate involved in physical fights.”

Covariates

Psychopathy was measured with the Psychopathy Checklist: Youth Version (PCL: YV, Forth et al., 2003) which is a 20-item expert symptom-rating scale that assesses psychopathic traits in youth. Ratings are given on 3-point Likert scale from *does not apply to the youth* (0) to *item applies to the youth* (2). Factor scores were calculated according to Hare's 4-factor model that includes Interpersonal (Factor 1, $\alpha = .75$), Affective (Factor 2, $\alpha = .83$), Lifestyle (Factor 3, $\alpha = .63$) and Antisocial (Factor 4, $\alpha = .83$) features. Inter-rater reliability was not conducted for this specific subsample, but in an analysis of inter-rater reliability for the larger sample, intraclass correlation coefficients were within the acceptable range (McCormick, Corrado, Hart, & Cohen, 2008).

Ethnicity is the self-reported ethnic group that the youth feels most a part of. The sample is primarily Caucasian ($n = 95$, 60.1%) and Aboriginal ($n = 44$, 27.9%) with the remaining 19 youth (12%) comprised of other ethnic groups (e.g., Asian, African Canadian, Middle Eastern, and East Indian). Average age of the sample was 15.85 years ($SD = 1.39$, Range = 12–19). Although all youth were multi-problem youth with multiple risk factors, there are some differences between Caucasian and Aboriginal serious juvenile offenders, such as over-representation in foster care (Corrado & Cohen, 2002; Corrado & Freedman, 2011) that justify separate analyses to assess potentially differential roles of psychopathy by ethnicity.

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