



The prevalence of psychopathic personality disturbances among incarcerated youth: Comparing serious, chronic, violent and sex offenders[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Purpose: There is a small but growing body of research on the role of psychopathy in juvenile sex offending. This can be contrasted with a larger and growing body of research examining the presence and prevalence of psychopathy on the development of serious and violent offending behavior among youth more generally. Currently, it remains unclear as to whether JSO may represent specific subgroups of JNSO, particularly in terms of psychopathic personality disturbances.

Methods: The current study examined the dimensions and prevalence of psychopathy using the Psychopathy Checklist: Youth Version (PCL: YV) in a sample of serious and violent incarcerated youth.

Results: The findings indicated that JSO had a significantly higher prevalence of psychopathy compared to violent, non-violent and chronic JNSO in the sample. In addition, there were important similarities and differences across the dimensions of the PCL: YV between JSO compared to specific subgroups of chronic and violent JNSO.

Conclusions: Taken together, psychopathic personality disturbances appear to distinguish antisocial JSO from serious and violent JNSO.

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Introduction

Psychopathy refers to interpersonal, affective and lifestyle/behavioral deficits that have direct relevance for understanding and explaining sex offending. Characteristics of psychopathy, such as deceitfulness and manipulation, lack of empathy, and antisocial lifestyles have all featured centrally in explanations of sexual coercion and sexual aggression (e.g., Cale & Lussier, 2011; Cale, Leclerc, & Smallbone, 2014; Lussier, Proulx, & Le Blanc, 2005; Malamuth, Linz, Heavey, Barnes, & Acker, 1995; Marshall, Hudson, Jones, & Fernandez, 1995; Prentky, Knight, Lee, & Cerce, 1995; Quinsey, Harris, Rice, & Cormier, 1998). Other studies have explored the presence and prevalence of psychopathy among adult sex offenders (e.g., Knight & Sims-Knight, 2003; Porter et al., 2000). Far less attention however has been devoted to the estimation of the prevalence of psychopathy among juvenile sex offenders (JSO). There is a small but growing body of research examining the presence

of psychopathic disturbances among serious and violent youth (e.g., Pardini & Loeber, 2008; Salekin & Lochman, 2008). At the same time, few studies have investigated the presence and prevalence of psychopathic disturbances among subgroups of serious and violent youth (e.g., McCuish, Corrado, Lussier, & Hart, 2014), and more specifically JSO.

This is an important research question considering that there is widespread consensus that JSO are broadly characterized by 'antisocial' and 'non-antisocial' types. Furthermore, antisocial JSO are characterized by substantial heterogeneity in their offending patterns and criminal career trajectories (e.g., Cale, Smallbone, Rayment-McHugh, & Dowling, 2015; Lussier, van den Berg, Bijleveld, & Hendriks, 2012; McCuish, Lussier, & Corrado, 2014). Given the evidence that the presence of psychopathic disturbances are related to serious and violent offending trajectories in youth (McCuish, Corrado, et al., 2014; McCuish, Lussier et al., 2014), the current study takes an important step forward by examining the presence and prevalence of psychopathic disturbances in a sample of incarcerated JSO and comparing this with other types of serious and violent youth.

Psychopathy and sex offending

Several theoretical models of sexual violence and abuse include psychopathy as a key explanatory construct (e.g., Knight & Sims-Knight, 2003; Malamuth, 2003; Seto & Barbaree, 1997). Clinical research has

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long established a connection between the presence of psychopathic traits and sex offending. In fact, psychopathy has been discussed in the context of rape (e.g., Harris, Rice, & Quinsey, 1994), sexual coercion (e.g., Knight & Guay, 2006; Lalumière & Quinsey, 1996), sexual homicide (e.g., Porter, Woodworth, Earle, Drugge, & Boer, 2003), child molestation (e.g., Dorr, 1998), and sadism (e.g., Mokros, Osterheider, Hucker, & Nitschke, 2011). Some have argued that psychopathy characterizes a distinct group of sex offenders where sex offending is a direct consequence of a specific mating strategy characterized by deception, manipulation and sometimes, coercion and violence (Lalumière, Harris, Quinsey, & Rice, 2005). For others, however, psychopathy and psychopathic traits are an integrated part of sexual violence.

Knight and Sims-Knight (2003) proposed an empirically-driven model of sexual violence that recognizes the dimensionality of psychopathy. Knight and Sims-Knight's model suggested the presence of two developmental paths associated with the presence of psychopathic traits. First, the antisocial path, suggests the presence of a group of sex offenders where sex offending is opportunistic and part of a more general, versatile pattern of criminal behavior. In other words, their sex offending may represent another manifestation of their tendency to be aggressive and antisocial in the interpersonal context.

Knight and Sims-Knight's second path, the callous-unemotional path, suggests the presence of a group of offenders that are either not emotionally responsive, or, simply lacking emotional inhibitions in the presence of cues of pain, suffering and distress. According to this path, as a result of the absence of internal emotional inhibitions, callous-unemotional sex offenders are more likely to experience violent sexual fantasies which in turn may further disinhibit their sexual behavior. This is reminiscent of Neil Malamuth's negative emotionality path of sexual aggression whereby individuals characterized by cognitive distortions (e.g., violence is acceptable means by which to solve problems; women are already rejecting me therefore using violence against them will not change anything) and emotions (e.g., humiliation, anger) supportive of violence are more likely to use violence in a sexual context (Malamuth, 1998, 2003). Importantly, in the model of Knight and Sims-Knight, the antisocial and callous-unemotional paths are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Therefore, this suggests the presence of a third path that combines these dimensions and more wholly reflects symptoms of psychopathy. Along these lines, Knight and Sims-Knight made the same hypotheses with respect to juvenile and adult sex offending (Knight & Sims-Knight, 2005).

Psychopathy and juvenile sex offenders (JSO)

The bulk of research on the psychopathy-sex offending link has been conducted with samples of convicted adult sex offenders. There has been far less research conducted with samples of JSO. In incarcerated samples of serious and violent youth, the prevalence of psychopathic disturbances typically ranges from around 10% up to as high as around 50% of youth. This variation could be explained, among other things, by the instruments and cut-off scores used to distinguish psychopathic and non-psychopathic youth, and the nature (e.g., types of institutions) and composition (e.g., males and females) of the samples. Nonetheless, this range in prevalence also reflects the heterogeneity of incarcerated youth populations. Looking across studies using the PCL: YV, Caldwell, Skeem, Salekin, and Van Rybroek (2006) reported an average prevalence of 25% of youth in correctional settings. Higher prevalence rates are typical in samples of incarcerated youth who are primarily violent and persistent in their offending (e.g., Dåderman & Kristiansson, 2003). On the other hand, in a sample of primarily non-violent incarcerated youth, Campbell, Porter, and Santor (2004) reported a much lower prevalence of psychopathy at approximately 9%.

In terms of JSO, the prevalence of psychopathic disturbances is somewhat less clear. One reason for this is that in addition to an overall lack of studies, JSO often compose a minority of serious and violent incarcerated youth and therefore establishing the prevalence of the

disorder is difficult. Nonetheless, in the study of Caputo, Frick, and Brodsky (1999), in 23 JSO the prevalence of callous and unemotional characteristics was 34.8%, compared to 8.9% in violent offenders and 6.9% in non-violent offenders. Lawing, Frick, and Cruise (2010) found a slightly higher prevalence rate of callous and unemotional characteristics in their sample of 150 JSO (approximately 54%). Using the PCL-R, Langström and Grann (2000) reported a prevalence rate of 20% in their Swedish sample of 46 JSO. Finally, Gretton, McBride, Hare, O'Shaughnessy, and Kumka (2001) reported the prevalence of psychopathy was approximately 13% (rated as 'high' psychopathy) in their sample of 220 JSO. Based on these studies, it is difficult to make comparisons to determine whether and to what extent JSO reflect certain subgroups of JNSO in terms of psychopathic disturbances.

There is ample evidence to suggest the presence of an antisocial pathway associated with the presence of psychopathic disturbances among JSO as suggested by Knight and Sims-Knight's model (e.g., Hunter, Figueredo, Malamuth, & Becker, 2003). For antisocial JSO, sex offending has primarily been characterized as the escalation of a violent offending trajectory (e.g., Elliott, 1994; Loeber & Hay, 1994; Moffitt, 1993). For example, Loeber and Hay (1994) conceptualized sex offending in adolescence as the apex of an overt antisocial pathway. In the Dunedin birth-cohort, life-course persistent offenders were those most likely to have committed a sex offense in adolescence (Moffitt, 1993). However, there is reason to suspect substantially more heterogeneity in the qualitative and quantitative offending patterns than is suggested by these earlier accounts. Using a sample of incarcerated serious and violent JSOs, McCuish, Corrado, et al. (2014) provided evidence that sex offending in adolescence was associated with different antisocial pathways; both overt and covert offending patterns. In a prospective longitudinal study of Dutch JSOs, Lussier et al. (2012) used the frequency of offending to identify five non-sexual offending trajectories (i.e., very low-rate, late-starters, adolescent-limited, late-bloomers, and high-rate persisters) and two sexual offending trajectories (i.e., high-rate slow desisters and adolescent limited) from adolescence to adulthood. Similarly, in a sample of clinically referred JSOs in Australia, Cale et al. (2015) identified four general offending trajectories in adolescence based on the frequency of offending (i.e., rare offenders; late-bloomers; low-rate chronic; high-rate chronic) that were differentially related to dimensions of non-violent, violent, and sex offending (i.e., onset, frequency, variety/specialization). Importantly, the presence of an antisocial juvenile sex offender type alone does not imply that these youth are emerging psychopaths.

The second path described by Knight and Sims-Knight (2003), callous-unemotionality, has been subject to far less research in the field of juvenile sex offending. For example, the interpersonal features of the disorder such as manipulation and lying reflect covert antisocial behavior shown to be related to the development of juvenile sex offending (McCuish, Corrado, et al., 2014; McCuish, Lussier, et al., 2014). In terms of the affective features of the disorder, Caputo et al. (1999) found that JSO were more likely to be characterized by callous and unemotional personality characteristics compared to violent non-sexual offenders and non-violent offenders. Similarly, Lawing et al. (2010) found that JSO high on callous and unemotional characteristics had a greater number of victims, higher levels of violence in their sex offenses, and were more likely to plan their offenses compared to JSO who scored lower on these dimensions.¹ Morrell and Burton (2014) found that both narcissism and impulsivity were associated with an increased severity of sex crimes in adolescence. Finally, Parks and Bard (2006) demonstrated that the interpersonal dimension of psychopathy predicted sexual recidivism, whereas the antisocial dimension predicted non-sexual recidivism.

Most of the research conducted on psychopathic disturbances among JSO has been limited to general psychopathy scores. Caldwell, Zimke, and Vitacco (2008) found that psychopathic characteristics predicted both general and sexual recidivism among JSO (see also Parks & Bard, 2006). However, Gretton et al. (2001) found that high

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