



## The role of psychopathic traits and developmental risk factors on offending trajectories from early adolescence to adulthood: A prospective study of incarcerated youth



Raymond R. Corrado<sup>a,b,\*</sup>, Evan C. McCuish<sup>a</sup>, Stephen D. Hart<sup>c</sup>, Matt DeLisi<sup>d</sup>

<sup>a</sup> School of Criminology Simon Fraser University 8888 University Drive, Burnaby British Columbia, Canada V5A 1S6

<sup>b</sup> University of Bergen, P.O. Box 7806, 5020, Bergen, Norway

<sup>c</sup> Department of Psychology Simon Fraser University 8888 University Drive, Burnaby British Columbia, Canada V5A 1S6

<sup>d</sup> Iowa State University 203 East Hall Iowa State University, Ames, IA, United States 50011

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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** Criminal career research has recently found that symptoms of psychopathy are more prevalent among offenders following chronic offending trajectories. In the current study, the ability of psychopathy to predict involvement in chronic offending trajectories above other criminogenic risk factors was examined.

**Methods:** Criminal convictions were measured for Canadian male ( $n = 262$ ) and female ( $n = 64$ ) offenders at each year between ages 12 and 28. Semi-parametric group-based modeling identified four unique trajectories labeled bell-shape offenders (27.9% of sample), slow desisters (28.5%), slow rising chronic offenders (19.0%), and high rate chronic offenders (24.5%).

**Results:** The four and three factor model of the PCL: YV were associated with the most chronic and serious offending trajectory even after controlling for a variety of relevant criminogenic risk factors. Self-reported involvement in weekly physical fights was a significant predictor of trajectory group membership, but most criminogenic risk factors were more informative of the strength of the relationship between higher symptoms of psychopathy and offending trajectories than of a direct effect of a specific risk factor on the unfolding of offending.

**Conclusions:** Interpersonal and affective symptoms of psychopathy were not related to chronic offending. Future research should examine whether these symptoms are related specifically to involvement in violent offending.

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### Introduction

Despite Farrington's (2005) call ten years ago for more systematic attempts at integrating psychopathy into criminological theories, the psychopathy construct has only recently been incorporated within the criminal career perspective. Most research thus far, largely relying on versions of Hare and his colleagues' "gold standard" Psychopathy Checklist (PCL), has focused on shorter-term violent, non-violent, and general recidivism outcomes (Corrado, Vincent, Hart, & Cohen, 2004; Edens & Campbell, 2007; Edens, Skeem, Cruise, & Cauffman, 2001; Salekin & Lynam, 2010; Vincent, Odgers, McCormick, & Corrado, 2008). Although symptoms of psychopathy such as a callous and unemotional disposition, usually combined, were more frequently incorporated into developmental criminology child/adolescent/young adult studies (e.g., Loeber et al., 2001), these symptoms do not encompass the full psychopathy construct. Only two studies have examined the

full psychopathy construct and its relationship with criminal career trajectories in full adulthood (e.g., through age 28; McCuish, Corrado, Lussier, & Hart, 2014) and middle adulthood (e.g., through age 40; Piquero et al., 2012). Although the age demarcations of these two adult stages are somewhat arbitrary, they nonetheless convey fundamental developmental changes associated with not only lifestyle turning points (e.g. legal drinking ages, occupation choices, longer-term intimate relationships), but also as discussed more recently by Corrado and Mathesius (2014), substantial maturation of the adult brain involving executive functioning.

The current study uses a sample of male ( $n = 262$ ) and female ( $n = 64$ ) offenders, initially recruited while incarcerated during a period of their adolescence, to expand on these two trajectory studies. The relationship between symptoms of adolescent psychopathy as measured by the Psychopathy Checklist: Youth Version (PCL: YV) and types of criminal trajectories measured through age 28 is examined while also considering several important criminogenic risk factors. Although there are few studies of this relationship, it is important to review key empirical findings and theoretical implications involving psychopathy. First, concerns regarding the extension of the adult

\* Corresponding author at: School of Criminology Simon Fraser University 8888 University Drive, Burnaby British Columbia, Canada V5A 1S6. Tel.: +1 778 782 3629.  
E-mail address: corrado@sfu.ca (R.R. Corrado).

psychopathy construct to childhood and adolescent developmental stages are discussed.

*Extending the psychopathy construct to childhood and adolescent developmental stages*

Lochman, Powell, Boxmeyer, Young, and Baden (2010) argued that the identification of high-risk subtypes among children and adolescents was a critical initial step in eventually relating child and adolescent manifestations of psychopathy to long-term criminal trajectories. Initial studies in criminology, though not discussing psychopathy specifically, indicated that this construct may have an influence on early-onset antisocial behavior and persistent criminal behavior. Patterson, DeBaryshe, and Ramsey (1989) and Patterson, Forgatch, Yoerger, and Stoolmiller (1998), for example, asserted that early antisocial behavior was a developmental trait that was expressed in different forms at subsequent stages throughout the life course, including chronic offending by age 18. Similarly, Moffitt (1993) and Loeber and Stouthamer-Loeber (1998) labeled individuals following this early onset pathway of serious antisocial behavior and subsequent long term offending as life-course persistent (LCP) offenders. LCP offenders were thought to represent a small group of chronic offenders, roughly less than ten percent of the population, that Wolfgang, Figlio, and Sellin (1972) identified as being responsible for the majority of all crime (also see, DeLisi, 2005; Jennings & Reingle, 2012; Vaughn et al., 2011). Moffitt and Caspi (2001) identified parenting, neurocognitive functioning, and very early child temperament and behavioral problems as key correlates of the LCP subtype. Similarly, although not finding the same early childhood-based temperament risk factors, Aguilar, Sroufe, Egeland, and Carlson (2000) identified high stress single parent families, an early childhood avoidant attachment style, and childhood abuse, including neglect or other forms of inadequate parenting as correlates of this LCP subtype. Along with other developmental life-course criminologists (e.g., Farrington, 1989; Le Blanc & Frechette, 1989; Loeber, Farrington, Stouthamer-Loeber, & White, 2008; Ribeiro da Silva, Rijo, & Salekin, 2012; Vaughn, Howard, & DeLisi, 2008), these initial studies asserted the existence of multiple risk pathways to long term offending, recidivism, and violent offending, with at least one pathway that included childhood onset of antisocial behavioral indicators typical of the antisocial factor included in the various PCL instruments. Vaughn and DeLisi (2008) asserted that the small number of chronic offenders and the small number of individuals with the strongest symptoms of psychopathy was not coincidental; the two groups were hypothesized to be comprised of chronic offender/LCP the same individuals. There were no studies in this initial phase of research, though, that included a validated youth psychopathy instrument and examined its association with criminal trajectories from early adolescence to adulthood.

Two thematic changes occurred that facilitated the abovementioned line of empirical inquiry. Most importantly were the developments of the PCL: YV (Forth, Kosson, & Hare, 2003) and self-administered (e.g., completed by the subject or their parents and/or teachers) child and adolescent psychopathy screening instruments such as the Child Psychopathy Scale (CPS; Lynam, 1997), the Antisocial Process Screening Device (Frick & Hare, 2001), the Youth Psychopathic Traits Inventory (YPI; Andershed, Gustafson, Kerr, & Stattin, 2002), and the Psychopathy Content Scale (PCS; Murrie & Cornell, 2000). As expected, given intense and controversial debate about various validity issues concerning the use of the PCL for adults, especially concerning predictive validity (e.g., tautological concerns regarding the use of antisocial behavior items to predict recidivism; Skeem & Cooke, 2010) and the theoretically justifiable number and labeling of the PCL-R's factor/facet structure (Cooke & Michie, 2001; Hare & Neumann, 2005), the use of the PCL: YV and these other instruments raised even more validity issues. The controversy included ethical concerns regarding the labeling of children and adolescents as psychopaths and premature use

of the PCL: YV as a risk prediction instrument in juvenile/youth justice settings and in sentencing and treatment planning (e.g., Edens et al., 2001; Salekin, Rosenbaum, Lee, & Lester, 2009). In addition, there have been internal validity concerns about children and adolescents completing self-report instruments. A related issue involves the appropriateness of using self-administered instruments in general and community samples of children and youth versus structured instruments for clinical and custodial samples (see Kotler and McMahon (2010) for a comparison of all these instruments and Salekin and Lynam (2010) for broader discussion of these validity issues).

The second theme was the use of these psychopathy instruments in on-going prospective longitudinal studies, such as the 40 year Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development in London, and in more recent longitudinal studies, such as the Pittsburgh Youth Study and the Pathways to Desistance Study. In Canada, the Incarcerated Serious and Violent Young Offender Study utilized the PCL: YV, as did Gretton, Hare, and Catchpole (2004) in their young offender study. Many of these studies as well as others examined the relationship between psychopathy and types of offending, including reactive and instrumental violence, property and violent offending, sex and non-sex offending, relational and overt aggression, institutional misconduct, and short-term (i.e., 1–4 years) (Edens & Cahill, 2007; Salekin, 2008) and shorter-term (e.g., Leistico, Salekin, DeCoster, & Rogers, 2008; the average length of follow-up was 8.56 months) recidivism. However, in these studies, offending was rarely measured through initial developmental stages into adulthood. Additionally, several studies were limited either by (a) their scoring of psychopathy instruments solely based on file information (Gretton et al., 2004), (b) their examination of only a limited number of psychopathy traits (e.g., Loeber et al., 2001), or (c) their use of psychopathy as a dependent variable and criminal/offending trajectories as an independent variable (Piquero et al., 2012).

*Integrating the psychopathy construct within criminal career research: conceptual challenges*

In addition to some of the conceptual challenges previously discussed, three major concerns, related to construct validity and research design, may have influenced the paucity of research on psychopathy and long-term patterns of offending. First, Edens et al. (2001) noted that some symptoms, asserted to be indicative of the adult psychopathy construct, resemble features of normative adolescent personality/behavior. For example, adolescents are typically more impulsive, more sensation-seeking, and more self-centered than adults and therefore the symptoms of normative adolescent development resemble the symptoms of adult psychopathy. For these and other reasons, Edens et al. (2001) recommended that psychopathy measures should not be used to make longer-term predictions concerning criminal behavior. As the criminal career perspective emphasizes the unfolding of criminal behavior across multiple developmental stages, use of psychopathy measures would therefore seem contrary to Edens et al.'s (2001) recommendation. However, Forth et al. (2003) emphasized in their PCL: YV manual that items are to be rated taking into consideration what would be normative for adolescents, rather than what would be normative for adults. As such, equating normative adolescent development with symptoms of psychopathy is only an issue in studies where raters are not properly trained. Furthermore, as noted by Cooke, Hart, Logan, and Michie (2012), in addition to symptom strength, functional impairment should also be taken into consideration when rating symptoms. In effect, current assessment of adolescent symptoms of psychopathy incorporates, rather than ignores, Edens et al.'s (2001) concerns.

A second validity concern pertains to findings indicating that antisocial behavior markers, rather than more traditional interpersonal and affective symptoms of psychopathy, were more strongly associated

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