

# An exploration of the mechanisms underlying the development of repeat and one-time violent offenders

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ABSTRACT

Research on offending behavior has consistently revealed four personality types, including the *primary psychopath*, *secondary psychopath*, *controlled*, and *inhibited*. This review explores the development of violent behavior in each type. The callous unemotional personality of repeat offender *primary psychopaths* is echoed in the offense-specific justifications used by the *controlled* type. The repeat offender *secondary psychopaths* exhibit deficits in executive cognitive control, including impulsivity. Brain dysfunction due to depression in the *inhibited* type also enables impulsive behavior, leading to uncharacteristic violence. Distinct rehabilitation strategies for each of the types are discussed with reference to their developmental trajectories.

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Contents

1. The <i>undercontrolled</i> and <i>overcontrolled</i> personality types . . . . .	310
2. Development of <i>undercontrolled</i> and <i>overcontrolled</i> personalities . . . . .	313
3. Offending behavior . . . . .	316
4. Neurological deficits . . . . .	318
5. Conclusions and implications about the development of violent behavior . . . . .	321
References . . . . .	322

Recent research into offender rehabilitation has considered the heterogeneity of offending behaviors, and the need to tailor rehabilitation for these different types to gain maximum results (Davey, Day, & Howells, 2005). In particular, research on violent offender rehabilitation has refocused on the Megargee (1966, 1979) typology of violent offender personality types (e.g., Chambers, Ward, Eccleston, & Brown, 2009; Davey et al., 2005). The purpose of the current paper is to review the different types of violent offender and explore the corresponding developmental trajectories that lead to violent behavior. The thought processes and neuropsychological abnormalities associated with violence will also be explored. Isolation of qualities pertaining to different types of violent

offender may then aid the tailoring of rehabilitation for specific needs.

**1. The *undercontrolled* and *overcontrolled* personality types**

Offender personality research has been conducted for over 45 years. In particular, the distinction of the *undercontrolled* and *overcontrolled* types is still useful in assessing the development of violent behavior (Megargee, 1966). In a later addition, dissection of *under-* and *overcontrolled* into four types of violent offender enabled examination of distinct personality qualities in relation to violent behavior (Blackburn, 1971). In the first section of this review, these typologies of violent offender will be explored with reference to their specific role in violent behavior.

Research on two distinct types of violent offender began when Megargee and Mendelsohn (1962) used MMPI measures of hostility and impulse control to differentiate between criminals who had, and had not, committed assault. Unexpectedly, they found that assault

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offenders scored higher on a scale measuring the inhibition of aggression. These results led to the interpretation that there were two different personality types capable of committing violent acts with the intent to harm the victim. These types were labeled “chronically overcontrolled” and “undercontrolled” (Megargee, 1966; Megargee & Mendelsohn, 1962). The *overcontrolled* type was characterized as being inhibited to express aggression. This inhibition would then lead to the build-up of frustrations over time, to the point that breached their control, leading to an extreme and uncharacteristic aggressive act. The *undercontrolled* type, in contrast, did not display any inhibition about their expression of anger and tended to react with aggression whenever provoked. Megargee hypothesized that the violence of the *overcontrolled* type would often be more extreme than that of the *undercontrolled* type due to the long-term build-up of frustrations, but may be equaled if the *undercontrolled* type perceived severe provocation. This prediction was supported when Megargee and Cook (1967) found that extremely violent assault offenders were more controlled and less aggressive compared with moderately violent assault offenders and non-violent offenders. Importantly, this difference arose because the extreme violent group consisted of both *over-* and *undercontrolled* offenders, whereas the moderate violent and non-violent groups consisted solely of *undercontrolled* offenders.

More detailed research into the qualities of the *overcontrolled* type was conducted according to the assumption that those who had committed extreme violence and/or scored highly on the overcontrolled hostility scale (OH; Megargee & Cook, 1967) were more likely to be *overcontrolled*. Conversely, offenders who had committed moderate or no violence and/or with low OH scores were more likely to be *undercontrolled*. In relation to demographic and offending histories, the *overcontrolled* types were older, had high average intelligence, and possessed fewer criminal records than their *undercontrolled* counterparts (Blackburn, 1971). Personality data revealed that compared with *undercontrolled* offenders, those who were *overcontrolled* were more introverted, presented themselves as favorable in tests, showed reluctance to express psychiatric symptoms, had excessive emotional control, repressed conflicts and were rigid (Blackburn, 1968; Lane & Kling, 1979; Megargee & Cook, 1967). In addition, the *overcontrolled* displayed less hostility, anxiety, acting out hostility and impulsivity than the *undercontrolled* (Blackburn, 1968; Lane & Kling, 1979; Megargee & Cook, 1967). These personality results were subsequently replicated in samples from forensic hospital patients (Blackburn, 1968; Lane & Kling, 1979) and the general probation population (Megargee & Cook, 1967). Thus, the two-fold typology was maintained and corroborated among both disordered and general offender samples.

Blackburn (1971) continued the exploration into the *under-* and *overcontrolled* types through a variety of different personality characteristics, rather than simply focusing on hostility and impulse control. MMPI profiles were obtained from a sample of 56 homicide offenders who were committed under the U.K. Mental Health Act at Broadmoor Maximum-Security Hospital. Within the sample, nine were classified with psychopathic disorder, while the remainder were diagnosed as mentally ill. Data from the MMPI profiles were subject to cluster analysis, which provided a four-cluster solution that accounted for 61% of the sample. Additional cases were classified into the four types, in total accounting for 80% of the sample. Two of the four clusters represented the *undercontrolled* types while the other two represented the *overcontrolled* types. Further, each *undercontrolled* type was reflected by a polar opposite *overcontrolled* type. The types were described as follows (the labels from Blackburn's, 1986 study will be used as the type definitions throughout this article):

*Primary psychopaths* comprised 13% ( $N=7$ ) of the sample and were *undercontrolled*. This group exhibited moderate anxiety and paranoid suspicion, but with no neurotic or psychotic symptoms.

They did not possess social anxiety and were extraverted, yet had poor socialization and high impulsivity. They lacked subjective distress and directed their high levels of hostility outwards to deal with interpersonal problems. They were often classified as having psychopathic disorder, with a lack of mental illness.

*Secondary psychopaths* comprised 23% ( $N=13$ ) of the sample and were also considered *undercontrolled*. These participants reported a range of psychiatric symptoms, including psychosis, depression, hypochondriasis, and psychopathy. They scored significantly higher on anxiety and hostility compared with the other groups. They were socially anxious and introverted, yet were impulsive and would act out. These participants were often diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia and were likely to have severe personality disorder.

*Controlled* comprised 30% ( $N=17$ ) of the sample, were *overcontrolled* and displayed a pattern opposite to the secondary psychopaths. They did not report being psychologically deviant, except for mild depressive tendencies. They scored higher on defensiveness, denial and impulse control and lower on anxiety and hostility. They expressed some interpersonal difficulties. Overall, they dealt with emotional arousal through avoidance, denial or repression.

*Inhibited* comprised 14% ( $N=8$ ) of the sample, were *overcontrolled* and displayed a pattern opposite to the primary psychopaths. They reported abnormally high depression, moderate anxiety and hostility (directed inwards towards themselves) and tended to be classified as mentally ill. They also had an abnormal elevation in social introversion accompanied by strong impulse control. This type was also considered *overcontrolled*, yet was able to feel hostility and depression that were directed inwards.

Blackburn's four-factor model of violent offender personality may be considered in relation to *under-* and *overcontrol* and along two additional personality dimensions. The representation of *over-* and *undercontrol* in the four types is illustrated in Fig. 1. *Undercontrol* contains the *primary* and *secondary psychopath* types while *overcontrol* can be divided into the *controlled* and *inhibited* types. Blackburn (1979) found that the dimension of psychopathy represented the *under-* and *overcontrol* distinction. The *primary* and *secondary psychopath* types represented a high psychopathy score, while a low psychopathy score described the *controlled* and *inhibited* types. A second dimension of sociability then indicated the similarities shown between the *under-* and *overcontrolled* types. High sociability characterized the *primary psychopath* and *controlled* types, whereas high withdrawal reflected the *secondary psychopath* and *inhibited* types. Thus, high and low scores on these two dimensions could distinguish each of the four types. Fig. 2 displays a graphical representation of the associations

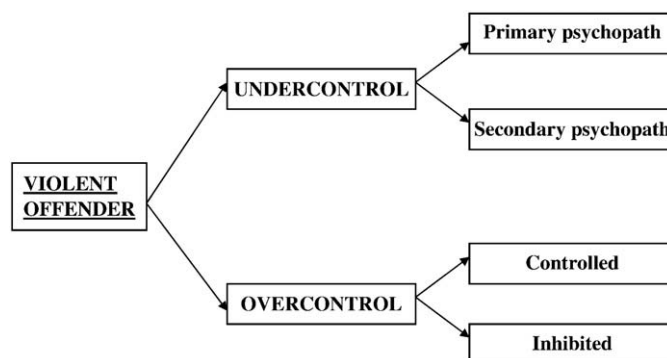


Fig. 1. Relationship of under- and overcontrol to four violent offender personality types.

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