

# On intelligence and crime: A comparison of incarcerated sex offenders and serious non-sexual violent criminals

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Received 13 January 2003; received in revised form 30 January 2004; accepted 5 March 2004

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## Abstract

The impact of low IQ on crime has been a focus of debate for several decades now. Although sociologists have virtually removed it from the list of possible factors influencing crime, the impact of IQ on crime continues to generate a significant amount of scientific research and a substantial number of publications. The purpose of this study is to assess intellectual levels and to compare two groups of incarcerated criminals. Using MANCOVA and ANCOVA procedures, 261 sex offenders and 150 non-sexual violent criminals were compared on IQ subscales. The results show significant differences on vocabulary, comprehension, arithmetic, mental math computations, object assembly, letter–number sequencing, and perception subscales, as well as on performance IQ and total IQ. The impacts of penal filtering and sample composition are hypothesized to explain differences between the two subgroups. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

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*Keywords:* Sex offenders; Intelligence; Crime; Offense planning

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## 1. Intelligence and crime

Over the last few decades, much evidence has suggested that intellectual functioning is associated with crime (Hirschi & Hindelang, 1977; Wilson & Herrnstein, 1985). While many researchers consider sociological factors, such as ethnicity or poverty, to be largely responsible for crime, others

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have attempted to demonstrate the importance of intellectual functioning in the understanding of criminal behavior. There have been two main explanations of the role of intellectual performance in crime. First, crime and criminality have been said to be indirectly influenced by a low IQ associated with poor school performance, job performance, and adaptation and social integration in general (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994; Magdol, Moffitt, Caspi, & Silva, 1998; Ward & Tittle, 1994). A second common explanation of the intelligence–crime relationship is what could be called the direct hypothesis, according to which low-IQ individuals are less likely to anticipate the consequences of their actions and to understand suffering in others (Cusson, 1998). Intelligence may therefore be hypothesized to influence the development of the criminal career, on the one hand, and the way crimes are committed, on the other. Thus, studies of the intelligence–crime relationship have mainly focused on two specific areas: a) assessment of the negative impact of intellectual functioning on the seriousness of the criminal career, and b) assessment of the influence of low IQ on *modus operandi* variables such as the planning and seriousness of offenses.

In an attempt to understand the intelligence–crime relationship, many researchers have addressed the question of the IQ–crime relationship by studying the criminal career (Moffitt, Caspi, Silva, & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1995; Moffitt, Gabrielli, Mednick, & Schulsinger, 1981; Spellacy, 1978). To do so, researchers have compared delinquents with non-delinquents and chronic offenders with one-time offenders on IQ scales. For example, Gibson and West (1970) compared 8- to 9-year-old delinquents with non-delinquents on intelligence test scores. Even after controlling for socio-economic status (SES), the subjects in the delinquent groups scored lower on verbal and non-verbal subtests. These results were later confirmed by Wolfgang, Figlio, and Sellin (1972), who used a cohort of 9945 subjects tested on IQ scores. The differences found varied from 5 to 10 points, with non-delinquent subgroups scoring higher. Yeudall, Fromm-Auch, and Davies (1982) also found significant differences between delinquents and non-delinquents. The differences ranged from 18.9 points on non-verbal scores to 21.8 points on verbal scores.

The differences found between delinquents and non-delinquents are generally considered to be of approximately 8 points, or half a standard deviation. Nevertheless, Moffitt (1990) suggested that results from aggregated samples showing differences between delinquents and non-delinquents might in fact be hiding larger differences (namely, between serious delinquents and non-delinquents). More sophisticated designs, involving better criminal subtype classifications, were therefore said to be required to effectively assess the IQ–crime relationship.

Using a sample of 9945 subjects, Wolfgang et al. (1972) compared one-time offenders with chronic offenders. Even after controlling for SES and race, differences of 8.1 points for Caucasians and 10.6 points for blacks were observed between the two groups, with one-time offenders obtaining higher scores than chronic offenders. Using a sample of 536 boys and girls, Moffitt (1990) found similar results. While differences of approximately 8 points could be observed between delinquents and non-delinquents, the differences rose to 17 points between non-delinquents and chronic delinquents. Similar results were more recently observed by Kratzer and Hodgins (1999), using a cohort of 13,852 subjects. Their results showed that among four groups of delinquents, *stable early starters* were those with the lowest IQ scores compared with other groups of delinquents. Other similar results concerning the inverse relationship between intellectual level and seriousness of the criminal career have been reported elsewhere in the literature (Cymbalisty, Schuck, & Dubeck, 1975; Gabrielli & Mednick, 1980; Lynam, Moffitt, & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1993; Moffitt et al., 1981).

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