

Psychopathy and young offenders: Rates of childhood maltreatment

Child maltreatment is an enormous problem in North America. For example, approximately two million Americans report that they were "beaten up" by a parent during childhood.⁽²⁾ Canadian researchers have also found that 20%-30% of prepubescent children have been sexually abused.⁽³⁾

Child maltreatment has been linked with a host of problems such as neurological disturbances,⁽⁴⁾ psychiatric difficulties,⁽⁵⁾ social skill and interpersonal problems,⁽⁶⁾ conduct disorders⁽⁷⁾ and the perpetuation of future child abuse.⁽⁸⁾ Further, recent research contends that there is an association between child maltreatment and antisocial or aggressive behaviour (although this research is characterized by methodological problems).⁽⁹⁾

Some adolescents continue antisocial behaviour throughout their lives⁽¹⁰⁾ - similar to psychopaths.⁽¹¹⁾ Psychopaths tend to begin their antisocial activities at a very early age, and their violent and aggressive tendencies remain relatively constant throughout their lives.⁽¹²⁾ However, no clear evidence (to date) indicates that adult psychopathy is related to childhood maltreatment.⁽¹³⁾

This article assesses the prevalence of childhood maltreatment in a sample of young offenders and investigates whether the onset of aggressive behaviour in psychopaths is related to childhood maltreatment. To accomplish this, the article examines the association (if any) between psychopathy, childhood maltreatment and antisocial activities. **Methodology** The study sample was composed of 95 male young offenders incarcerated in two secure youth detention institutions. The offenders were assessed for psychopathy by using information gathered from interview and institutional files and the Hare Psychopathy Checklist (youth version). This instrument is a 20-item symptom checklist designed to measure the interpersonal, affective and behavioural traits of psychopathy in adolescent populations. Each item is scored on a three-point scale and offender scores range from 0 to 40.

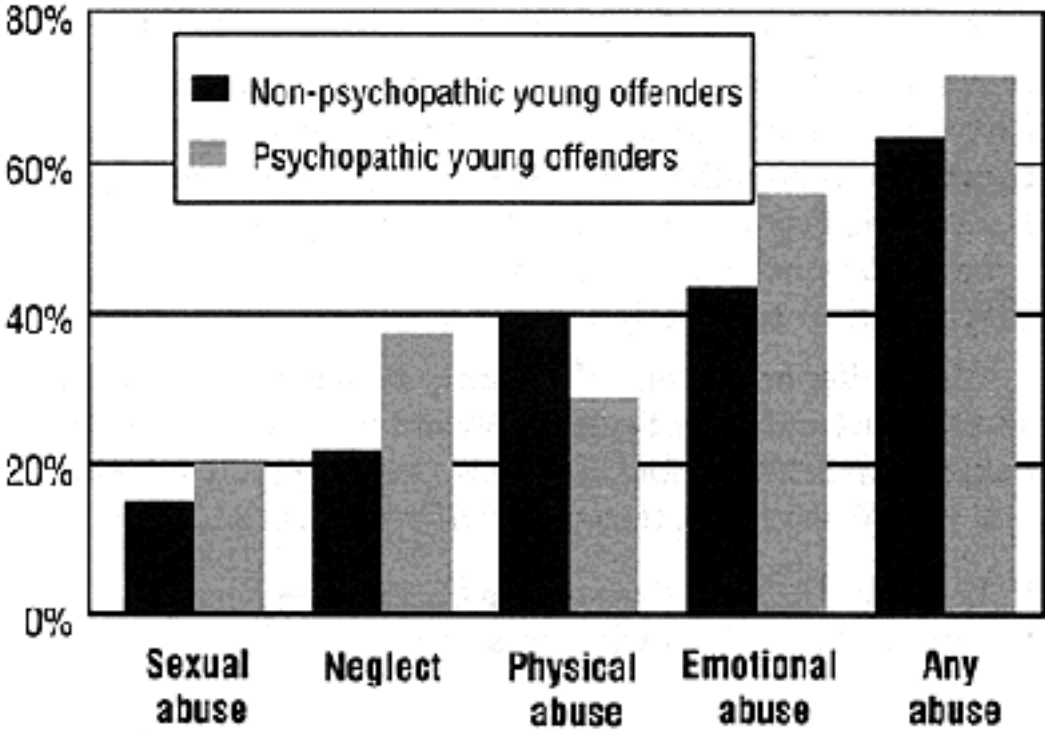
A semi-structured interview and an institutional file review were used to assess the type, duration and severity of childhood maltreatment (physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, neglect and/or witnessing interparental physical abuse). Childhood sexual abuse included sexual abuse by individuals outside the offender's immediate family.

Several information sources were used to measure antisocial activity. Criminal records were used to identify the number of violent and nonviolent offences committed by the young offenders. In addition, all the offenders completed a self-report delinquency scale that asks questions like: "Have you ever threatened someone with a gun, knife or any other weapon?" The scale probes for a wide range of nonviolent and violent antisocial activities. Responses were broken down into seven categories: never, once, twice, three to five times, six to 10 times, 11 to 20 times and more than 20 times. Finally, the offenders completed a modified Conflict Tactics Scale to measure their use of violence to resolve conflict within dating relationships. **Psychopathy** Although comprehensive analyses of the data have not yet been completed, we can report on some preliminary analyses. For example, the average score on the psychopathy checklist was 26.4 (SD = 6.19), about two points higher than typical results for male adult offender samples.

The subjects were divided into two groups based on evidence of psychopathic characteristics. Psychopathic young offenders were defined as those who scored 30 or higher on the checklist (a cutoff score used for male adult offender populations), while non-psychopathic young offenders were defined as those who scored below 30. Using this cutoff, 36.8% (35) of the sample were categorized as psychopathic and 63.2% (60) as non-psychopathic. Childhood maltreatment Overall, the offenders exhibited fairly extensive abuse histories - 63.3% of the non-psychopaths and 71.4% of the psychopaths reported having been seriously abused throughout their childhood. The most common type of abuse for both groups was emotional abuse (49.5%), followed by physical abuse (35.8%), neglect (27.4%) and sexual abuse (16.8%). However, the two groups did not differ significantly across any specific forms of abuse (see Figure 1).

Further, neither experiencing childhood abuse nor witnessing parental violence (30.5% of the sample had witnessed physical violence between their parents) predicted scores on the psychopathy checklist. There was, however, an association between abuse and offending - the 61 young offenders who had experienced childhood abuse engaged in more nonviolent and violent offending than did the 34 non-abused young offenders. Antisocial activity This sample of young offenders committed many violent acts. The majority (64.1%) had a current or past charge or conviction for a violent offence and 91.6% reported committing at least one violent offence (arson, robbery, assault, sexual assault or murder). There were no significant differences in the percentage of psychopathic (97.1%) and non-psychopathic (88.3%) offenders who reported violent offences.

Figure 1
Young Offender Abuse History



However, significant differences emerged in the frequency of antisocial behaviour. Psychopathic

offenders reported engaging in significantly more violent (an average score of 14.2 on the self-report delinquency scale) and nonviolent offending (71.6) than did non-psychopathic offenders (9.3 and 56.3, respectively). File information further indicated that significantly more psychopathic offenders (68.6%) were abusive, threatening and aggressive while in the institution than non-psychopathic offenders (28.3%).

Both psychopaths and non-psychopaths displayed relatively high rates of physical aggression toward dating partners. The severe violence (kicking, biting, hitting with a fist, causing bleeding/bruising, threatening, or using a knife or gun) rates were 11.4% for psychopaths and 15.3% for non-psychopaths. Similar rates, using a more inclusive definition (including slapping, shoving and grabbing), were 28.6% for the psychopaths and 25.4% for the non-psychopaths. What have we learned? This study suggests that young offenders have a much higher rate of childhood maltreatment than the general population.

Past research has reported that delinquents with a history of childhood abuse engage in more aggressive acts than those delinquents who have not been abused.⁽¹⁴⁾ At this point, however, it is not clear how experiencing abuse contributes to future antisocial behaviour. We were unsuccessful in predicting either violent or nonviolent offences using items from the semi-structured interview. Future analyses will attempt to develop a statistical model to explain this relationship by focusing on the items that distinguish the abused from the non-abused young offenders.

Consistent with past research, however, is this study's indication that psychopathy is not associated with any specific traumatic childhood experience. The psychopathic offenders experienced all forms of childhood abuse at the same rate as the non-psychopathic offenders. We are now analyzing the data to see if psychopaths differ from non-psychopaths in the severity, duration or time of onset of abusive experiences.

Approximately 37% of the young offenders in this sample were classified as psychopathic (using the checklist cutoff score of 30), substantially higher than the results normally reported for adult male offenders (15% to 25%).⁽¹⁵⁾

Why?

First, it is possible that some general characteristics of adolescence, such as impulsiveness or irresponsibility, contribute to the higher score. We are currently collecting data from a community sample of adolescents to test this possibility.

Second, these data do not represent the general young offender population because the sample included only those in secure custody. Considering that these young offenders tend to be more serious and persistent offenders, the high prevalence of psychopathy is perhaps not that surprising.

This study also provides some support for relationship between childhood maltreatment and antisocial behaviour in a sample of young offenders with violent criminal histories. However, the higher prevalence of self-reported criminal behaviour among psychopaths was not found to be related to childhood abuse. Our continuing exploration of the data will hopefully provide a clearer picture.

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