

The Impact of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Disorders on Juvenile Offenders

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ABSTRACT

Crimes committed by adolescents remains a major problem in the United States. High prevalence rates of mental and substance abuse disorders amongst those in the juvenile justice system may be two factors that are related to violent crimes being committed. The purpose of this study is to evaluate whether mental and substance abuse disorders are associated with violent crimes among adolescents. This secondary analysis analyzed the multi-site, longitudinal data collected by Pathways to Desistance. The current study included adolescent participants (N=1,354). Data was collected from participants using computer assisted personal interviews. Results of Spearman's *rho* indicated significant positive relationships between total number of mental illnesses and violent crimes, between alcohol use and violent crimes, and between marijuana use and violent crimes being committed by adolescents. Findings from this study contributes to future research that can analyze specific mental health substance abuse disorders that may cause adolescents to commit violent crimes. This will then allow the social work field to provide better preventative interventions and will allow the juvenile justice system develop more appropriate sentencing for adolescents.

INTRODUCTION

Significance of the Study

- Adolescents who commit crimes are more likely to lead a difficult lifestyle upon reaching adulthood, including unemployment, relationship issues, and various health problems.
- Of the two million adolescents being arrested yearly, 70% have a mental disorder. In addition, 74% of incarcerated youths have a lifetime use of alcohol and 85% have a lifetime use of illegal drugs.

Purpose of Research

- To evaluate whether mental and substance abuse disorders are associated with violent crimes among adolescents.

Research Questions

- What is the relationship between mental disorders and crimes being committed by adolescents?
- What is the relationship between substance abuse disorders and crimes being committed by adolescents

Hypotheses

- It is hypothesized that there is a positive relationship between mental disorders and crimes being committed by juveniles.
- It is also hypothesized that there is a positive relationship between substance abuse disorders and crimes being committed by juveniles.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Mental Health and Incarcerated Adolescents

- Juvenile offenders have a high prevalence rate of mental health disorders upon entering the juvenile justice system.
- Disruptive behavior disorders and anxiety related disorders are the most common mental health disorders.
- Untreated mental health disorders may cause adolescents to commit crimes.

Substance Abuse Disorders and Incarcerated Adolescents

- Youths in the juvenile justice system are five times more likely to use a substance and three times more likely to have a substance abuse disorder than those not in the juvenile justice system.
- The two main substances being used by adolescents are alcohol and marijuana.

Limitations and Gaps in the Research

- Several of the studies have low generalizability due to limited sample in select geographic locations.
- Not all the studies included a diverse population.
- The current study is structured to address some of these limitations by, for example, including a racially diverse population.

METHODS

Research Design and Data Collection Procedures

- This study was a secondary analysis of data collected from Pathways to Desistance, a multi-site and longitudinal study.
- Pathways to Desistance has 11 waves of data collection. The current study only analyzed data collected during the baseline interviews.
- Data was collected using computer assisted personal interviews. Collateral reporters and Federal Bureau Investigation records of arrest or court records provided supplemental information and validated the participants' interviews

Sample and Sampling Method

- A total of 1,354 serious juvenile offenders with 654 adjudicated youths being from Maricopa County and 700 being from Philadelphia County in Pennsylvania were included in this study.
- There were 1,170 males and 184 females included in this sample.
- The study included a racially and ethnically diverse sample comprised of White, Black, Hispanic, and other.
- Participants were ages 14-18 with the mean age being 16 years.

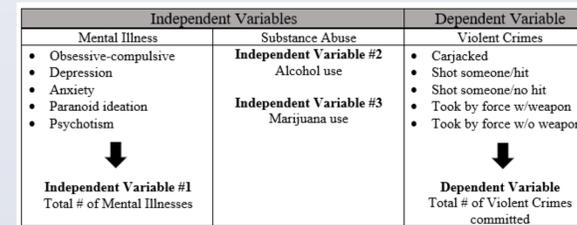
Measures

- The first independent variable was mental illness and this was measured using the Brief Symptom Inventory. Participants were asked about various symptoms they had felt in the last 7 days and respond from not at all (0) to extremely (4).
- The second and third independent variables were alcohol use and marijuana use and these were measured using the modified version of substance use/abuse inventory. Responses ranged from not at all (0) to every day (8).
- The dependent variable was violent crimes and this was measured using adapted Self-Reported Offending interview questions. Participants were asked to report whether or not they had committed the specified crime. The values assigned were 0 for no and 1 for yes for each type of violent crime. The final variable is the total number of violent crimes.

Table 1

Sample Characteristics (N=1354)

Characteristic	f	%
Gender		
Male	1170	86.4
Female	184	13.6
Age	M=16.04	SD=1.143
Ethnicity		
White	274	20.2
Black	561	41.4
Hispanic	454	33.5
Other	65	4.8
Bio Father in House		
Absent	1039	76.7
Present	315	23.3
Bio Mother in House		
Absent	358	26.4
Present	996	73.6
Own Child in House		
Absent	1327	98.0
Present	27	2.0



RESULTS

Spearman's rho Correlation

- All three analyses were calculated using Spearman's *rho* correlation. Results are indicated in Table 2.

Table 2

Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations for Total Number of Violent Crimes, Total Number of Mental Illness, Alcohol Use, and Marijuana Use

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Violent crime	1.05	1.389	--			
2. Mental illness	.36	.934	.074**	--		
3. Alcohol use	4.45	2.744	.357**	.140**	--	
4. Marijuana use	6.42	3.214	.354**	.083**	.505**	--

Note. **p < .01.

Total Number of Mental Illness and Total Number of Violent Crimes

- Results indicated a positive and statistically significant association between total number of mental illnesses and total number of violent crimes, $r_s(1257) = .074, p < .01$. Higher number of mental illnesses was related to higher number of violent crimes being committed by adolescents.

Alcohol Use and Total Number of Violent Crimes

- The results indicated a positive and statistically significant association between alcohol use and total number of violent crimes, $r_s(1345) = .357, p < .01$. Alcohol use was related to higher levels of violent crimes being committed by adolescents.

Marijuana Use and Total Number of Violent Crimes

- The results indicated a positive and statistically significant association between marijuana use and total number of violent crimes, $r_s(1345) = .354, p < .01$. Marijuana use was related to higher levels of violent crimes being committed by adolescents.

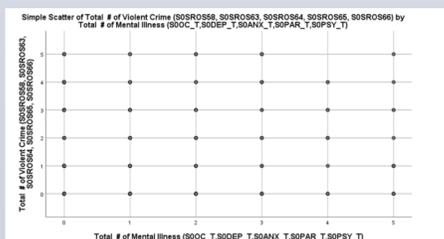


Figure 1. Simple scatterplot showing the relationship between total number of mental illness and total number of violent crimes.

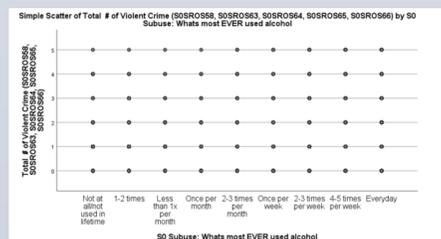


Figure 2. Simple scatterplot showing the relationship between alcohol use and total number of violent crimes.

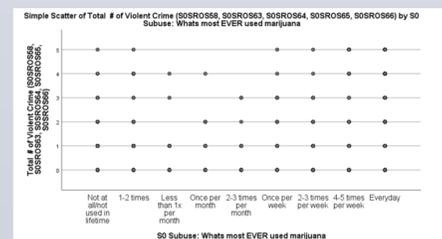


Figure 3. Simple scatterplot showing the relationship between marijuana use and total number of violent crimes.

DISCUSSION

Summary of Findings

Inferential statistics indicated significant positive relationships between the study's variables. A positive significant relationship was found between total number of mental illnesses and total number of violent crimes being committed by juveniles. This indicated that the higher number of mental illnesses is related to the higher number of violent crimes. In addition, a positive significant relationship was found between alcohol use and total number of crimes being committed by adolescents. Lastly, a positive significant relationship was found between marijuana use and total number of crimes committed by adolescents.

Strengths and Limitations

Limitations

- Non-random sampling method was used for the sample size which affects the generalizability.
- Self-reporting nature of the survey may have affected participant responses.
- The sample size was predominately comprised of males than females.
- Only relationships between factors were examined, not the actual causing factor.

Strengths

- Sample size was large and racially and ethnically diverse.
- Even though it was a limitation to have the survey questions be self-reporting, answers were validated.
- Researchers were present during the surveys and were able to read the questions aloud.

Research and Practice Implications

- It would be beneficial for social workers to provide better resources and support to adolescents both in and out of the juvenile justice system.
- Future research can provide social work practice with a better understanding of what mental disorders and what substances are more likely to cause adolescents to commit violent crimes.
- The implication of these findings can lead to the juvenile justice system adjusting sentencing and providing interventions so that adolescents do not abuse substances and commit crimes upon being released.
- Most importantly, the implications of these findings may provide evidence to sponsors and government entities that funding is a necessity for agencies that currently or want to work in reducing mental health and substance abuse disorders in adolescents.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the staff and faculty of the Social Work Department for their continuous support throughout the past two years. I would like to especially thank Dr. Karen Lee for her guidance and assistance in the completion of this final project. Additionally, I would like to thank my colleagues who made this journey fun and memorable. Lastly, I would like to thank my mom, dad, and sister who have always supported me; I love you guys.