



## Abstract

This study aimed to develop and validate whether family support and mental health have a positive correlation amongst juvenile offenders. A group of 377 juveniles was administered the Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI) and the Youth Psychopathic Traits Inventory (YPI) to measure a variety of mental health outcomes. This study was a secondary data analysis of the Pathways to Desistance Project. It is hypothesized that juvenile offenders with lower familial support will have more mental health issues. The results indicated that there was a significant positive correlation between the mother's family support within mental health. The results also showed that there were no significant relationships to the father's warmth and hostility. Those who received less familial support had a higher likelihood of becoming juvenile offenders. Results from this study will have implications for social workers who work with children in the juvenile justice system as child welfare workers need to simultaneously address the family support they receive and provide resources for mental health services to children and adolescents.

## Introduction

### Significance of Study:

- Statistics show that 47% of the youth involved with the juvenile justice system have disruptive disorders, such as conduct disorders, and substance use disorders; the most common mental health disorders are anxiety and depression.
- Youths within the juvenile justice system have reported higher rates of mental illnesses than their peers.
- 35% of the juveniles in 2019 met the criteria of anxiety, and 18% indicated being depressed.

### Purpose of Study:

The purpose of this study is to increase knowledge related to the mental health of juvenile offenders. The importance of this study to the field of social welfare is that a child who has minimal familial support is at a higher risk of becoming part of the juvenile justice system.

### Research Question:

What is the relationship between family support and mental health among juvenile offenders?

### Hypothesis:

The hypothesis is that juvenile offenders with lower familial support will have more mental health issues.

## Literature Review

### Theoretical Framework:

The stress coping theoretical model describes the correlation of familial support and mental health within a conceptual framework. The theory mentions that if the youth can count on a caregiver or family member for support than it reduces the impact of a stressful life event that can eventually impact their mental health (Donnelly & Holzer, 2018). The supportive actions of others or the belief that help is available to have a lower risk of youth being exposed to these stressful situations.

### Familial Support and Mental Health:

In past research in relation to depression amongst juvenile offenders, 49.4% of youth met the criteria for depressive disorder. These youth were involved with family court, detention, residential facilities, and juvenile court (Wakefield, Baronia, & Brennan, 2019). The study also found a difference in gender amongst the female youth and male youth in the juvenile justice system. The study found that 74% of first-time young offenders met criteria for a mental health disorder, and female youth in the justice system have higher rates of depression than justice-involved youth boys.

### Gaps in Research:

- Most studies that measure depression in juvenile offenders use self-reported questionnaires.
- Majority of studies were male oriented and lacked clear research findings on female offenders and those from Black and minority ethnic groups (Lader, Singleton, & Meltzer, 2002).

## Methods

**Research Design:** The current research was a secondary data analysis of interviews collected in collaboration with the "Pathways to Desistance" study. The original study was a 10-year study that surveyed 1,354 serious juvenile offenders between the ages of 14 and 19, from the juvenile and adult court systems between the years of 2000 and 2010, from Maricopa County, Arizona ( $n = 654$ ) and Philadelphia County, Pennsylvania ( $n = 700$ ).

**Sampling Method:** The study sample for the current study is a subset of the original Pathways to Desistance study sample. The sample was taken exclusively from the second wave of study participants. Study participants who did not fully respond to all the familial support and mental health questions were excluded from the study. The final sample size for this study was 377 juvenile offenders. Participants were selected through purposive sampling.

**Measures:** The independent variable for this study is family support. Family support was an indication of parental warmth and hostility among the parents of the juvenile offenders. The dependent variable for this study is mental health. Mental health in this study is measured in the Youth Psychopathic Traits Inventory (YPI) and the Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI). Total psychopathy consisted of the cumulative score of 50 4-point Likert-scale items from the YPI (Mulvey, 2016). The BSI is a self-report measure that contains 53 items of mental health symptoms. The current study used depression, anxiety, and global severity measures only.

## Results

- A Spearman's correlation coefficient was computed to determine the relationship between participants' mother's hostility and mental health. The results indicated a statistically significant and positive relationship between mother's hostility and mental health,  $r_s(375) = .291, p < .001$ . The strength of the correlation was weak. Higher levels of mother's hostility were associated with higher levels of mental illness.
- A multiple linear regression was performed to predict a study participant's psychopathy based on their age, gender, ethnicity, and parental support measures. A significant regression equation was found ( $F(7, 369) = 6.80, p < .001$ ), with an  $R^2$  of .11. This indicates that 11% of the variance in psychopathy was explained by the regression model. A study participant's predicted psychopathy was equal to  $94.762 - .001(\text{age}) + 8.405(\text{gender}) - 4.757(\text{minority}) - 2.189(\text{maternal warmth}) + 9.208(\text{maternal hostility}) - 1.217(\text{paternal warmth}) + 6.673(\text{paternal hostility})$ . Male study participants who had higher scores of maternal and paternal hostility demonstrated higher levels of psychopathy. In this model, age, minority status and maternal and paternal warmth were not significant predictors of psychopathy ( $p > .05$ ).

**Table 2 Regression Model for Mental Health**

Predictor	B	SE	$\beta$
Constant***	-1.147	.361	
Age***	.067	.019	.173
Gender*	-.130	.064	-.101
Minority	-.029	.050	-.029
Mother's Warmth*	.075	.037	.119
Father's Warmth	-.031	.030	-.062
Mother's Hostility***	.349	.069	.305
Father's Hostility	-.015	.068	-.013

Reference group; Female and Non-minority. \*\*\* $p < .001$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$

## Conclusion

This study indicates that a mother's warmth will positively influence their child's well-being. Juvenile offenders with mental health issues have become a significant population to study because of the environmental factors that become risk factors at some point in their lives. These risk factors can include growing up in a household where abuse is normalized. Research also proved that the juveniles that were participants mainly grew up in a low-income community where resources and mentorship were not readily available for them to access. This also causes a lack of family support if the parents do not offer that mentorship of caring for them and motivating them to succeed in life. The exposure juveniles have to community violence also had an association with adverse mental health outcomes, including internalizing disorders such as depression and anxiety. That is why the relationship between family support and mental health amongst juvenile offenders turned out to be positively influenced in some aspects of the juvenile's life growing up.

**Implications for Future Research:** Most of the current research relies on data collection and studies that utilize a cross-sectional design that offers the experiences at a specific age range, but do not necessarily follow these research participants to document outcomes into adulthood; this is a shortcoming that could be filled with increased longitudinal research. Doing research on this specific population, it is essential that we get a post-survey on how the resources and help that they receive during their probation period helps them alleviate the mental health issues they might be facing. For future research, it is also essential that we notice how gender plays a massive role in the study.



## References

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