

Age of First Offense in Juvenile Offenders: The Role of Internalizing and Externalizing Problems

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Introduction

Juvenile delinquency has increasingly become a concern for clinicians and researchers. As news reports of crimes committed by youth increase, so do efforts to better understand why these youth engage in antisocial behavior. In addition, research has focused on better ways to assess and treat juvenile offenders. The Millon Adolescent Clinical Inventory (MACI) has been utilized in gathering information regarding assessment of overall treatment amenability and treatment targets (Salekin, 2002). Researchers have focused a great deal of attention on personality traits associated with criminal behavior (Loper, Hoffschmidt, & Ash, 2001). In addition, Barriga et al., (2000) found that self-debasing cognitive distortions such as those that attribute negative events to internal reasons were related to internalizing disorders and self-serving cognitive distortions in which harmful acts are blamed on others were associated with externalizing difficulties. However, the question remains of how these difficulties relate to age of first offense.

Several distinctions have been made between male and female juvenile offenders including the fact that males tend to commit crimes earlier than female offenders (Silverthorn, Frick, & Reynolds, 2001). It stands to reason that externalizing difficulties would be associated with criminal behaviors. Furthermore, it is likely that youth with externalizing problems would engage in criminal behaviors. On the other hand, youth with internalizing difficulties who turn their emotions inward would be less likely to engage in criminal behaviors. The present study provided a unique opportunity to examine the needs associated with youth who get into trouble at earlier ages. The purpose of the present study was to examine internalizing and externalizing problems in juvenile offenders as they relate to age of first offense. It was hypothesized that externalizing problems would be predictive of a lower age of first legal charge for male and female offenders. A second hypothesis was that internalizing difficulties would not be predictive of age of first legal charge.

Method

Participants in this study included 442 juveniles referred by the Office of Juvenile Services for an evaluation. There were 267 males (60.4%) and 175 females (39.6%). Participants ranged in age from 13 to 18 years old ($M = 15.51$). Caucasian participants made up 68.1% of the population, 12.9% were African-American, 10.4% were of Hispanic origin, and 4.3% were American Indian/Alaskan Native.

Participants were administered the Millon Adolescent Clinical Inventory and the Suicide Probability Scale as part of the evaluation. Data was collected on several demographic variables including but not limited to age of first offense, ethnicity, age, mental health history, placement history, and diagnoses.

The Millon Adolescent Clinical Inventory: The MACI is a 160-item objective personality inventory designed to assess for psychological disturbances (Millon, 1993).

Each item is answered either true or false. For the purposes of the present study to assess internalizing problems, the Self-Devaluation, Sexual Discomfort, Anxious Feelings, and Depressive Affect were used. To measure externalizing difficulties, Social Insensitivity, Substance Abuse Proneness, Delinquent Predisposition, and Impulsive Propensity were utilized.

The Suicide Probability Scale: The SPS is a 36-item self-report measure that assesses suicide risk. Each item is answered using a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = None or a little of the time to 4 = Most or all of the time. Participants were asked to rate the frequency of their subjective experience and past behaviors on this Likert-type scale. For the purposes of the present study to assess internalizing difficulties, the clinical scales: Hopelessness, Suicide Ideation, Negative Self-Evaluation, and Hostility were used in addition to the total score.

Results

Pearson product moment correlations were used to analyze the relationship between age of first offense and scores on the MACI scales measuring internalizing problems: Self-Devaluation, Sexual Discomfort, Anxious Feelings, and Depressive Affect and SPS scales: Hopelessness, Suicide Ideation, Negative Self-Evaluation, Hostility and the total score. For male participants, Anxious Feelings ($r = .17$, $p = .002$) significantly correlated with age of first offense. For females, Suicide Ideation ($r = -.14$, $p = .03$) and Negative Self-Evaluation ($r = -.14$, $p = .04$) produced significant correlations with age of first offense.

Another set of Pearson product moment correlations were utilized to assess the relationship between age of first offense and externalizing difficulties utilizing the MACI scales: Social Insensitivity, Substance Abuse Proneness, Delinquent Predisposition, and Impulsive Propensity. For males, significant relationships were found between MACI scales Social Insensitivity ($r = -.14$, $p = .01$), Delinquent Predisposition ($r = -.15$, $p = .007$), and Impulsive Propensity ($r = -.14$, $p = .01$) and age of first offense. On the other hand, there were no significant correlations between age of first offense and externalizing MACI scales for female participants.

Linear Regression analyses were also performed on the data to further examine these relationships. Results indicated a significant model, $F(4, 266) = 2.72$, $R^2 = .04$, $p = .03$. However, none of the externalizing scales from the MACI were significant predictors. The linear regression model utilizing externalizing scales for female juvenile offenders was not significant. The Beta weights for externalizing difficulties are shown in Table 1. These results imply that externalizing difficulties are related to age of first offense for males but not necessarily the variables investigated in the current study.

For internalizing problems, the regression model was not significant for males or females. The Beta weights for internalizing problems for males and females are shown in Table 1. These results imply that internalizing problems are not related to age of first offense in male or female juvenile offenders.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between age of first offense and internalizing and externalizing difficulties in male and female juvenile offenders. Records from 442 juvenile offenders referred by the Office of Juvenile

Services for a psychological evaluation were examined to determine this relationship. There was some support for the first hypothesis. For male juvenile offenders, it appears that externalizing difficulties were related to age of first offense. However, none of the predictors utilized in the current study were significant predictors. In support of the second hypothesis, results indicated internalizing scales of the MACI and SPS were not predictive of age of first offense for male or female offenders.

Results from the present study can be utilized in assessing juveniles at risk for committing crimes. Specifically, identification of externalizing difficulties in male adolescents may be a sign of the need for early intervention in hopes of preventing future crimes. However, neither internalizing nor externalizing problems in female juvenile offenders can be used alone in determining risk.

These results have implications for the treatment of juvenile offenders. A more complete understanding of factors which put a juvenile offender at risk for engaging in future criminal behaviors allows professionals to intervene and potentially address these issues before the juvenile commits additional crimes.

References

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Table 1 Internalizing and Externalizing Beta Weights for Gender by Age of First Offense

Predictor Variables	Males	Females
MACI Self-Devaluation	-.004	-.003
MACI Sexual Discomfort	-.008	.007
MACI Anxious Feelings	.018	-.010
MACI Depressive Affect	.014	.010
SPS Total	.093	.009
Hopelessness	-.115	-.020
Suicide	-.040	-.090
Self-Evaluation	-.130	-.100
Hostility	-.111	-.020
MACI Social Insensitivity	-.007	-.009
MACI Substance Abuse Proneness	.010	.007
MACI Delinquent Predisposition	-.020	-.004
MACI Impulsive Propensity	-.020	-.004