
Research Note

Prior Adjustment of Violent Juvenile Offenders*

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This study compares 202 juvenile offenders on a series of preoffense adjustment variables grouped into five categories: Family Dysfunction, School Adjustment, Prior Violence, Criminal Activity, and Substance Abuse. Emphasis is placed on the importance of distinguishing subgroups of violent youth based on the type of assault (interpersonal conflict or crime-related) and the youth's relationship to the victim (parent or other victim). Findings support the need to identify multiple developmental pathways and distinctive risk factors for different forms of juvenile violence.

Delinquency research has long been plagued by a failure to make important distinctions among different types of juvenile offenders (Quay, 1987). Global comparisons of delinquent and nondelinquent youth yield limited meaningful findings because of the heterogeneity among delinquents (Binder, 1988; Osgood, Johnston,

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O'Malley, & Bachman, 1988; Quay, 1987; Rutter & Giller, 1984). As Quay (1987) noted, "Since delinquency is not a psychological construct (such as 'extrovert,' 'anxious personality,' or 'conduct disorder'), the label does *not* imply that those who carry it are behaviorally or psychologically homogeneous" (p. 118). The purpose of this study was to demonstrate the value of successive categorical distinctions within a group of violent juvenile offenders.

Rutter and Giller (1984) reviewed the various attempts to classify subgroups of delinquent youth. They concluded that there is a reasonable basis for distinguishing delinquents who commit acts of violence from nonaggressive youth who steal, although there are youth who commit both types of offenses (see also Loeber & Schmalings, 1985; Quay, 1987; Walshe, 1987). Subclassification of violent delinquents represents a further distinction. Many studies have found that violence is an exceedingly heterogeneous category and that few psychological characteristics consistently distinguish violent from nonviolent individuals (Lochman, 1984; Megargee, 1970). The widely held pessimistic conclusion that clinicians cannot predict violence is based in large part on studies that made the unsuccessful attempt to isolate variables that discriminate undifferentiated groups of violent individuals from (equally undifferentiated) nonviolent individuals (see Monahan, 1981).

Recent studies have made further distinctions among violent juveniles with promising results (Cornell, Benedek, & Benedek, 1987; Loeber & Schmalings, 1985; Quay, 1987).¹ Cornell, Benedek, and Benedek (1987) found that juveniles who committed homicide in the course of an interpersonal conflict had fewer school adjustment problems, less substance abuse and prior criminal activity, but greater recent stressful life events, than juveniles who committed homicide in the course of another criminal act such as robbery or rape. Adolescents who committed crime-related homicides were also distinguished by more serious psychopathology on the MMPI (Cornell, Miller, & Benedek, 1988). Other studies have pointed to distinguishing features in the prior adjustment of adolescents who murder parents as opposed to other victims (Corder, Ball, Haizlip, Rollins, & Beaumont, 1976; Cormier, Angliker, Gagne, & Markus, 1978; Duncan & Duncan, 1971). Adolescents who murder parents often have a history of serious parental abuse and other family dysfunction, but have comparatively few adjustment problems outside the home.

Although there is frequent recognition of the need to make distinctions among violent juvenile offenders (Cornell, 1989; Sas, Jaffe, & Reddon, 1985), this methodological issue has not received adequate attention.² Many studies continue to

¹ Efforts to categorize juveniles on the basis of psychological maturity or other personality constructs are not considered here. These approaches may be useful in investigating personality functioning, or in guiding treatment decisions, but have practical limitations. Such categorization usually requires psychological assessment and is based on theoretical assumptions and hypothetical constructs that are not generally shared across mental health and legal professions. Moreover, efforts at categorization by psychological criteria may be aided by prior distinctions among the behavioral characteristics of the offense, such as those considered in this study.

² Consider an (imperfect, but useful) analogy between research on delinquency and medical research. Delinquency research began with comparisons of delinquents and nondelinquents, followed by com-

treat delinquents as a single, undifferentiated group (see reviews by Cornell, 1989; Quay, 1987). The demonstration of prior adjustment differences among identifiable subgroups of violent juvenile offenders would have direct implications for research on the etiology of adolescent violence. There may be multiple developmental pathways to violent behavior which are obscured by undifferentiated group comparisons. Accordingly, risk factors for violent behavior may be specific to the category of juvenile violence under consideration.

The present study examined the prior adjustment of 202 serious juvenile offenders on archival measures of family dysfunction, school adjustment, prior violence, criminal activity, and substance abuse. The sample was subdivided into successively smaller comparison groups to demonstrate the importance of making finer distinctions among violent juvenile offenders. The first comparison contrasted nonviolent and violent offenders. The violent offenders were then subdivided into nonhomicide and homicide offenders, and next the homicide offenders were subdivided into crime-related and conflict-related offenders. Finally, conflict-related homicide offenders with parent victims were contrasted with those with other victims.

METHOD

Subjects

Subjects were identified from a computer survey of Virginia Department of Corrections records for youth convicted in either juvenile or adult courts between 1977 and 1987. Because of changes in personnel and record-keeping practices over the years, we could not verify that these records were complete. Nevertheless, there was no evidence of systematic bias in the records, and all 71 available subjects convicted of homicide were used in the study.

Comparison groups of youth charged with a violent offense (some form of assault) or a nonviolent property offense (larceny or breaking and entering) were identified from the larger pool of several thousand available cases. The assault comparison group consisted of youth convicted of a violent assault (e.g., malicious wounding) that resulted in injury to the victim (omitting cases in which the victim was merely shoved or punched but not actually injured). Youth in the nonviolent comparison group were convicted of some form of larceny or breaking and entering and had no previous charges for violent crimes. The database consisted of cases listed by type and year of offense, giving the youth's identification number and date of birth. Cases were selected by choosing the first available

parisons within the delinquent group (e.g., violent and nonviolent delinquents). Imagine if medical research began with group comparisons of sick and healthy subjects, followed by a subdivision of sick subjects into those with fevers and those without fevers. Eventually those with fevers could be subdivided as well, and so on, until at last, specific, discrete disorders could be isolated. Fortunately, medical research is not bound by the kinds of social and legal categories used to define subjects in delinquency research.

records of youth with the same year of conviction and same age as each homicide case. If a case record was grossly incomplete (e.g., no social history) or did not meet study criteria (e.g., a youth convicted of larceny also turned out to have committed a violent offense), the next available case was chosen as a substitute. Data collection ceased when target sample sizes of 80 assault subjects and 51 nonviolent subjects were attained.

Subjects ranged in age from 12 to 17 (mean 15.5) at the time of the offense. Of the subjects, 136 (67.3%) were black, 63 (31.2%) were white, and 3 (1.5%) were from some other minority group. A global classification of parent socioeconomic status estimated that 17 (8.4%) were white collar; 141 (69.8%), blue collar; and 44 (21.8%), welfare. All but 7 (3.5%) subjects were male.

Procedure

Records were reviewed by two coders, who rated each subject on 33 prior adjustment variables independently of offense information. In separate reviews, coders rated homicides as crime- or conflict-related. Interrater reliability for all variables in the study ranged from 83% to 100% (kappas, .60 to 1.0). Following the method specified by Cornell, Benedek, and Benedek (1987), the 33 prior adjustment variables were clustered on a rational basis into five categories: Family Dysfunction, School Adjustment, Prior Violence, Criminal Activity, and Substance Abuse. Higher weights were assigned to items judged to be more serious (e.g., child abuse, school expulsion). As described elsewhere (Cornell, Benedek, & Benedek, 1987; 1989), the purpose of this procedure was to (a) provide a more concise summary of the adolescent's prior adjustment, (b) compensate for difficulties resulting from single items with low frequencies (e.g., parent psychiatric hospitalization), and (c) reduce the problem of analyzing excessive numbers of dependent variables. Individual items were weighted and summed into composite scores for each category, as described in Table 1.³ Analysis of the internal consistency of composite scores yielded alphas ranging from .48 to .81.

RESULTS

Data analyses consisted of four hierarchical multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVAs) with follow-up univariate analyses on successively smaller subgroups of subjects. The first MANOVA contrasted violent subjects with nonviolent controls, $F(5,196) = 7.19, p < .001$. Univariate analyses indicated that violent subjects were significantly higher in Prior Violence and Substance Abuse (see Table 2).

The second MANOVA contrasting homicide and assault subjects also was significant, $F(5,116) = 2.42, p < .05$. Univariate analyses indicated that assault

³ Several items were modified slightly to accommodate record-keeping practices in Virginia. Also, there were insufficient data to employ categories of Psychiatric History and Recent Stressful Life Events described by Cornell, Benedek, and Benedek (1987).

Table 1. Description of Composite Measures of Prior Adjustment

Family dysfunction (alpha = .66)
Parent marital status (0, married; 1, divorced/separated; 2, never wed)
Father absence (0, none; 1, one year +; 2, absent since age 5)
Mother absence (0, none; 1, one year +; 2, absent since age 5)
Step-parent conflict (0, no; 1, yes)
Spouse abuse (0, no; 1, mild; 2, moderate; 3, severe)
Child abuse (0, no; 3, yes)
Severity of child mistreatment (0, none; 2, corporal punishment; 3, moderate or regular abuse; 4, severe)
Other violence in home (0, none; 1, mild/moderate; 2, severe)
Child neglect (0, no; 1, yes)
Parent substance abuse (0, no; 1, one parent; 2, both parents)
Parent psychiatric hospitalization (0, no; 1, one parent; 2, both)
School adjustment (.48)
Status at offense (0, enrolled/graduated; 2, drop-out/expelled)
Grades (0, average or better; 2, below average)
Special Education placement (0, no; 1, yes)
School behavior problems (0, no; 1, nonassaultive; 2, assaultive)
Truancy (0, no; 1, yes)
Suspensions (0, no; 1, yes)
Prior violence (.52),
Fought adults (0, no; 1, once; 2, twice or more)
Fought peers (0, no; 1, once; 2, twice or more)
Injured someone (0, no; 1, yes)
Destroyed property (0, no; 1, yes)
Criminal activity (.61)
Placement in a juvenile facility (0, no; 1, <1 year; 2, >1 year)
Arrest for property offense (0, no; 1, one; 2, two or more)
Arrest for personal offense (0, no; 1, one; 2, two or more)
Arrest for weapon offense (0, no; 1, one; 2, two or more)
Arrest for other (nonstatus) offense (0, no; 1, one; 2, two or more)
Substance abuse (.81)
Alcohol use (0, none/minimal; 1, some; 2, heavy/regular)
Drug use (0, none/minimal; 1, some; 2, heavy/regular)
Types of drugs used (0, none; 1, one/two; 2, three/four; 3, five +)
Drug charges (0, none; 1, one; 2, two +)
Onset of substance use (0, none; 1, age 16 +; 2, 13-15; 3, preteen)
Substance abuse treatment (0, no; 1, yes)

Note: Each composite measure of prior adjustment is the sum of individual items listed below it, scored as indicated in parentheses.

subjects had a history of greater Prior Violence than homicide subjects (see Table 2).

The third MANOVA contrasted crime-related and conflict-related homicide subjects, $F(5,60) = 4.10, p < .01$. Follow-up analyses (see Table 3) found that crime subjects were higher than conflict subjects on Criminal Activity and Substance Abuse.

The fourth MANOVA compared conflict subjects whose victims were par-

Table 2. Comparisons of Violent and Nonviolent, Homicide and Assault Offenders

	Nonviolent (<i>n</i> = 80)	Violent (122)		Homicide (71)	Assault (51)	
	Mean (<i>SD</i>)	Mean (<i>SD</i>)	Univariate <i>F</i>	Mean (<i>SD</i>)	Mean (<i>SD</i>)	Univariate <i>F</i>
Family dysfunction	5.75 (3.70)	6.92 (4.65)	3.56	7.33 (5.07)	6.33 (3.98)	1.39
School adjustment	5.36 (1.95)	4.94 (2.27)	1.84	4.66 (2.51)	5.33 (1.84)	2.62
Prior violence	1.13 (1.18)	1.83 (1.84)	8.99*	1.47 (1.58)	2.35 (2.08)	7.22*
Criminal activity	2.79 (1.73)	2.69 (2.47)	0.09	2.60 (2.63)	2.80 (2.24)	0.19
Substance abuse	3.36 (3.38)	4.99 (3.33)	11.42*	5.32 (3.23)	4.53 (3.45)	1.70

Note: All tests two-tailed. Univariate analyses carried out in follow-up to significant MANOVAs.
**p* < .01.

ents and those with other victims, $F(5,26) = 4.39$, $p < .01$. According to the univariate analyses (see Table 3), subjects whose victims were parents had higher levels of Family Dysfunction, but more favorable School Adjustment and less Criminal Activity.

DISCUSSION

One of the reasons previous research has had difficulty distinguishing violent from nonviolent individuals may be that there are clinically important differences

Table 3. Comparisons of Crime and Conflict, Parent Victim and Other Victim Offenders

	Crime (<i>n</i> = 34)	Conflict (32)		Parent (12)	Other (20)	
	Mean (<i>SD</i>)	Mean (<i>SD</i>)	Univariate <i>F</i>	Mean (<i>SD</i>)	Mean (<i>SD</i>)	Univariate <i>F</i>
Family dysfunction	8.61 (5.06)	6.75 (4.93)	2.30	9.42 (4.12)	5.15 (4.73)	6.63 ^a
School adjustment	5.14 (2.10)	4.19 (2.85)	2.45	2.50 (2.43)	5.20 (2.63)	8.36 ^b
Prior violence	1.47 (1.44)	1.38 (1.60)	0.65	1.17 (1.64)	1.50 (1.61)	0.31
Criminal activity	3.29 (2.95)	1.72 (2.00)	6.36 ^a	0.58 (1.00)	2.40 (2.16)	7.45 ^a
Substance abuse	6.56 (2.97)	4.06 (3.19)	10.84 ^b	3.83 (3.19)	4.20 (3.27)	0.96

Note: All tests two-tailed. Univariate analyses carried out in follow-up to significant MANOVAs. Five homicide cases could not be coded unequivocally into crime or conflict groups.

^a *p* < .05.

^b *p* < .01.

among violent individuals which are obscured in more global comparisons. As Quay (1987) forcefully argued,

However, the assumption that all delinquents exhibit some common set of psychological characteristics has been the basis for most of the early research into the psychological characteristics of delinquents . . . and, unfortunately, remains so. . . . If, in fact, delinquent youth are behaviorally and psychologically heterogeneous, the search for single psychological variables that can reliably separate delinquents from nondelinquents is not an effective research strategy. Neither will the search for the causes of or cures for delinquency which proceed on this assumption be effective. Searching for *the* cause of or *the* cure for delinquency is much like searching for *the* cause of and *the* cure for fever. (p 118)

Results of the present study support Quay's view. Prior adjustment problems associated with juvenile violence in this sample were associated with different subgroups of violent youth. The present study found that even severely violent youth could be meaningfully subdivided into successively smaller subgroups.

Juveniles convicted of serious violent crimes have substantially higher levels of prior violence than do juveniles convicted of nonviolent offenses, which is consistent with prior research (Monahan, 1981). In addition, the violent offenders have higher levels of substance abuse, but in other areas they are similar to nonviolent offenders. Perhaps there is an association between high levels of substance abuse and impulsivity leading to violent behavior.

Among violent offenders, youth convicted of the most serious violent crime, homicide, actually have less history of prior violence than do offenders convicted of less serious assaults. This curious result seems inconsistent with the common finding that prior violence is predictive of future violence (Monahan, 1981) and underscores the need for a more differentiated conception of violent behavior. The lower incidence of prior violence among the homicide offenders may be consistent with the notion of overcontrolled hostility in severely violent offenders (Megargee, 1966). Perhaps within the group of violent offenders, some of the most severe acts of violence were isolated explosive acts committed by individuals who were otherwise relatively nonaggressive, whereas the assault group contained youth who were undercontrolled and chronically aggressive. Anecdotally, several homicides involved youth who were described as unusually controlled and non-aggressive prior to their offense, but more direct personality assessment is needed.

Consistent with previous research (Cornell, Benedek, & Benedek, 1987), juveniles who commit crime-related homicides are distinguished from those who commit conflict-related homicides. Crime-related homicides appear to be committed by juveniles with an established record of prior delinquent activity and longstanding substance abuse problems. Within the conflict-related group, further distinctions are possible. Juveniles who murdered parents scored higher on measures of family dysfunction, but lower on school adjustment problems and prior criminal activity than did juveniles who murdered other victims (none were family members). These findings suggest that parricide, in particular, may represent a specific form of homicide in which the juvenile experiences severe family dysfunction, but is comparatively well-adjusted in school and in the community.

Directions for Future Study

Archival studies are vulnerable to potential biases in record-keeping and the vagaries of missing information. In addition, research is limited to general information that is commonly entered in clinical records. Although the coding procedures in this study have now been employed successfully in two statewide samples (Michigan and Virginia), future studies might investigate the prior adjustment of violent juvenile offenders in more depth and detail by direct assessment in the institutions where they are incarcerated. In addition, it would be useful to examine distinctions among the juvenile subgroups in personality characteristics and attitudes related to aggressive behavior and to obtain follow-up data on postoffense adjustment.

The group distinctions employed in this study are by no means definitive and may be elaborated or superseded by more encompassing classification schemes. Certainly the distinction between homicide and assault is tenuous in cases where the victim's survival depends on chance factors such as the promptness of medical attention. Nevertheless, homicide represents an unequivocally severe violent act and distinctions within a group of homicidal youth underscore the importance of a more differentiated view of juvenile violence.

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