




Ungovernable, Incurable, and Impudent: An Empirical Study of Criminal Character Among Serious Institutionalized Delinquents

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Received: 7 April 2021 / Accepted: 29 July 2021 /

Published online: 9 August 2021

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Abstract

The notion of criminal character—indicative of an offender unresponsive to rehabilitative efforts, largely unamenable to treatment, primed for recidivism, and committed to a criminal or delinquent lifestyle—has an uneven history in criminology and criminal justice. Despite tangential efforts to apply criminal character considerations to delinquency, we are unaware of any study that has empirically employed the concept of criminal character among justice-system involved youth. Here, we examine the similarities and differences among a large cohort of serious delinquent offenders, some of whom correctional staff assessed as having “criminal character.” Youth with criminal character had more extensive delinquent history, adverse childhood experiences, psychopathology, and institutional and violent misconduct while confined in state juvenile correctional facilities and had significant associations with institutional and violent misconduct despite controls for 29 covariates. However, sensitivity analyses indicated the results were sensitive to specification of the dependent variable (e.g., null associations with dichotomous measures of misconduct) and revealed period effects (e.g., null associations for more recently placed youth). Our models show the potential pitfalls from using administrative measures of criminological and forensic concepts and we offer guidance for measurement development in this area.

Keywords Criminal character · Juvenile delinquency · Juvenile justice · Institutional misconduct · Prison violence

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Introduction

Whether a youth embodies criminal character is a foundational question in delinquency theory and a multifaceted practical issue in juvenile justice. Unfortunately, criminal character is an amorphous construct and is rarely defined or operationalized. Instead, it is treated as a gestalt that effectively conveys that a young offender is committed to a delinquent lifestyle, appears unamenable to treatment, is unresponsive to rehabilitation programs, will likely recidivate if given the opportunity, or has weak moral character (e.g., Chandler & Moran, 1990; Howell, 2003; Loeber & Farrington, 2001; O'Donnell, 1971; Wilson, 1985). Theoretically, juvenile justice assessments of a youth's criminal character can inform the informal versus formal nature of police contacts, referrals, and placements. For novice delinquents, practitioners generally employ leniency and a variety of diversion mechanisms to funnel youth away from the justice process.¹ For chronic delinquents whose behavioral history is more severe, formal interventions are more likely recommended (Mears, 2012; Schulenberg & Warren, 2009) in part due to the youth's recalcitrance. In the event that a delinquency case progresses to the adjudication stage, issues of criminal character (e.g., expressions of remorse, contrition, and shame, acknowledgement of their victim, involvement in prosocial activities) are gleaned from character witnesses in which positive character features are intended for mitigation and negative character features are intended for aggravation. Both informally and formally, criminal character is an important juvenile justice consideration, and can be key at identifying the most serious young offenders.

A variety of content areas addresses criminal character among juvenile delinquents. Across several decades of theoretical development, criminologists have intermittently gravitated toward the concept of criminal character. Cultural deviance theorists (e.g., Cloward & Ohlin, 1960; Cohen, 1955) asserted that delinquent or criminal character developed in a social psychological process in reaction to conventional behavioral norms. For instance, Cloward and Ohlin (1960, p. 132) suggested, "Recognizing this sequence in the development of delinquent norms and justifying beliefs and values makes it easier to understand the intractable and apparently conscienceless behavior of the fully indoctrinated members of delinquent subcultures." In containment theory, Reckless (1961) expressed both skepticism and support about criminal character, especially the role of family socialization processes for inculcating certain traits and behaviors among delinquents. In social control theory, Hirschi (1969) broached the concept of criminal character as an example of a syndrome definition of delinquency. Specifically, Hirschi (1969, p. 49, italics in the

¹ Concern about criminal character is also important in the prevention domain. The Boys and Girls Clubs of America (2020) have character and leadership as one of the pillars of their organization and offer several programs (e.g., Keystone Clubs, Torch Clubs, and Youth of the Year programs) aimed toward academic success, career preparation, and community service. These programs inculcate and reinforce prosocial character development toward behavioral competencies in school, work, peer, family, and community domains. Other structured, prosocial activities such as sports involvement are theorized to enhance character development that buffers against delinquency. However, empirical research indicates this does not often occur (see, Spruit et al., 2016).

original) wrote, “In this view, delinquency is defined by a peculiar *configuration* of delinquent acts. It is not the first act, or the third, that defines a boy as ‘delinquent,’ but it is some, often ineffable combination of acts that distinguishes the ‘true’ delinquent from the ‘pseudo’-delinquent and the ‘true’ nondelinquent.” In the code of the street theory, Anderson (1999) argued that character and morality form the fundamental line of demarcation that separates prosocial “decent” people from antisocial “street” people.

The study of serious, violent, or chronic juvenile offenders skirts criminal character as a developmental feature where instead character is inferred from a youth’s behavioral disorder diagnostic history, neuropsychological functioning, family background, and socioeconomic characteristics (e.g., Barriga et al., 2009; DeLisi et al., 2014a, 2014b; Gorman-Smith et al., 1998; Hains, 1984; Jolliffe et al., 2017a, 2017b; Loeber & Farrington, 2000; Moffitt, 1990, 1993; Murray & Farrington, 2010; Webster-Stratton & Taylor, 2001). To illustrate, in the Pittsburgh Youth Study, several behavioral and attitudinal features including covert behaviors (concealing, manipulative, untrustworthy, low guilt), attitudes that are favorable toward drug use and delinquency, attitudes that are negatively inclined toward family, school, and peer commitments and bonds, and conduct problems are consistent with criminal character. Moreover, these variables are significantly associated with serious delinquency and violence, including homicide offending and homicide victimization (Farrington et al., 2018; Stouthamer-Loeber et al., 2002).

Other studies of juvenile justice system-involved youth similarly found that criminal character-oriented issues as indicated by antisocial attitudes, beliefs, and dispositions and history of conduct problems are associated with delinquency, recidivism, and related outcomes (Baglivio et al., 2016, 2018; Blackburn et al., 2007; Caudill, 2010; Caudill & Trulson, 2016; Pechorro et al., 2013; Trulson et al., 2005; Wolff et al., 2016).

Criminal character also has been a relevant albeit nebulous legal factor in numerous landmark juvenile justice decisions, where practitioners made implicit or explicit assessments of a youth’s putative criminal character as a function of their demeanor, their delinquency history, their status as a juvenile justice system client, their offense conduct, or other psychosocial, personality, or temperamental traits. These assessments occurred in broad considerations of due process (*In re Gault*, 1967), pretrial detention (Schall v. Martin, 1984), waiver (*Kent v. United States*, 1966), and sentencing (*Graham v. Florida*, 2010; *Miller v. Alabama*, 2012; Roper v. Simmons, 2005). In status offender legislation, a variety of monikers including Child in Need of Supervision or Services (CHINS), Person in Need of Supervision of Services (PINS), or Youth in Need of Supervision or Services (YINS) describe adolescents who are in need of social services and/or who exhibit chronically unruly, disobedient, or oppositional conduct.² Some statutes include labels such as “incorrigible” or

² Status offender designations are varied and pertain to youth who would benefit from social services or prosocial guardianship, and not all youth who receive CHINS, PINS, YINS, or related labels are necessarily serious, violent, or chronic delinquents (Loeber & Farrington, 2000, 2001; Regoli et al., 2016). However, these designations are also used for youth whose delinquency appears more entrenched and who would appear to be exhibiting signs of criminal character.

“ungovernable” to indicate that youth appear intractably antisocial in their behavior, and in some cases, parents refer their child to the juvenile court, effectively relinquishing parental control to the court’s *parens patriae* mission.

Current Focus

Despite the salience of criminal character to theoretical, empirical, and legal issues pertaining to the most active juvenile offenders, it is also possible that the concept is superfluous to other concepts that simply highlight the chronic and severe nature of antisocial behavior, such as Moffitt’s life-course-persistent offender prototype (Moffitt, 1990, 1993, 2018) as opposed to more subjective character-based assessments that could contribute to biased labeling processes and iatrogenic effects (cf., Abrah, 2019; Augustyn et al., 2019; Caudill et al., 2017; Restivo & Lanier, 2015). Moreover, behavioral disorders, such as Oppositional Defiant Disorder and Conduct Disorder contain symptoms that are indicative of antisocial features and incorrigibility and thus are rooted in psychiatric science as opposed to nominal labels (e.g., superpredator) that could produce unintended consequences in terms of juvenile justice system processing for youth who engage in serious delinquent acts.

To empirically explore these issues, we define criminal character as a constellation of attitudinal and behavioral traits that are indicative of antisocial as opposed to conventional, prosocial behaviors. Despite its recurrent use in informal assessments of youth conduct, formal juvenile justice system decision-making, and developmental psychopathology and criminology theory, we are not aware of an empirical study of criminal character among juveniles.³ As such, our current research goal was to compare youth with and without criminal character on their delinquency history, adverse childhood experiences, psychopathology, demographic characteristics, and sentencing factors. In addition, we employ multivariate negative binomial regression models to explore the association between criminal character and total institutional misconduct and violent misconduct while accounting for confounding effects of multiple factors.

Method

Ethics

The University of North Texas IRB (application # 11,321) granted institutional and ethnical approval for the study. Since we used archival data, IRB assigned exempt

³ A tangential but conceptually similar research area relates to the study of demeanor and dispositional tendencies of juveniles and the ways that it potentially influences various juvenile justice system processes. Although studies do not necessarily invoke the concept of criminal character, an antagonistic, sullen, defiant, or deviant demeanor is sometimes associated with justice system outcomes (Barnes et al., 2008; DeLisi & Berg, 2006; Morewitz, 2016; Piliavin & Briar, 1964).

status and written informed consent/assent from the participants was not required to participate in this study in accordance with the national legislation and institutional requirements.

Participants

The sample for the present research includes 3,382 delinquents committed to state juvenile correctional facilities in Texas between 1987 and 2011 via a unique blended sentencing statute. In Texas, there are two general types of offenders placed into institutions. The first—indeterminate commitments—are sentenced to the Texas Youth Commission (TYC) for a minimum of nine months and encompass common, but generally less severe delinquents. The second—and the focus of the current research—are those sentenced to TYC under Texas' blended sentencing law. This group is determinate commitments and may receive maximum sentences ranging from 10 to 40 years depending on their offense. Because of the extended sentence lengths, determinate commitments are potentially transferred onto the adult system by the time they reach the maximum age of juvenile correctional jurisdiction usually age 19, which is not allowed for indeterminate commitments.

Unlike regular juvenile court processing and sanctioning in the state, Texas' blended sentencing statute focused on youthful offenders between the ages of 10–16 who have committed one or more statutorily defined serious and/or violent offenses. These offenses include attempted or completed: murder, capital murder, voluntary manslaughter, intoxication manslaughter, criminally negligent homicide, aggravated kidnapping, aggravated sexual assault, sexual assault, aggravated assault, aggravated robbery, felony injury to a child, elderly, or disabled person, felony deadly conduct, aggravated controlled substance felony, criminal solicitation/conspiracy of a capital or first degree felony, second degree felony indecency with a child, criminal solicitation of a minor, first degree felony arson, and habitual felony conduct.

Procedure

The TYC, now named the Texas Juvenile Justice Department, furnished the data for this study. TYC provided de-identified data on youthful offenders across a variety of pre-incarceration domains including, but not limited to, information on youth demographics, delinquent histories, family-based measures, adverse childhood experiences, and general measures of behavioral risk. A combination of official records, clinical observations by TYC counselors and correctional staff, and on-site diagnostic examinations that occur at intake to state juvenile correctional facilities constitute these data. TYC also provided official counts of all forms of officially recorded misconduct during the ward's state incarceration period.

Measures

Criminal character. Criminal character is a dichotomous variable (0=no; 45%; 1=yes; 55%) indicating correctional assessment that the youth exhibited

dispositional and behavioral features that were indicative of criminal character based on TYC counselor and correctional staff clinical observations of youth, on-site diagnostic examinations, and official records determined assessment of criminal character. Lifetime diagnostic history for behavioral disorders, including Combined Type ADHD, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, and Conduct Disorder is one example of data from archival records that staff used to assess criminal character. Unfortunately, on-site diagnostic examinations did not include new diagnoses for behavioral disorders and instead related to broader medical conditions and global functioning that spanned domains such as intellectual functioning, auditory, orthopedic, speech, visual, or other health impairment, traumatic brain injury, pervasive developmental disorders, and other medical or mental health problems. Assessment of criminal character is archival data and the current authors did not render any assessments of youth in this study.

Delinquency History

Prior referrals is a count variable indicating the total referrals in the youth's record prior to current commitment. Prior placements is a count variable indicating the total out of home placements in the youth's record prior to current commitment. Prior detention days is a count variable indicating the total number of detention days in the youth's record prior to current commitment. Prior adjudications is a count variable indicating all court adjudications in the youth's record prior to current commitment. History of truancy and gang involvement are dichotomous variables indicating whether the youth has behavioral history involving non-attendance of school and gang history. Consistent with importation theoretical models of institutional misconduct (Blevins et al., 2010; DeLisi et al., 2011; Irwin & Cressey, 1962), serious and extensive delinquency history and juvenile justice system involvement, drug use, or school problems are associated with misconduct and maladaptive adjustment to confinement facilities (Kolivoski & Shook, 2016; Reidy et al., 2018; Tasca et al., 2010; Taylor et al., 2007; Trulson, 2007; Trulson et al., 2010).

Adverse Childhood Experiences

Seven dichotomous variables (0=no; 1=yes) for adverse childhood experiences included emotional abuse (caregiver use of intentional infliction of intimidation, coldness, or distress that is often verbal), abandonment (caregiver leaving the child alone at home for days or weeks), medical neglect (caregiver denial of adequate medical care to the youth), supervision neglect (caregiver is unaware of the child's location and thus unable to monitor child's behavior), sexual abuse (contact sexual offending such as sexual assault), physical neglect (caregiver refusal to provide shelter, food, or clothing), and physical abuse (caregiver use of aggression and physical violence toward the child). An ordinal measure of chaotic home environment (0=no, 1=somewhat, 2=very much), defined as crowded living conditions with more than one family residing in the home and frequent moving by family members to and from the home was also used. Several studies reported greater adverse childhood experiences are broadly linked to externalizing and antisocial conduct

(Baglivio & Epps, 2016; Bonner et al., 2020; Craig et al., 2017; DeLisi et al., 2017; Fox et al., 2015; Leban & Gibson, 2020) as well as maladjustment among juvenile prisoners (DeLisi et al., 2010; Gover et al., 2000).

Psychopathology

Seven dichotomous variables (0=no; 1=yes) for psychopathology including whether the youth was violent to family, suicidal, mentally ill, sexually deviant, danger to self, danger to others, or has history of substance abuse (e.g., marijuana, cocaine, heroin, methamphetamine, or any illicit drug) were used. A variety of studies found juveniles with extensive, comorbid psychopathology have greater misconduct and maladjustment to confinement (Butler et al., 2007; Cesaroni & Peterson-Badali, 2010; Craig & Trulson, 2019; Kolivoski & Shook, 2016; Lai, 2019; Taylor et al., 2007).

Control Variables

Eight control variables spanning sociodemographic, commitment offense, sentence length, and time in custody were used. Family poverty is an ordinal variable typifying poverty in the youth's family (0=no, 1=somewhat, 2=very much). Dichotomous variables for male, African American, and Hispanic and a continuous measure for age at commitment start ($M=15.88$, $SD=1.17$, range=10.8–18.9) captured demographic features. A dichotomous measure for capital murder commitment offense and continuous measures in years for sentence length ($M=45.96$, $SD=17.6$, range=1–84) and time in custody ($M=3.06$, $SD=1.30$, range=0.05–8.32) were used based on their associations with institutional misconduct and/or recidivism among juveniles (Caudill & Trulson, 2016; Kolivoski & Shook, 2016; Kuanliang et al., 2008).

Dependent Variables

Total misconduct ($M=38.34$, $SD=63.15$, range=0–1,254) is a count variable indicating all institutional misconduct during the youth's current commitment. Infractions include attempting, aiding, or abetting a category I (serious) rule violation, attempting, aiding, or abetting a category II (less serious) rule violation, absconding, attempted escape, attempted suicide, possession of contraband, destruction of property, disruption of program, dress code violation, refusing a drug screen, escape, extortion, fleeing apprehension, throwing bodily fluids, gambling, hostage taking, indecent exposure, lending, lying, missed scheduled activity, participation in a riot, inappropriate sexual contact, stealing over \$50, stealing under \$50, tampering with security equipment, tattooing, threaten to harm self, vandalism, violate any law, and violation of security.

Violent misconduct ($M=3.89$, $SD=6.49$, range=0–82) is a count variable indicating all institutional misconduct for assaults on staff, assaults on staff with bodily injury, assault on staff/offender contact, assault by threat of imminent bodily injury, assault of a student, assault of a student with bodily injury, assault of a student/

Table 1 Descriptive statistics

Variable	Mean	SD	Range	No	Yes
Criminal Character				45%	55%
Prior Referrals	4.39	4.46	0–43		
Prior Placements	3.69	4.81	0–45		
Prior Detention Days	83.24	76.78	0–989		
Prior Adjudications	2.37	2.30	0–22		
Total Misconduct	38.34	63.15	0–1,254		
Violent Misconduct	3.89	6.49	0–82		
History Substance Abuse			0–1	22.8%	77.2%
History of Truancy			0–1	29.3%	70.7%
Emotional Abuse			0–1	81.5%	18.5%
Abandoned			0–1	88.5%	11.5%
Medical Neglect			0–1	95.7%	4.3%
Supervision Neglect			0–1	77%	23%
Sexual Abuse			0–1	86%	14%
Physical Neglect			0–1	90.8%	9.2%
Physical Abuse			0–1	84.1%	15.9%
Youth Violent To Family			0–1	75.2%	24.8%
Youth Suicidal			0–1	89.1%	10.9%
Youth Mentally Ill			0–1	85.6%	14.4%
Youth Sexually Deviant			0–1	81.5%	18.5%
Youth Danger to Self			0–1	81.9%	18.1%
Youth Danger to Others			0–1	29.7%	70.3%
Youth Gang Related			0–1	82.7%	17.3%
Family Poverty	.74	.71	0–2		
Chaotic Home	.98	.75	0–2		
African American			0–1	61.1%	38.9%
Hispanic			0–1	60.9%	39.1%
Male			0–1	5.5%	94.5%
Capital Murder			0–1	94.2%	5.8%
Age	15.88	1.17	10.8–18.9		
Sentence Length	10.62	8.64	.09–40		
Time in Custody	3.06	1.30	.05–8.32		

offender contact, a fight with bodily injury, a fight with no injury, and threatening another with weapon during the youth's current commitment. Table 1 contains descriptive statistics for all study variables.

Analytical strategy

At the bivariate level, we performed difference of means t-tests comparing youth with criminal character to those without for continuous or count variables, cross-tabulations for dichotomous variables with Pearson χ^2 measure of association, and

Kruskal–Wallis H tests for ordinal variables with Pearson χ^2 measure of association. Effects sizes in Cohen's d for continuous variables and Cramér's V for binary and ordinal variables were also calculated. At the multivariate level, negative binomial regression models regressed total misconduct and violent misconduct on criminal character and 29 other covariates. Negative binomial regression is the appropriate estimation strategy for outcome variables that are count data with evidence of overdispersion (Gardner et al., 1995). The likelihood-ratio test of alpha was significant in both regression models, which confirms that negative binomial, as opposed to Poisson regression, is the correct estimation strategy.

Findings

Bivariate Associations for Youth by Criminal Character

Table 2 shows group differences for youth by criminal character. Numerous differences in terms of delinquency career, adverse childhood experiences, psychopathology, and sociodemographic features differentiate youth by their criminal character status. Youth with criminal character have more referrals, placements, detention days, and adjudications than those without criminal character. Those with criminal character also had more truancy, substance abuse, violence perpetration, suicidal thoughts and behaviors, and mental illness. Criminal character youth are disproportionately Hispanic or African American, experienced family poverty, and experienced chaotic homes. However, they are less likely to be capital murderers. The only variables where there were not group differences by criminal character were danger to self, gang related, male, age, sentence length, and time in custody.

Negative Binomial Regression Model for Total Misconduct

Table 3 shows negative binomial regression models for total misconduct and violent misconduct with all of the covariates from the bivariate analyses specified as controls. Criminal character was positively associated (IRR = 1.12, BSE = 0.05, $z = 2.52$) with total misconduct, that is, those identified as having criminal character engaged in more institutional misconduct. Several covariates in the model also had significant associations with total misconduct. Prior placements, prior detention days, history of truancy, sexual abuse, physical abuse, youth sexual deviance, youth danger to self, youth danger to others, and African American were positively associated with total misconduct. In contrast, prior referrals, supervision neglect, gang status, age, capital murder status, and sentence length were negatively associated with total misconduct.

Negative Binomial Regression Model for Violent Misconduct

Criminal character was positively associated (IRR = 1.10, BSE = 0.05, $z = 2.92$) with violent misconduct meaning those identified as having criminal character

Table 2 Bivariate associations for youth by criminal character

Criminal character					
Variable	No	Yes	t or χ^2	d/V	p value
Prior Referrals	3.74	4.99	-7.89	-.28	< .001
Prior Placements	3.00	4.33	-7.77	-.28	< .001
Prior Detention Days	77.94	84.73	-2.48	-.09	< .05
Prior Adjudications	2.12	2.60	-5.85	-.21	< .001
Total Misconduct	30.60	44.17	-6.07	-.22	< .001
Violent Misconduct	3.21	4.45	-5.35	-.19	< .001
History Substance Abuse	70.4%	83%	71.2	.15	< .001
History of Truancy	66.7%	74.1%	20.6	.08	< .001
Emotional Abuse	12.6%	23.6%	63.1	.14	< .001
Abandoned	8.5%	14.1%	24.3	.09	< .001
Medical Neglect	2.4%	5.8%	23.2	.09	< .001
Supervision Neglect	16.5%	28.6%	64.6	.14	< .001
Sexual Abuse	11.4%	16.4%	16.4	.07	< .001
Physical Neglect	5.5%	12.5%	45.3	.12	< .001
Physical Abuse	11%	20%	47.7	.12	< .001
Youth Violent To Family	12.6%	33.5%	188.6	.24	< .001
Youth Suicidal	2.2%	10.1%	78.9	.16	< .001
Youth Mentally Ill	4.8%	14.4%	80.2	.16	< .001
Youth Sexually Deviant	6.2%	20.8%	138.1	.21	< .001
Youth Danger to Self	17%	17.7%	.25	.01	ns
Youth Danger to Others	66.9%	72.1%	10	.06	< .01
Youth Gang Related	16.5%	17.9%	.99	.02	ns
Family Poverty	.59	.86	105.6	.20	< .001
Chaotic Home	.71	1.19	280.9	.32	< .001
African American	42.7%	57.3%	21.44	.08	< .001
Hispanic	49.9%	50.1%	5.17	-.04	< .05
Male	48.2%	51.8%	3.56	-.03	ns
Age	15.91	15.87	0.96	.03	ns
Capital Murder	60.5%	39.5%	13.97	-.06	< .001
Sentence Length	10.51	10.90	-1.27	-.04	ns
Time in Custody	3.04	3.12	-1.72	-.06	ns

engage in more institutional violent misconduct. Several covariates for violent misconduct were similar to total misconduct in terms of significance and direction. These include prior placements, prior detention days, history of truancy, supervision neglect, physical abuse, youth danger to self, gang related, chaotic home, African American, age, capital murder status, and sentence length. Several new effects emerged. Prior adjudications, abandoned, Hispanic, and male were positively associated with violent misconduct. Emotional abuse was negatively associated with violent misconduct. Prior referrals, sexual abuse, youth sexually

Table 3 Negative binomial regressions models for total misconduct and violent misconduct

Variable	Total Misconduct		Violent Misconduct	
	IRR (BSE)	z	IRR (BSE)	z
Criminal Character	1.12 (.05)	2.52**	1.10 (.05)	2.29*
Prior Referrals	.94 (.02)	-2.92**	.97 (.02)	-1.33
Prior Placements	1.13 (.02)	5.93***	1.07 (.02)	3.42***
Prior Detention Days	1.01 (.01)	2.90**	1.0 (.003)	3.02**
Prior Adjudications	1.02 (.02)	1.15	1.04 (.02)	1.99*
History Substance Abuse	1.07 (.06)	1.12	1.09 (.06)	1.58
History of Truancy	1.18 (.06)	2.36*	1.18 (.07)	2.66**
Emotional Abuse	.94 (.08)	-0.77	.86 (.06)	-2.26*
Abandoned	1.05 (.08)	0.66	1.18 (.08)	2.37*
Medical Neglect	.98 (.15)	-0.16	.94 (.12)	-0.51
Supervision Neglect	.80 (.05)	-4.02***	.80 (.06)	-3.19***
Sexual Abuse	1.16 (.08)	2.03*	1.14 (.10)	1.50
Physical Neglect	1.11 (.10)	1.07	1.18 (.10)	1.92
Physical Abuse	1.21 (.11)	2.16*	1.18 (.09)	2.08*
Youth Violent To Family	.92 (.05)	-1.68	.98 (.06)	-0.33
Youth Suicidal	.99 (.12)	-0.13	1.08 (.12)	0.70
Youth Mentally Ill	1.18 (.11)	1.68	1.10 (.09)	1.18
Youth Sexually Deviant	1.17 (.08)	2.29*	1.12 (.09)	1.41
Youth Danger to Self	1.61 (.10)	7.53***	1.54 (.10)	6.77***
Youth Danger to Others	1.12 (.06)	2.07*	1.09 (.06)	1.46
Youth Gang Related	.83 (.05)	-2.72**	.85 (.05)	-3.03**
Family Poverty	1.03 (.03)	0.94	1.03 (.04)	0.72
Chaotic Home	1.09 (.05)	2.09*	1.08 (.04)	2.24*
African American	1.41 (.09)	5.17***	1.76 (.15)	6.62***
Hispanic	.98 (.07)	-0.28	1.22 (.10)	2.40*
Male	1.03 (.09)	0.28	2.16 (.31)	5.46***
Age	.71 (.01)	-19.23***	.67 (.02)	-17.80***
Capital Murder	.64 (.08)	-3.79***	.70 (.08)	-3.10**
Sentence Length	.99 (.003)	-4.33***	.99 (.003)	-4.37***
Time in Custody	1.03 (.02)	1.61	.97 (.02)	-1.64
Wald χ^2	2519.69***		2007.96***	

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

deviant, and youth danger to others had null associations with violent misconduct (but significant associations with total misconduct).

Sensitivity Models

To check the robustness of the findings, we re-estimated all models with linear regression to facilitate regression diagnostic checks particularly for multicollinearity,

which are not available in negative binomial models in Stata. Although mean variance inflation factors were appropriate (mean VIFs = 2.13–2.33), two variables—prior referrals and prior placements—had VIFs > 14. As such, these variables were dropped and negative binomial regression models re-estimated. The results were substantively the same especially the associations for the variable of focus. Criminal character was positively associated with total misconduct (IRR = 1.14, BSE = 0.05, $z = 2.85$) and violent misconduct (IRR = 1.12, BSE = 0.06, $z = 2.38$).

We also conducted two additional sensitivity checks to examine whether specification changes to the dependent variable from a count to a dichotomous outcome and whether periodicity in the sample affected the results. When misconduct was measured as a dichotomy and estimated with binary logistic regression, criminal character had nonsignificant associations with misconduct (OR = 0.94, BSE = 1.14, $z = -0.39$) and violent misconduct (OR = 1.14, BSE = 0.10, $z = 1.45$). We also were concerned with period effects since the participants were processed between 1987 and 2011 when there were important historical, social, and due process changes in the juvenile justice system (e.g., abolishment of the death penalty and mandatory life without parole sentences for juveniles). To examine this, we estimated models among youth who were in custody at or below the mean (3.06 years) and among those who were in custody at or above the mean. In models only including participants who had been in custody at or below the mean, criminal character had null associations with total misconduct (coefficient = 0.03, BSE = 0.07, $z = 0.33$) and violent misconduct (coefficient = 0.05, BSE = 0.07, $z = 0.62$). In models only including participants who had been in custody at or above the mean, criminal character had positive associations with total misconduct (coefficient = 0.17, BSE = 0.07, $z = 2.61$) and violent misconduct (coefficient = 0.13, BSE = 0.06, $z = 2.10$).

Discussion

Character issues have been at the core of delinquency since the juvenile court founding as judicial personnel, caseworkers, and clinicians consider the amenability of a youth to treatment and rehabilitation to inform supervision decisions. Unfortunately, most data sets of serious delinquent offenders lack any measure of criminal character, a limitation that the current study was able to surmount. Our empirical exploration of criminal character netted interesting findings that provide a foundation for future research.

Criminal character is relatively common in these data with a prevalence of 55% and is effectively an index of a youth's delinquent career, adverse childhood experiences, psychopathology, and rearing environment. The relatively high prevalence of criminal character raises interesting issues. On one hand, the high prevalence counters notions that correctional officials potentially identify, target, or label a small cadre of youth as having criminal character as seen in the labeling literature (cf., Augustyn et al., 2019; Caudill et al., 2013, 2017; Chenane et al., 2020; Mowen et al., 2018). Indeed, more than one in two youths is designated as having criminal character. Instead, it appears to be tacit recognition by correctional staff that a large proportion of youth in confinement facilities have rather severe

social backgrounds and behavioral histories as shown by copious research (Abram et al., 2003; Heirigs et al., 2019; Pechorro et al., 2013; Pinto et al., 2015; Trulson et al., 2011). Still another interpretation is the criminal character concept might be superfluous to well-established theoretical concepts that capture early emerging and life-long antisocial conduct, such as Moffitt's LCP prototype. Although relatively few youths in the general population comport with the LCP pathway, it is likely that many to most of the youth in the current data fit this developmental pathway since they are already engaging in the most severe forms of delinquency (e.g., murder, rape, armed robbery) and not the more normative forms that adolescence-limited offenders commit (Jolliffe et al., 2017a, 2017b; Kerridge et al., 2020; Testa & Semenza, 2020; Vaughn et al., 2014). From this vantage, it would seem that character issues are part and parcel of offending frequency and severity.

On the other hand, the relatively high prevalence is not consistent with the sensitivity and specificity that one would expect for a classification variable. As such, we encourage measurement development and refinement of the criminal character concept to articulate the forensic and criminological features that most instantiate it. For example, the Measure of Criminal Attitudes and Associates (MCAA; Mills et al., 2002) measures attitudes in four dimensions spanning violence, entitlement, antisocial intent, and associates that would capture criminal character with a stronger measurement protocol than a dichotomous correctional assessment. The MCAA also addresses the critical attitudinal features that are inherent to character instead of simply serving as proxy for serious, violent, and chronic offending. The Measure of Criminal Social Identity (MCSI; Boduszek et al., 2012) is another measure that assays personal bonding with other criminals, psychological salience of an offender's group identity, and attitudes toward other criminals. Theoretically, youth who score high on these types of measures would be at greater risk for continued delinquency and both measures have good reliability and validity at providing empirical linkages between character/criminal identity and offending and recidivism (Boduszek et al., 2012, 2021; Juarez & Howard, 2021; Mills et al., 2002; Sherretts et al., 2017). Moreover, we encourage research employing diverse samples of youth including those with less severe behavioral histories to produce additional estimates of the prevalence of criminal character.

Following from the preceding point, two conceptual areas are potentially useful for clarifying criminal character within a nomological network. Based on evidence that psychopathy is consistently associated with the most serious, violent, and chronic forms of delinquency (Corrado et al., 2015; DeLisi et al., 2014a, 2014b; Flexon & Meldrum, 2013; Geerlings et al., 2020; Vaughn et al., 2008), it is a good place to start to connect criminal character to a broader conceptual framework. Wards with criminal character in these data exhibited some lifestyle and antisocial features of psychopathy especially in the areas of their delinquent career and core self-regulation deficits. We speculate that when making the criminal character assessment, correctional officials were also potentially responding to the interpersonal (e.g., slick, grandiose, manipulative, pushy) and affective (e.g., cold, indifferent, remorseless, guiltless) features of psychopathy among these youth in addition to their archival records. Thus, psychopathy likely forms a core feature of criminal character (see, Aharoni et al., 2011; Cima et al., 2010; Glenn et al., 2009).

Another potential constitutive feature of criminal character also relates to general psychopathology or the “p factor” (Caspi et al., 2014) that encompasses internalizing features, externalizing features, and thought disorder. Here the bivariate analyses are revealing. Youth with criminal character had a volatility, self-destructiveness, and multifaceted deviancy compared to youth without criminal character that involved family violence, suicidal thoughts and behaviors, mental illness, sexual deviancy, and dangerousness toward others. This is a combustible risk profile, but one that has a different valence than simply a serious offender with an extensive delinquency history. We also suspect there is heterogeneity within the criminal character population and it likely comports with existing theoretical models. For example, Moffitt’s (1993, 2018) influential developmental taxonomy, particularly the life-course-persistent offender prototype, are a priori the juveniles that should most embody criminal character especially relative to normative delinquents and abstainers. It is interesting that criminal character had no association with dichotomous measures of institutional misconduct, but did for count measures. As the misconduct count distribution increased and encompassed the most chronic and frequent violators, the character measure became significant. Consequently, there is ample opportunity to expand the conceptualization and measurement of criminal character vis-à-vis other important empirical and theoretical correlates of serious delinquency.

There are important limitations of the current study especially the cross-sectional design and data. It is probable there are period effects in the data where prior eras of juvenile justice system were harsher and likely more amenable to rudimentary labeling processes such as whether a youth had criminal character. The sensitivity analyses clearly showed that with criminal character having significant effects for youth with longer time in custody as opposed to those who more recently placed. It is uncertain whether the criminal character status simply represents the youth’s behavioral and life history at intake or some degree of dynamism or development. These data do not reveal, for instance, whether the criminal character status predated, coincided with, or developed from their delinquency history, adverse childhood experiences, and psychopathology. For example, longitudinal research about dark personality features, moral disengagement, and antisocial behavior found that delinquency increased moral disengagement, narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism but that reciprocal relationships were not seen (Sijtsema et al., 2019). To apply these findings to the present study, it is possible that delinquency, especially serious, violent, and chronic forms, serve as a causal mold that solidifies in criminal character. Alternatively, criminal character might drive conduct problems, but only longitudinal data can answer these questions. Our study also reveals the limitations of using administrative data that were not generated for research purposes. This is especially true for the variable of interest where none of the authors played any role in determining which variables configure into designations of criminal character.

Conclusion

Despite these limitations, we believe this study fills a gap in the literature by making an empirical connection to the long discussed notion that delinquent offenders demonstrate criminal character. Moreover, this designation can serve to distinguish more severe delinquents from other delinquents, even among a cohort of offenders whom all committed serious and/or violent acts. Importantly, we were able to demonstrate that criminal character, as measured in this study, predicted involvement in total and violent institutional misconduct, net the effects of other predictors in the models. However, the models were sensitive to specification of the outcome variable and seemed to only pertain to youth who had been in custody for longer periods. Although we focused only on institutional misconduct, we believe considerations of criminal character connect to a constellation of behaviors relevant to serious delinquents. The earlier the symptoms of criminal character are noticed, the sooner a youth can receive behavioral interventions. Indeed, recidivism once released from the institutional environment, re-offending in the transition to adulthood, and the relationship between criminal character measures as a delinquent and how that label might foretell behavior upon incarceration in an adult prison facility are just a few of the outcomes relevant to the study of criminal character among serious delinquent offenders. A focus on such outcomes offer prime research implications for us and others in the study of how measures tapping criminal character can be used to understand serious delinquency.

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