

Assessing Juvenile Psychopathy: Developmental and Legal Implications

Adolescent Development and Juvenile Justice

Psychopath. The word alone evokes powerful emotions and images. Attaching that label to a juvenile offender is a serious charge, and should be done so with caution, especially given that the standard assessment tools for psychopathy were originally developed for adults, not juveniles. As the MacArthur Research Network on Adolescent Development and Juvenile Justice has shown, and as the U.S. juvenile justice system recognizes, adolescent offenders are different from adults in important ways. Therefore, simply applying adult measures of psychopathy to juveniles may overlook important aspects of their developmental stage.

Gaining a better understanding of juvenile psychopathy is imperative given that judges are facing increasing pressures from burgeoning caseloads and shifting public policies to waive juveniles to adult courts. In making their determinations of whether youth should be tried as adults, judges often consider potential for future violence and amenability to treatment in the juvenile system. To help them in their decision-making, judges often rely on the results of psychological assessments. For adults suspected of psychopathic tendencies, the most highly regarded assessment tool is Hare's Revised Psychopathy Checklist (PCL-R). Given its effectiveness in predicting tendencies toward future violence, the PCL-R has been adapted, with only slight modifications, for youth.

The Network has supported research examining the course of psychopathy from adolescence into adulthood, asking in essence: Once a psychopath, always a psychopath?

What Makes a Psychopath?

By anyone's judgment, psychopathy is a serious disorder, characterized by both emotional detachment and antisocial behavior. Psychopaths are typically charismatic individuals who readily manipulate others and engage in risky behaviors designed to satisfy their own personal needs. Their lack of conscience leaves them with little or no concern for the welfare of others. The prototypical psychopath has been described as superficially charming and intelligent, but who also is insincere and untruthful, egocentric, and lacking in remorse and shame. Their propensity for violence is high, and their amenability to treatment low.

Determining Whether an Individual Is a Psychopath

The most widely used measure for assessing adult psychopathy is the PCL-R. The PCL-R consists of 20 items measuring emotional detachment (e.g., callousness, egocentricity, superficial charm, shallow affect) and chronic unstable and antisocial behavior (e.g., irresponsibility, boredom, proneness, parasitic lifestyle, impulsivity). The PCL-R, used in studies of adult offenders, has clearly shown that psychopaths—individuals who score 30 or more on these assessments—are four times as likely to commit a future violent crime than are nonpsychopathic offenders.

Given the effectiveness of the PCL-R in predicting future violence among adults, researchers have suggested adapting it to juveniles. The result is the PCL-Youth Version (PCL-YV). The youth version of the PCL is composed of essentially the same 20 items as the PCL-R. Although the PCL-YV modifies the scoring criteria of certain items to focus somewhat more on peer, family, and school adjustment, adolescents are presumed to manifest psychopathy in virtually the same way as adults.

Table 1 shows the various measures in the two PCL versions. Italicized items are those that differ in the youth version.

Table 1. PCL-YV and PCL-R* Items

Emotional Detachment Items	Antisocial Behavior Items	Unclassified Items
Glibness/superficial charm	Need for stimulation, proneness to boredom	Impersonal sexual behavior <i>Promiscuous sexual behavior</i>
Grandiose sense of self worth	Parasitic lifestyle	Unstable interpersonal relationships <i>Many short-term marital relationships</i>
Pathological lying	Poor anger control <i>Poor behavior controls</i>	Criminal versatility
Conning, manipulative	Early behavior problems	
Lack of remorse, guilt	Lacks goals <i>Lacks realistic goals</i>	
Shallow affect	Impulsivity	
Callous/lack of empathy	Irresponsibility	
Failure to accept responsibility for actions	Juvenile delinquency	
	Serious violation of conditional release; <i>Revocation of conditional release</i>	

*PCL-R items are printed in *italics* only when they differ from PCL:YV items

Network researchers compared PCL assessments over time for 200 juveniles versus 120 adults, divided evenly between “psychopathic” and “non-psychopathic” individuals. Adolescents and adults were recruited from secure facilities and interviewed and assessed at four different times: baseline, one month, one year, and two years. The researchers also assessed three developmental characteristics: responsibility (including resistance to peer pressure), perspective, and self-control.

Preliminary results suggest that juveniles’ scores on the PCL-YV, relative to adults, declined more over time. Interestingly, among the adults, approximately one-third also exhibited a decline in PCL-R scores. However, a little more than one-half of the adults remained stable and a small proportion scored higher over time.

One logical conclusion, the researchers suggest, is that the decline in scores among teens may stem from their increasing maturity. Immaturity is, by definition, something individuals outgrow, whereas psychopathy is presumed to be a stable disorder. As such, an association between measures of immaturity and measures of psychopathy would suggest that PCL scores in adolescence may be inflated by developmental immaturity and may decrease as these offenders mature. Indeed, further analysis showed that for some of the psychosocial maturity measures (consideration of others, self-control), increases in maturity were associated with decreases in PCL-YV scores.

Are These Adapted Assessments Effective in Identifying Youth Who Will Persist in Their Antisocial Behavior?

Adolescence is a time of dramatic developmental changes, and some teens might outgrow some of the traits that often look like defining characteristics of psychopathy, such as proneness to boredom, thrill-seeking, impulsivity, and poor behavioral control. Consider *need for stimulation* and *impulsivity*, two items in both the adult and juvenile assessment tools. Other studies by Network researchers, as well as other scientists, have shown that these two characteristics are typically stable from childhood to mid-adolescence, increase from mid- to late adolescence (approximately ages 16-19), and then decline over the course of adulthood. Similarly, because adolescents generally have more limited perspective and capacity for self-direction than adults, the items *lack of goals* and *irresponsibility* also may be problematic. Adolescents also typically have a limited sense of long-term consequences, both of which may inflate their scores on the items, *lack of empathy/callousness* and *failure to accept responsibility*. The considerable fluctuations of identity during adolescence may also affect scores on the *grandiose sense of self-worth* item.

Because many of these conditions are normal and often transient developmental characteristics of adolescence it may be a mistake to use these as markers of an irredeemable character, when the putative “psychopathy” may dissipate with age. Although the assessment tools are effective in predicting short-term outcomes among antisocial youth, the long-term predictive validity of these measures remains untested in adolescence. Network researchers and others are continuing to assess what role these traits may or may not play in the evaluation of psychopathy among juveniles.

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- **Adolescence is a period of enormous developmental change.**
 - **The adult markers of psychopathy may not apply to youth.**
 - **Courts and other professionals currently use only slightly modified adult assessment tools to identify youth psychopaths.**
 - **We do not know whether these assessment tools are accurate, valid, and stable indicators of juveniles’ long-term probability of recidivism or rehabilitation.**
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Policy and Practice Implications

It has long been known that the PCL predicts psychopathic tendencies relatively well in adults. Several recent studies have indicated that it also reliably predicts short-term violence among adolescents. Based on these findings, some researchers are recommending that the PCL measures of psychopathy be routinely administered in assessing juvenile offenders. When short-term decisions are being made about these juveniles (e.g., placement in a secure vs. nonsecure setting for six months), the use of these tools may be warranted. However, there is currently little empirical support for using assessments of psychopathy to inform long-term decisions, including whether to waive juveniles to the adult criminal justice system. We do not know whether these measures are accurate, valid, and stable indicators of juveniles’ long-term probability of recidivism or rehabilitation. Because so much hangs in the balance, it is imperative that the assessments used to make potentially life-altering decisions be based on accurate and valid indicators.

This is not to say that youth should not be held accountable for their crimes. But until we have developed better tools for assessing psychopathic traits in adolescents—or determining that the traits used to gauge psychopathy among adults also apply to adolescents—courts should not rely solely on these current assessment tools in their decisions to waive to adult court youth who appear to exhibit “classic” signs of psychopathy.

For more information

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The Research Network on Adolescent Development and Juvenile Justice is an interdisciplinary, multi-institutional program focused on building a foundation of sound science and legal scholarship to support reform of the juvenile justice system. The network conducts research, disseminates the resulting knowledge to professionals and the public, and works to improve decision-making and to prepare the way for the next generation of juvenile justice reform.