

Depression and Delinquency: A Review of Research

Turgut Ozkan

The Department of Criminology, Sociology, and Geography, Arkansas State University, AR 72467, USA

Received: May 25, 2017; **Accepted:** June 01, 2017; **Published:** June 10, 2017

Introduction

Although the relationship between mental disorders and antisocial conducts has attracted much scholarly attention, the issue has not been resolved yet [1]. Part of the reason is the use of varying target populations, measurement differences, type of mental illness, and a lack of controlling antecedent variables that correlate with both outcomes. Regarding the type of mental illness, one particular interest, the depression-delinquency/crime relationship is particularly important due to the high prevalence rates¹ of depression and its somewhat obscure relationship with antisocial conducts, especially delinquency.

According to the most recent definition by American Psychiatric Association, major depressive disorder is a common and serious medical illness that has a negative impact on one's feeling, thinking and actions through the induction of feelings of sadness, and/or a loss of interest in social activities [2]. Depression is generally characterized by a number of symptoms, such as difficulty in concentrating, loss of interest in activities once enjoyed, hopelessness, feelings of worthlessness, and sometimes, self-harming thoughts and tendencies [3]. Depression influences the thinking style through reinforcing negative thoughts about the self and others [4,5]. These characteristics of depression link this psychological problem to antisocial conducts, to the point of self-harm, even suicide.

While a typical depressed adult is mostly expected to appear sad and withdrawn, depressive disorders in youth can be coupled with irritable mood and aggressiveness [6]. The symptoms and treatment options may show variability for children and adolescents [4]. For this reason, the depression-delinquency link should perhaps be observed with different lenses, for the target population experiencing adolescence and emerging adulthood. Currently, we know that there are some risk factors that may influence the emergence of depressive symptoms among the youth, such as family history of suicide, childhood sexual abuse, personality factors, peer affiliations and school success [5]. On the contrary, we do not know much about the causal sources of early onset of depression [7].

There are notable findings regarding the ill effects of depression. In a study on a representative sample of the U.S population provided

¹According to World Health Organization's (WHO) estimates, there are 300 million people who are suffering from depression in the world (<http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs369/en/>).

Corresponding author: Turgut Ozkan

✉ tozkan@astate.edu

Assistant Professor, the Department of Criminology, Sociology, and Geography
Arkansas State University, AR 72467, USA.

Tel: 870-972-3705

Citation: Ozkan T. Depression and Delinquency: A Review of Research. *Acta Psychopathol.* 2017, 3:S1.

by the National Epidemiologic Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions, individuals diagnosed with major depressive disorder were found to be more vulnerable to involvement in violence than those not diagnosed with the same problem in the general population [1]. In a population study based on 47,158 individuals in Sweden, Fazel et al. [8] documented that the risk of violent crime can be higher for individuals with depression symptoms among the youth. Specifically, during a follow-up period of 3.2 years, 3.7% of the depressed men and 0.5% of the depressed women violently offended after diagnosis [8]. Depression resulting in antisocial conducts is more pronounced for young individuals, though. There is accumulating evidence that depression can be predictors of youth delinquency [9,10]. Similarly, Anderson et al. [11] reported that depressed adolescents have a substantially increased probability of involvement in property crime, while there was little evidence concerning the likelihood of engaging in violent crime or the selling of illicit drugs in their study. On the other hand, involvement in bullying and substance abuse were found to be related to depression. Youths who were frequently involved in bullying—perpetrators or victims—were more than twice as likely to report depressive symptoms in comparison to those who were not involved in bullying [12].

Examination of cross-sectional and longitudinal studies on depression and delinquency in adolescents reveals that there are gender differences in prevalence and change over time, as well as the co-occurrence of the two [13]. Females report higher levels of depression across countries [14,15], and the depression is twice as likely to hit females than males [16]. The same relationship

does hold for the offender population as well. Depression is more common among the female offender population than the male offender population [17]. In addition, depression plays a different role for suicidal ideation among females [18], while peer rejections are more likely for males suffering from depression [19]. Finally, females seem to be more vulnerable to the early onset of depression, and depressed girls are more likely to be involved with antisocial behaviors compared to their non-depressed peers [3].

Causal Explanation

Obeidallah and Earls [3] discuss three theoretical pathways in general that depression may lead to antisocial behavior. First, depression may cause a feeling of indifference regarding one's own personal safety and the consequences of their actions, a factor that can easily turn into criminogenic outcomes. Second, depression may cause withdrawal, low self-esteem, and peer rejection, which may, in turn, result in delinquency. Depressive symptoms lower perceived peer acceptance in both girls and boys [20], although the peer rejection-delinquency link is clearer for males [19]. Finally, weaker attachments to prosocial institutions due to a lack of interest and ability to blend in environments such as school or leisure activities. This relates to diminishing social bonds that fail to keep one within prosocial institution's influence zone [21].

However, the issue is more complicated than that. The question of which one precedes the other is not crystal clear. In Wolff and Ollendick's [13] review, three main explanations behind the link between depression and delinquency are worth mentioning regarding this problem: shared risk factors, the failure model, and the acting out model. Briefly, the shared risk model suggests that both problems have common sources that give rise to each separately, such as genetic effects [22] or social structural positions and stressful life events [23]. The failure model suggests that early delinquency results in negative social outcomes such as peer rejection or diminished social supports, which in turn result in depression [24]. Finally, the acting out model predicts that depression may be channeled into aggression or deviancy.

On one hand, it is argued that antisocial conducts may result in a depressed mood due to alienation/rejection by family/peers during adolescence [25] and blockage in developmental well-being, which creates problems during adulthood in domains such as family, work or education [26]. In other words, antisocial behaviors can increase depression in the long term because involvement in delinquency has the potential to block future opportunities during the adulthood, thus creating more depression in the future [27]. On the other hand, it is also plausible that depressed mood can also influence subsequent antisocial behaviors [25,28]. This is the main argument of the "acting out" hypothesis.

There is also the possibility that both of these unwanted outcomes can feed each other [23,29,30]. Adolescents with co-occurring depression and delinquent behaviors experience

worse outcomes in comparison to adolescents with only depressive or delinquent symptoms [31]. While the relative strength of these hypothesized co-occurring forces is not clear, recent studies emphasize the fact that depression better predicts delinquency than delinquency predicts depression [32]. That is, depressive symptoms predict changes in delinquency better than delinquency predicts changes in depression [32].

Depression has not always solely been associated with offending. There is a potential relationship between victimization and depression as well. While one can be drawn into depression after a violent victimization experience (i.e., sexual), a similar relationship can occur in the opposite direction. Studies have documented that individuals are not at their best in assessing risky situations during depression. For example, moderate/severe depression was found to be associated with an elevated risk of unwanted first pregnancy [33]. Sweeting et al. [34] found a positive relationship between victimization and depression, with depression's effect on victimization more pronounced among 15-year old males. Vulnerability/resiliency to suicidal responses is common among depressed individuals [5]. For some specific offenses (i.e., bullying), both offenders and victims tend to show the very same psychiatric problems—depression—during early adulthood [35].

General Strain Theory

There is one particular crime theory that focuses on stressors, negative emotionality, and delinquent outcomes. Agnew [36] suggested General Strain Theory (GST) as a theoretical linkage between strains and antisocial outcomes. GST is based on the idea that strains and stressors—as a result of negative relationships with others—trigger negative emotions, such as anger and frustration in the absence of an appropriate coping mechanism. In this framework, Agnew [36] argued that crime might be a solution when a depressed person sees this as a way of reducing emotional pressure (similar to the acting out model). For example, substance abuse could be a coping mechanism for the depressed [37]. But GST expands its arguments to virtually all types of strained emotions and all types of crimes including violent, property or substance abuse.

There is some evidence regarding the effect of strains on delinquency. Negative life events, life hassles, negative relationships with adults, and parental fighting were found to be linked to delinquency, whereas neighborhood problems, unpopularity with the opposite sex, or occupational strain were not found to be related to delinquent outcomes [38]. In contrast, Paternoster and Mazerolle [39] found that neighborhood problems, negative life events, school and peer hassles as well as negative relationships with adults were associated with delinquency. Unfortunately, what type of strains can be considered as clinically-assessed depressive symptoms is not clear in most empirical tests of GST.

While GST is not specifically based on depression, its focus on negative emotionality makes the theory relevant for the depression-delinquency link. Among the studies testing the main

premises of GST, interpersonal strains were found to be more pronounced for male delinquency [40]. In another study, Piquero and Sealock [41] found that depression did not influence either interpersonal or property offending. But the authors suggested that emotional and spiritual coping skills may inhibit the effect of depression on property offending. Depression failed to exert a significant effect on either interpersonal or property offending [41]. Also, one test of GST showed that the main emotion that is related to delinquency is anger, rather than depression [42].

There is some evidence that delinquency might provide a relief for those distressed. For example, Liu [18] found that delinquency moderates the relationship between emotional distress and suicidal gestures, especially for girls. The author also noted that conforming girls who are under high emotional distress are more at risk for suicidal gestures than are distressed delinquent girls because the former might have gained a relief by opposing conventional values.

What Can Influence the Depression and Delinquency Association?

It is important to bear in mind that there could be potential factors that can diminish, increase, or nullify the effect of depression. For example, while depression during adolescence can increase the likelihood of adult offending, depression in combination with substance use has a greater effect on adult offending [43]. Furthermore, there are mediating effects that can take the significance away from depression's effect on the behavioral outcome. For instance, Clarke [44] found that the effect of depression disappeared when impulsivity included in the model predicting problem gambling as an outcome. This is an important finding since depression can be associated with higher levels of impulsivity for both sexes [19]. Depression, indeed, can diminish one's potential to use self-regulating mechanism. There is a good chance that one's level of self-control can play a part in suppressing the effect of depression. For example, Remster [45] found that the effect of depression on delinquency disappeared when self-control was controlled in her model. On the other hand, exposure to violence is particularly important. In one study, exposure to violence in the home environment was linked to psychological distress among adolescents, and self-reported violent behaviors were associated with both depression and future expectations [46]. Exposure to violence can be linked to hostility, and be predictive of depression for females [47,48].

Conclusion

The relationship between depression and crime is important for criminal justice practitioners. It is known that the prevalence

of mental problems (in general, not just depression) is very high, especially in juvenile justice settings [6]. The experience of incarceration may increase the likelihood of depression for adolescents. Furthermore, incarceration in emerging adulthood is an important stressor that can have long-lasting mental effects in adulthood [49]. It still remains a challenge for juvenile justice authorities to properly address those mental problems with a hope to reduce recidivism.

Depression should be a risk factor in risk assessments both in correctional facilities and community supervision. Risk assessment for violence should be conducted for inmates with depression symptoms. Instead of relying solely on aggressive behavior problems in delinquency prevention programs, depressive symptoms should be screened as well during community supervision. [29]. Also, gender-responsive programs are more likely to produce positive outcomes due to documented differences between males and females regarding depression-related outcomes [19]. Depression is more common among incarcerated females in general [50], and gender-specific risk, responsively, and need analysis would be particularly useful [51].

As for scholarly efforts, more research is needed in terms of revealing how depression plays out with other emotional and behavioral factors, such as self-control, moral disengagement, future expectations, and victimization. More research is needed to reveal how early onset depression affects future antisocial conducts with an eye on family and neighborhood dynamics as well as substance use [3]. On the other hand, we know that depression is more common for females in comparison to males, but we need to know more about the effect of depression on the differential victimization rate among females and males. This is important, especially because depression is twice as likely for females than males. Victimization, specifically, sexual abuse is known to cause emotional distress. Females are more likely to be sexually victimized than males, and also more likely to be victimized in more serious forms.

Finally, early onset depression is a serious mental issue as it may transform into other mental problems [7]. What factors—including genetics, see Levinson [52]—co-occur or precede the early onset of depression should be investigated. In short, the triangle of victimization, depression, and delinquency should be further investigated, preferably using longitudinal data controlling for potential mediators and moderators. In order to uncover the true nature of the delinquency-depression link, longitudinal studies are needed [13]. This will also reduce the ambiguity regarding the dilemma of whether delinquency or depression precedes the other.

References

- 1 Pulay AJ, Dawson DA, Hasin DS, Goldstein RB, Ruan WJ, et al. (2008) Violent behavior and DSM-IV psychiatric disorders: results from the national epidemiologic survey on alcohol and related conditions. *J Clin Psychiatry* 69: 12-22.
- 2 American Psychiatric Association (2013) Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (5th edn.). In: DSM-5. Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Publishing.
- 3 Obeidallah DA, Earls FJ (1999) Adolescent girls: the role of depression in the development of delinquency. Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice.
- 4 Dopheide JA (2006) Recognizing and treating depression in children and adolescents. *Am J Health Syst Pharm* 63: 233-243.
- 5 Fergusson DM, Beautrais AL, Horwood LJ (2003) Vulnerability and resiliency to suicidal behaviours in young people. *Psychol Med* 33: 61-73.
- 6 Grisso T (2008) Adolescent offenders with mental disorders. *Future Child* 18: 143-164.
- 7 Kovacs M (1996) Presentation and course of major depressive disorder during childhood and later years of the life span. *J Am Acad Child Adolesc Psychiatry* 35: 705-715.
- 8 Fazel S, Wolf A, Chang Z, Larsson H, Goodwin GM, et al. (2015) Depression and violence: a Swedish population study. *Lancet Psychiatry* 2: 224-232.
- 9 Reynolds AD, Crea TM (2015) Peer influence processes for youth delinquency and depression. *J Adolesc* 43: 83-95.
- 10 Rowe R, Maughan B, Eley T (2006) Links between antisocial behavior and depressed mood: the role of life events and attributional style. *J Abnorm Child Psychol* 34: 283-292.
- 11 Anderson DM, Cesur R, Tekin E (2015) Youth depression and future criminal behavior. *Econ Inq* 53: 294-317.
- 12 Saluja G, Iachan R, Scheidt PC, Overpeck MD, Sun W, et al. (2004) Prevalence of and risk factors for depressive symptoms among young adolescents. *Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med* 158: 760-765.
- 13 Wolff JC, Ollendick TH (2006) The comorbidity of conduct problems and depression in childhood and adolescence. *Clin Child Fam Psychol Rev* 9: 201-220.
- 14 Van de Velde S, Bracke P, Levecque K (2010) Gender differences in depression in 23 European countries. Cross-national variation in the gender gap in depression. *Soc Sci Med* 71: 305-313.
- 15 Weissman M (1993) Sex differences in rates of depression: cross-national perspectives. *J Affect Disord* 29: 77-84.
- 16 Nolen-Hoeksema S (1987) Sex differences in unipolar depression: evidence and theory. *Psychol Bull* 101: 259-282.
- 17 Dixon A, Howie P, Starling J (2004) Psychopathology in female juvenile offenders. *J Child Psychol Psychiatry Allied Discip* 45: 1150-1158.
- 18 Liu RX (2004) The conditional effects of gender and delinquency on the relationship between emotional distress and suicidal ideation or attempt among youth. *J Adolesc Res* 19: 698-715.
- 19 Vaske J, Gehring K (2010) Mechanisms linking depression to delinquency for males and females. *Fem Criminol* 5: 8-28.
- 20 Rudolph KD, Ladd G, Dinella L (2007) Gender differences in the interpersonal consequences of early-onset depressive symptoms. *Merrill Palmer Q* 53: 461-488.
- 21 Hirschi T (1969) Causes of delinquency. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- 22 O'Connor TG, McGuire S, Reiss D, Hetherington EM, Plomin R (1998) Co-occurrence of depressive symptoms and antisocial behavior in adolescence: A common genetic liability. *J Abnorm Psychol* 107: 27-37.
- 23 De Coster S, Heimer K (2001) The relationship between law violation and depression: an interactionist analysis. *Criminol* 39: 799-836.
- 24 Overbeek G, Biesecker G, Kerr M, Stattin H, Meeus W, et al. (2006) Co-occurrence of depressive moods and delinquency in early adolescence: the role of failure expectations, manipulativeness, and social contexts. *Int J Behav Dev* 30: 433-443.
- 25 Patterson GR, Reid J, Dishion T (1992) A social interactional approach: antisocial boys. Vol 4. Eugene, OR: Castalia Publishing Company.
- 26 Siennick SE (2007) The timing and mechanisms of the offending-depression link. *Criminol* 45: 583-615.
- 27 Hagan J (1997) Defiance and despair: subcultural and structural linkages between delinquency and despair in the life course. *Soc Forces* 76: 119-134.
- 28 Capaldi D (1992) Co-occurrence of conduct problems and depressive symptoms in early adolescent boys: II. A 2-year follow-up at Grade 8. *Dev Psychopathol* 4: 125-144.
- 29 Beyers JM, Loeber R (2003) Untangling developmental relations between depressed mood and delinquency in male adolescents. *J Abnorm Child Psychol* 31: 247-266.
- 30 Overbeek G, Vollebergh W, Meeus W, Engels R, Luijpers E (2001) Course, co-occurrence, and longitudinal associations of emotional disturbance and delinquency from adolescence to young adulthood: a six-year three-wave study. *J Youth Adolesc* 30: 401-426.
- 31 Capaldi DM, Stoolmiller M (1999) Co-occurrence of conduct problems and depressive symptoms in early adolescent boys: III. Prediction to young-adult adjustment. *Dev Psychopathol* 11: 59-84.
- 32 Kofler MJ, McCart MR, Zajac K, Ruggiero KJ, Saunders BE, et al. (2011) Depression and delinquency covariation in an accelerated longitudinal sample of adolescents. *J Consult Clin Psychol* 79: 458-469.
- 33 Hall KS, Richards JL, Harris KM (2017) Social disparities in the relationship between depression and unintended pregnancy during adolescence and young adulthood. *J Adolesc Health* 60: 688-697.
- 34 Sweeting H, Young R, West P, Der G (2006) Peer victimization and depression in early-mid adolescence: a longitudinal study. *Brit J Educ Psycho* 76: 577-594.
- 35 Copeland WE, Wolke D, Angold, A, Costello E (2013) Adult psychiatric outcomes of bullying and being bullied by peers in childhood and adolescence. *JAMA Psychiatry* 70: 419-426.
- 36 Agnew R (1992) Foundation for a general strain theory of crime and delinquency. *Criminol* 30: 47-87.
- 37 Khantzian EJ (1997) The self-medication hypothesis of substance use disorders: a reconsideration and recent applications. *Harv Rev Psychiatry* 4: 231-244.
- 38 Agnew R, White HR (1992) An empirical test of general strain theory. *Criminol* 30: 475-500.
- 39 Paternoster R, Mazerolle P (1994) General strain theory and delinquency: a replication and extension. *J Res Crime Delinq* 31: 235-263.
- 40 Agnew R, Brezina T (1997) Relational problems with peers, gender, and delinquency. *Youth Soc* 29: 84-111.

- 41 Piquero NL, Sealock MD (2000) Generalizing general strain theory: an examination of an offending population. *Justice Q* 17: 449-484.
- 42 Sigfusdottir ID, Asgeirsdottir BB, Gudjonsson GH, Sigurdsson JF (2008) A model of sexual abuse's effects on suicidal behavior and delinquency: the role of emotions as mediating factors. *J Youth Adolesc* 37: 699-712.
- 43 Copeland WE, Miller-Johnson S, Keeler G, Angold A, Costello EJ (2007) Childhood psychiatric disorders and young adult crime: a prospective, population-based study. *Am J Psychiatry* 164: 1668-1675.
- 44 Clarke D (2006) Impulsivity as a mediator in the relationship between depression and problem gambling. *Pers Individ Dif* 40: 5-15.
- 45 Remster B (2014) Self-control and the depression-delinquency link. *Deviant Behav* 35: 66-84.
- 46 DuRant RH, Getts A, Cadenhead C, Emans SJ, Woods ER (1995) Exposure to violence and victimization and depression, hopelessness, and purpose in life among adolescents living in and around public housing. *J Dev Behav Pediatr* 16: 233-237.
- 47 Moses A (1999) Exposure to violence, depression, and hostility in a sample of inner city high school youth. *J Adolesc* 22: 21-32.
- 48 Kimmel DM (2014) Effects of adolescent violent victimization on adult depression: testing heterogeneity for men and women. *Soc Ment Health* 4: 179-196.
- 49 Esposito MH, Lee H, Hicken MT, Porter LC, Herting JR (2017) The consequences of contact with the criminal justice system for health in the transition to adulthood. *Longit Life Course Stud* 8: 57-74.
- 50 Loucks N (2004) Women in prison. In: McIvor G (ed.) *Women who offend*. London: Jessica Kingsley.
- 51 Andrews DA, Bonta J (2010) *The psychology of criminal conduct* (5th edn). New Providence, NJ: LexisNexis Group.
- 52 Levinson DF (2006) The genetics of depression: a review. *Biol Psychiatry* 60: 84-92.