

Childhood Adversity and Delinquency in Youth: Self-Esteem and Depression as Mediators

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Abstract : Childhood adversities refer to situations where a child's basic needs for safety and support are compromised, leading to substantial disruptions in their emotional, cognitive, social, or neurobiological development. Given the prevalence of adversities (8%-39%), their impact on developmental outcomes is challenging to completely avoid. Delinquency is an important consequence of childhood adversities, given its potential causing violence and other forms of victimisation, influencing victims, delinquents, their families, and the whole of society. Studying mediators helps explain the link between childhood adversity and delinquency, which aids in designing effective intervention programs that target explanatory variables to disrupt the path and mitigate the effects of childhood adversities on delinquency. The Dimensional Model of Adversity and Psychopathology suggests that threat-based adversities influence outcomes through emotion processing, while deprivation-based adversities do so through cognitive mechanisms. Thus, considering a wide range of threat-based and deprivation-based adversities and their co-occurrence and their associations with delinquency through cognitive and emotional mechanisms is essential. This study employs the Millennium Cohort Study, tracking the development of approximately 19,000 individuals born across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, representing a nationally representative sample. Parallel mediation models compare the mediating roles of self-esteem (cognitive) and depression (affective) in the associations between childhood adversities and delinquency. Eleven types of childhood adversities were assessed both individually and through latent class analysis, considering adversity experiences from birth to early adolescence. This approach aimed to capture how threat-based, deprived-based, or combined threat and deprived-based adversities are associated with delinquency. Eight latent classes were identified: three classes (low adversity, especially direct and indirect violence; low childhood and moderate adolescent adversities; and persistent poverty with declining bullying victimisation) were negatively associated with delinquency. In contrast, three classes (high parental alcohol misuse, overall high adversities, especially regarding household instability, and high adversity) were positively associated with delinquency. When mediators were included, all classes showed a significant association with delinquency through depression, but not through self-esteem. Among the eleven single adversities, seven were positively associated with delinquency, with five linked through depression and none through self-esteem. The results imply the importance of affective variables, not just for threat-based but also deprivation-based adversities. Academically, this suggests exploring other mechanisms linking adversities and delinquency since some adversities are linked through neither depression nor self-esteem. Clinically, intervention programs should focus on affective variables like depression to mitigate the effects of childhood adversities on delinquency.

Keywords : childhood adversity, delinquency, depression, self-esteem

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