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A Longitudinal, Sibling-Comparison Analysis of Associations between Depression and Delinquency in Adolescence

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Introduction

- An extensive body of research documents the comorbidity between conduct problems and depression in adolescence (Wolff & Ollendick, 2008).
- The importance of treating comorbid depression and conduct problems is heightened by the elevated risk for negative outcomes in adolescents with both disorders (Nottelmann & Jensen, 1997).
- Youth diagnosed with both disorders are two times more likely to attempt suicide than those with depression alone and eight times more likely to make an attempt than those with conduct problems alone (Lewinsohn et al., 1995).
- In addition, those with both depression and conduct disorders were found to have more emotional symptoms, substance abuse and greater functional impairment (Ezpeleta et al., 2006).
- Depression and delinquency are often comorbid, but previous research has not clearly established their temporal relationship. Also, previous studies have been limited in their ability to rule out influences, like family background characteristics, that might confound their association.

Research Questions

- Does delinquency lead to depression or does depression lead to delinquency? Are they mutually influential?
- Will associations be found between delinquency and depression once family background characteristics are controlled by comparing siblings?

Abstract

This study examines the prospective associations between delinquency and depression in adolescence, as previous research suggests that they may be related. The direction of the relationship between these factors was of primary interest. The study controlled for potential confounds using statistical covariates in one analysis and the comparison of siblings in a second analysis.

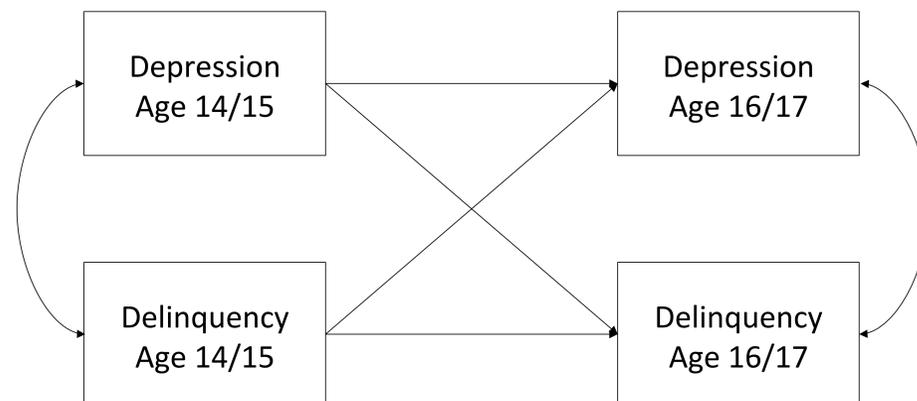
Method

Sample:

- The Children of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 11,495 offspring of a large, nationally representative sample of mothers.
- Ages 14-17

Measures and Analysis:

- Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D; Radloff, 1977)
- Self-reported Delinquency Measure (SRD; Elliott & Huizinga, 1983)
- Covariates: Race, gender, mother's education, family income, birth order, maternal age at childbirth, and maternal history of delinquency
- The following model was tested:



Results

- Depression in ages 14/15 predicted future depression in ages 16/17 ($\beta = .41, p < .001$), and delinquency in ages 14/15 predicted future delinquency in ages 16/17 ($\beta = .37, p < .001$).
- A significant positive association was found between depression at ages 14-15 and delinquency at ages 16-17 ($\beta = .11, p < .05$), and between delinquency at ages 14-15 and depression at ages 16/17 ($\beta = .09, p < .01$).
- Boys had higher levels of delinquency than girls, girls had higher levels of depression than boys ($ps < .001$).
- No gender differences were found in the strength of the associations between delinquency and depression.
- All results were replicated in sibling-comparison analyses.

Discussion

- Significant within-construct associations from ages 14/15 to 16/17 for both depression and delinquency suggests continuity in both outcomes during adolescence.
- Significant between-construct associations between depression and delinquency suggest that depression and delinquency are mutually influential.
- Findings from sibling comparisons suggest that associations found between delinquency and depression are not confounded by family background characteristics.
- Because depression and delinquency are mutually influential, addressing one outcome could serve to reduce or prevent the other.
- Further research should explore possible interventions and treatments to reduce consequences of comorbid depression and delinquency.