



Psychiatry & Behavioral Sciences Section – 2011

I11 An Update on Juvenile Psychopathy and Development

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The goals of this presentation are to briefly review the construct of psychopathy and youth psychopathy instruments, examine developmental concerns that arise from application of the concept to youths, and to explore the validity and utility of this concept in the juvenile population.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by helping forensic evaluators learn the limitations of the concept of psychopathy in juveniles and learn the limitations of certain psychopathy instruments in predicting recidivism in juveniles, particularly females and ethnic minorities.

Psychopathy is a construct with which most forensic practitioners are quite familiar. The presence of this “condition” in adults is considered by many one of the best predictors of general and violent recidivism and, to some extent, amenability to treatment. Recently, the concept of juvenile psychopathy has been proposed and numerous instruments have been developed to qualify and quantify the component traits in children and adolescents.

Labeling a child or adolescent as a psychopath, however, may be problematic for a variety of reasons. Transient, normative developmental phenomenon, and behaviors may be mistaken for fixed, maladaptive, malignant personality patterns. Since “amenability to treatment” and future dangerousness are often important considerations in the juvenile justice system (and to some extent, the adult criminal justice system), this may lead to lengthy, and perhaps unnecessary periods of incarceration for juveniles erroneously identified as psychopaths.

Currently, researchers are attempting to determine whether psychopathy is a valid construct in juveniles and whether its component traits are stable over time (and if so, which ones). However, this research is relatively new and has not yet confirmed or disconfirmed the validity or predictive utility of juvenile psychopathy, particularly in adolescent females and ethnic minority members. Over time, instruments may be developed and employed that will more accurately predict which juveniles are likely to continue offending as adults (particularly violently offending). This should lead to more just legal outcomes for minors, help protect the general public, and preserve the dignity and integrity of the legal process.

Psychopathy, Antisocial Behavior, Juvenile