

Crime Victims' Institute

College of Criminal Justice • Sam Houston State University

Director: Mary M. Breaux, Ph.D.



From Trait to Trauma: Exploring the Overlap Between Psychopathy and Intimate Partner Violence Victimization Among Youth

Chelsey S. Narvey, Ph.D. & Nhi Le, M.A.

Within the criminological literature, psychopathy, victimization, and offending have all been studied extensively. The victim-offender overlap is considered one of the most well-established phenomena in criminology (Gottfredson, 1981; Jennings et al., 2012; Lauritsen & Laub, 2007; Piquero et al., 2005), and the correlation between crime and psychopathy is similarly indicated (DeLisi, 2009, 2016; Geerlings et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2011). More recently, studies have begun to examine the relationship between psychopathy and victimization, finding an existing overlap within this specific population as well. However, little research has been conducted on psychopathy and intimate partner violence (IPV) victimization specifically.

Prior research has demonstrated that individuals who are more likely to act impulsively, have low self-control, or possess callous and unemotional traits are at an increased risk of victimization (Fanti & Kimonis, 2012; Fontaine et al., 2018). This is true for those who exhibit only one of these traits; therefore, an individual who exhibits all or most of these traits may be at an even higher risk. Most of these findings are primarily centered around general victimization. Given that these characteristics can impair decision-making, lead to engagement in high-risk social environments, and increase the likelihood of being in high-risk, unstable relationships, it is reasonable to hypothesize that they may impact the risk of IPV victimization as well. In romantic relationships, emotional dependency, volatility, and conflict are often heightened, and this is particularly true among juveniles. Thus, this relationship warrants further exploration.

Literature Review

Psychopathy is a complex personality construct characterized by interpersonal, affective, and behavioral features, including manipulativeness, lack of empathy,

and impulsivity (Hare & Neumann, 2008). While often associated with violent behavior, psychopathy encompasses a heterogeneous group, and not all individuals with high psychopathy scores engage in criminal activities (Lilienfeld & Watts, 2016). In juvenile populations, particularly those involved in the justice system, psychopathy has been linked to various maladaptive outcomes, including increased risk of victimization (Beaver et al., 2016; Daigle & Teasdale, 2018). With respect to relationships, those with psychopathic traits may be more likely to stay in relationships that are toxic or coercive for a number of reasons, including the following: (1) They may fail to recognize the early signs of abuse and maltreatment; (2) Interpersonal deficits and emotional shallowness may prevent them from leaving or seeking help; or (3) They may want to regain control.

Additionally, youth who are justice-involved (many of whom score high in psychopathy) often have histories of trauma and abuse (Baglivio et al., 2020); accordingly, the convergence of psychopathic traits with these experiences could create heightened vulnerabilities for IPV victimization. Meta-analyses have determined that depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), antisocial personality disorder, and borderline personality disorder have all been significant correlates of IPV victimization (Spencer et al., 2019). Many of these traits co-exist with psychopathy. Moreover, those with more romantic partners are at heightened risk of IPV victimization (Halpern et al., 2009), a characteristic that is common among those high in psychopathy. Finally, in their work examining bullying victimization specifically, Fanti and Kimonis (2012) found that psychopathy increased the likelihood of being a victim of bullying. Consequently, the potential for specific types of victimization among those high in psychopathy exists.

While there may be theoretical reasons to assume this relationship exists, other studies that have examined psychopathy found that it was much more significantly related to IPV perpetration than victimization (Spencer et al., 2024). Though the victim-offender overlap may suggest that those high in psychopathy would be at an increased risk of victimization, other perspectives can argue that they are actually at a decreased risk due to their augmented ability to assess vulnerability in others; their ability to do so suggests that they may take extra steps to hide their own vulnerabilities (Book et al., 2013; Wheeler et al., 2009); this can be especially true in intimate relationships given their shallow affect. Thus, while existing literature suggests a potential link between psychopathy and IPV victimization, findings are mixed, and no studies to date have focused primarily on this relationship in their analyses.

The Current Study

Understanding the link between psychopathy and IPV victimization in justice-involved juveniles is crucial for developing effective intervention strategies. Programs that address the specific needs of this population, taking into account psychopathy-related traits, can help mitigate the risk of victimization and promote healthier relationship behaviors. Additionally, policies that incorporate psychopathy assessments into risk evaluations can enhance the accuracy of IPV risk predictions and inform targeted interventions.

To address the void in the existing literature, the goal of the current study was to answer the following research question: *To what extent is psychopathy predictive of IPV victimization for justice-involved juveniles?* Data from the *Research on Pathways to Desistance, 2000-2010*, were analyzed to answer this question. This secondary longitudinal dataset captures various disciplines of study (e.g., household characteristics, self-reported offending, mental health, victimization) with justice-involved juveniles (Mulvey, 2016; Schubert et al., 2004). Primary investigators interviewed 1,354 adjudicated juveniles in Arizona and Pennsylvania, and conducted follow-up interviews. These follow-up interviews were conducted semiannually during the first three years (up to 36 months) and annually during the remaining seven years (up to 84 months). Full information regarding the measures and data collection can be found at <http://www.pathwaysstudy.pitt.edu>.

Data and Analyses

Dependent Variables: IPV Victimization and Abuse Item Endorsement

To measure IPV victimization, items were drawn from a modified version of The Domestic Violence Inventory (Moffitt et al., 1997, 2006; Straus et al., 1995), which accounts for perpetration and victimization of physical, psychological, emotional, and sexual abuse in romantic relationships. A dichotomous variable was created to separate respondents who answered “yes” to one or more items (regardless of the type of abuse) pertaining to IPV victimization from those who responded “no.” For this sample (see Table 1), 33.75% of the sample were marked as experiencing IPV victimization.

Count variables were created to measure how many abuse-specific items (physical, emotional, and sexual abuse) respondents endorsed. This refers to the frequency of self-reported physical and emotional abuse experiences among respondents. For the present study, the binary marker variable, the count of items endorsed for physical abuse, and the count of items endorsed for emotional abuse were included to assess polyvictimization. On average, participants endorsed 0.61 items related to physical abuse and 1.12 items related to emotional abuse.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the Pathways to Desistance Dataset (N = 1,354)

Variable	Coding/Description	N (%)	M	SD	Min - Max
Age	Age in years		20.026	1.151	18-23
Race	0 = Other	65 (4.80)	2.037	.854	0-3
	1 = White	274 (20.24)			
	2 = Black	561 (41.43)			
	3 = Hispanic	454 (33.53)			
Gender	0 = Female	173 (12.78)	.858	.350	0-1
	1 = Male	1042 (76.96)			
IPV Victim	0 = No marker for IPV victimization	460 (33.97)	.498	.500	0-1
	1 = Marker for IPV victimization	457 (33.75)			
Physical Abuse	Count of items endorsed for physical abuse		.607	1.276	0-8
Emotional Abuse	Count of items endorsed for emotional abuse		1.117	1.678	0-9
PCL:YV Scores	Total PCL Scores		15.907	7.337	0-39

Notes: N = PCL:YV Scores originate from Baseline. Frequency. M = Mean. SD = Standard Deviation. Min = Minimum Value. Max = Maximum Value.

Independent Variable: Psychopathy

Scores from the Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R) were used to operationalize psychopathy in juveniles. Juveniles respond to 20 items, and responses are interpreted and scored by certified clinicians. Items include measures for factors such as egocentricity,

absence of empathy, and superficial charm. Participants with high scores (typically 25 and above) are perceived as high in psychopathy (see Hare, 2003; Hare et al., 2000; Hare & Neumann, 2008). A derivative of the PCL-R, The Hare Psychopathy Checklist: Youth Version (PCL:YV), was administered to the sample at Baseline (Forth & Kosson, 2003; Mulvey, 2016). For this sample (see Table 1), the average PCL:YV score was 15.91, with the lowest score being 0 and the highest being 39.

Covariates

Age, race/ethnicity, and gender were included as covariates, and controlled for their potential effects on the outcome variable of interest (see Table 1). Age data were measured in years (truncated). Gender was coded as either male or female. Race/ethnicity was coded as four categories: Other, White, Black, and Hispanic.

The analytic sample included 1,354 justice-involved youth with a mean age of 20.03 years ($SD = 1.15$, range = 18–23). The majority of the sample identified as Black (41%), followed by Hispanic (34%), White (20%), and Other racial identities (5%). Most participants were male (77%), with females comprising 13% of the sample.

Analytic Strategy

All analyses were performed in Stata version 18. Group comparisons were performed to assess how juveniles who experienced IPV victimization differed from those who did not. To compare means on continuous variables (i.e., PCL:YV, age), independent samples t-tests were performed, with effect sizes reported as *Cohen's D*. To compare categorical variables (i.e., race, gender), Pearson's chi-square tests were performed, with effect sizes reported as *Cramer's V*.

To assess which variables were predictive of a juvenile being marked for IPV victimization (regardless of type), a binary logistic regression was performed. Model fit was interpreted based on log-likelihood, likelihood-ratio tests, and pseudo-R-square (i.e., McFadden, Cox-Snell, Nagelkerke) values. Effect sizes were reported as odds ratios (OR). To assess which variables were predictive of a juvenile endorsing either physical or emotional abuse victimization items, negative binomial regressions were performed. Negative binomial regression was chosen for this assessment to better account for the nature of the items. Model fit was interpreted based on log-likelihood, likelihood-ratio tests, and deviance values. Effect sizes were reported as incident rate ratios (IRR).

Findings

Group comparisons were conducted to examine differences between participants with and without a marker for IPV victimization (Table 2). Mean PCL:YV scores are slightly higher for those with IPV victimization ($M = 15.98$) than those without ($M = 15.09$), though this difference is not statistically significant. Similarly, no significant age differences are observed between the two groups. Gender is not significantly associated with IPV victimization status. However, there is a statistically significant association between race and victimization, with Black participants being overrepresented in the IPV victim group, while Hispanic participants are more frequently found in the non-victim group.

Table 2. Group Comparisons of Youth Marked for IPV Victimization

Variables	No, marker for IPV victimization		Yes, marker for IPV victimization		T/ χ^2	p	D/V
	M/N	SE	M/N	SE			
PCL:YV	15.092	.360	15.979	.373	1.71	.956	-.115
Age	20.055	.055	19.996	.053	.77	.779	-.051
Gender					1.03	.310	.034
Male	83		71				
Female	377		386				
Race					18.59	<.001	.142
Other	22		18				
White	109		87				
Black	160		223				
Hispanic	169		129				

Notes. Physical and emotional abuse items were not included in analyses because participants were required to endorse at least one item of interpersonal violence to be marked as an IPV victim. M = Mean, N = Frequency, SE = Standard Error, T = T-Test, χ^2 = Pearson's Chi-square, D = Cohen's D, V = Cramer's V

To examine the predictors of IPV victimization and endorsement of abuse items, separate regression analyses were conducted: a binary logistic regression (Table 3) and two negative binomial regressions (Table 4).

Predictors of IPV Victimization

Results from the binary logistic regression model (Table 3) indicate that race is the only statistically significant predictor of IPV victimization. Individuals who identified as Black have statistically significant, higher odds of reporting IPV victimization. More specifically, Black participants have more than twice the odds of experiencing IPV victimization.

Other demographic variables, such as gender, were not statistically significant predictors. Similarly, psychopathy scores, measured by the PCL:YV, do not significantly

predict IPV victimization—although the relationship is in the expected positive direction.

Table 3. Assessing Predictors for IPV Victimization Using a Binary Logistic Regression (N = 881).

Variables	B	SE	p	OR
Race (Ref = Other)				
White	.125	.367	.734	1.133
Black	.714	.352	.043*	2.041
Hispanic	.109	.357	.760	1.115
Male	.120	.183	.512	1.128
Age	.041	.059	.493	1.042
PCL:YV	.014	.009	.108	1.015
<i>Model Fit Statistics</i>				
Log-Likelihood	-598.773			
Likelihood Ratio χ^2 (p)	23.688 (.001)			
<i>Pseudo R-Square</i>				
Cox-Snell	.027			
Nagelkerke	.035			
McFadden	.019			

Notes. *p<.05. B = Coefficient. SE = Standard Error. OR = Odds Ratio.

Predictors of Abuse Item Endorsement

Negative binomial regressions were used to assess predictors of the number of physical and emotional abuse items endorsed (Table 4). Across both models, psychopathy scores (PCL:YV) emerge as the only significant predictor.

Table 4. Assessing Predictors for Endorsing Abuse Items Using Negative Binomial Regressions (N = 881).

Variables	Model 1: Physical Abuse Items				Model 2: Emotional Abuse Items			
	B	SE	p	IRR	B	SE	p	IRR
Race (Ref = Other)								
White	.123	.454	.786	1.131	.283	.298	.342	1.327
Black	.634	.433	.144	1.884	.396	.286	.167	1.486
Hispanic	.340	.440	.440	1.404	.034	.292	.906	1.035
Male	-.100	.216	.643	.905	-.308	.145	.832	.970
Age	-.015	.071	.834	.985	.734	.476	.123	1.076
PCL:YV	.029	.105	.006**	1.029	.207	.007	.003**	1.021
<i>Model Fit Statistics</i>								
	-				-			
Log-Likelihood	868.791				1263.6			
	14.850				18			
Likelihood Ratio χ^2 (p)	(.021)				20.339 (.002)			
	1737.58				2527.2			
Deviance (df = 873)	2				36			

Notes. **p<.01. B = Coefficient. SE = Standard Error. IRR = Incident Rate Ratio.

In Model 1 (Physical Abuse), psychopathy is significantly associated with increased endorsement of abuse items, indicating that for each unit increase in psychopathy scores, the rate of physical abuse item endorsement increases by approximately 2.9%. Similarly, in Model 2

(Emotional Abuse), psychopathy is also a significant predictor, corresponding to a 2.1% increase in emotional abuse item endorsement per unit increase in psychopathy. None of the demographic variables, including race, gender, and age, reached statistical significance in either negative binomial model.

Summary

Together, these findings suggest that psychopathy traits play a consistent and significant role in predicting the extent of abuse item endorsement, while race was associated with increased odds of reporting IPV victimization. Other demographic characteristics, including gender and age, did not significantly contribute to the prediction of either IPV victimization or abuse item endorsement in this sample.

Discussion

The present study sought to examine predictors of intimate partner violence (IPV) victimization and abuse endorsement among a sample of adjudicated youth using data from the *Pathways to Desistance* dataset. Specifically, this study tested whether psychopathic traits, as measured by the Hare Psychopathy Checklist: Youth Version (PCL:YV), along with demographic variables, were associated with IPV victimization and the frequency of self-reported physical and emotional abuse experiences. Findings from logistic and negative binomial regressions provide nuanced insights into the relationship between psychopathy and IPV experiences in justice-involved youth, challenging and extending current understandings in the empirical literature.

Psychopathy and Abuse Experiences

Consistent with prior research linking psychopathy to victimization (Beaver et al., 2016; Daigle & Teasdale, 2018; Narvey, 2020), this study found that higher psychopathy scores significantly predicted greater endorsement of both physical and emotional abuse items. Specifically, increases in PCL:YV scores were associated with modest but statistically significant increases in reported abuse experiences, with incidence rate ratios suggesting a 2–3% increase in abuse item endorsement per unit increase in psychopathy. These findings align with work by Narvey (2020), which found that youth high in psychopathic traits are more prone to violence and victimization. However, the current study extends these findings by highlighting the association not with perpetration, but with victimization and abuse exposure in

intimate partner relationships specifically—a relationship that has been relatively understudied in justice-involved youth populations.

This nuance is particularly important in light of existing research that often conceptualizes individuals with psychopathic traits as perpetrators of violence rather than as victims (DeLisi, 2009; DeLisi et al., 2007). The findings challenge the stereotypical portrayal of youth high in psychopathy as aggressors, suggesting instead that these individuals may also experience high levels of interpersonal victimization—potentially due to maladaptive interpersonal styles, impulsivity, or engagement in high-risk relationships. These results caution against the oversimplified, often sensationalized portrayal of psychopathic youth as exclusively predatory. They reinforce the view that psychopathy in adolescence is complex, variable, and influenced by context and must be carefully studied (Farrington, 2005).

Demographics and IPV Victimization

Another key finding was that Black youth were significantly more likely to report IPV victimization. While this result warrants further exploration, which is beyond the scope of the current study, it lends support to prior research that has demonstrated how victimization risk disparities persist even within already marginalized populations such as adjudicated youth (Fisher et al., 2015; Like-Haislip, 2014). These disparities may reflect broader contextual factors, such as neighborhood violence exposure or differences in access to support services, which could shape relationship dynamics and reporting behaviors. Importantly, race was not a significant predictor of abuse item endorsement, suggesting that while demographics may influence reported IPV victimization status, it may not relate as clearly to how often youth experience abusive situations once they are in violent or coercive relationships.

Implications for the Use of the PCL:YV

Given the ongoing debate about the ethical and empirical appropriateness of applying psychopathy labels to adolescents (Edens et al., 2001; Farrington, 2005; Frick, 2022), these findings have critical implications. The results suggest that while psychopathy, as operationalized by the PCL:YV, can serve as a useful predictor of violence and aggression, it does not suggest that those high in psychopathy are safe from victimization experiences. Thus, practitioners should proceed with caution in placing judgment on juveniles, particularly

when making decisions about treatment needs. The association between psychopathy and abuse victimization found here further complicates the narrative that youth with psychopathic traits are primarily aggressors. Instead, they may be caught in cycles of violence—both experiencing and potentially perpetuating abuse—which calls for nuanced, trauma-informed interventions rather than punitive labeling. This is especially the case since psychopathy has been considered a stable trait across one's life course (Frick et al., 2003).

Conclusion and Implications

This study contributes to a growing body of literature examining psychopathy in adolescence by emphasizing the dual roles of adjudicated youth as both potential perpetrators and victims of violence. Psychopathy, as measured by the PCL:YV, was a consistent predictor of abuse exposure, and race emerged as a significant factor in IPV victimization. These findings urge researchers, clinicians, and policymakers to adopt a more balanced and developmentally informed view of psychopathic traits in youth—one that recognizes not only the risks posed by such individuals but also the risks they face.

Additionally, these findings carry important implications for victim support efforts in Texas. Given that adjudicated youth, particularly those with elevated psychopathic traits, may be at increased risk for victimization, targeted, trauma-informed interventions are essential. Programs should address not only behavioral concerns but also the complex histories of abuse and neglect that many of these youth have experienced. Furthermore, the significantly higher odds of IPV victimization among youth of color may indicate the usefulness of context-specific responsive support services.

Texas-based resources such as the Texas Victim Services Association (TVSA), the Texas Crime Victim Clearinghouse (TxCVC), and programs like the Victim Intervention Program Services (VIPS) at the Family Life and Community Resource Center offer valuable frameworks for expanding victim-focused care. Additional organizations, including the Center for Success and Independence and the East Texas Crisis Center, provide trauma-informed mental health services and public education initiatives tailored to vulnerable populations. By integrating findings from this study into existing programs and promoting cross-sector collaboration, Texas can take meaningful steps toward reducing victimization and enhancing recovery among youth involved in the justice system.

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Author Bios:

Chelsey S. Narvey, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology at Sam Houston State University (SHSU). She is a mixed-methods researcher focusing on issues related to corrections and developmental criminology. Her research interests also surround quality of life during incarceration, policy and practice, procedural justice, and legitimacy in institutional settings.

Nhi Le, M.A., is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology at SHSU. Her research focuses on psychopathy/psychopathology, sexual offending, and age and crime.

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District Judge, 462nd Judicial District Court

**Abigail "Abby" Brookshire
Arlington**

Student, The University of Texas at Arlington

**Melissa Carter
Bryan**

Victim Assistance Coordinator, Brazos County District Attorney's Office

**Hillary A. England, MSW
Pflugerville**

Deputy Director of Victim Services and Prevention Programs, Office of the Governor

**Matthew L. Ferrara, Ph.D.
Austin**

Forensic Psychologist

**Elizabeth "Libby" Hamilton
Austin**

Crime Victim Liaison, Texas Board of Pardons and Paroles

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Houston**

State Senator for District 17 & Chair of the Committee on Finance

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Argyle**

Chief of Police
Argyle Police Department

**Lindsay M. Kinzie, Esq.
Keller**

General Counsel, The Gatehouse at Grapevine

**Forrest A. Mitchell
Corpus Christi**

Retired Director of Operations, Nueces County Medical Examiner's Office

**Hon. Andrew Murr
Junction**

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Amarillo**

Director of Education, Family Support Services of Amarillo, Inc.

**Jeffery "JD" Robertson
Wimberley**

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**David E. Schwartz
Bellaire**

Retired Pharmacist

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Forney**

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