



Impulsivity and Institutional Misconduct in At-Risk Adolescents

Margaret R. Bullerjahn, Nora E. Charles¹, and Christopher T. Barry²

¹University of Southern Mississippi ²Washington State University



Introduction

Results

Discussion

Impulsivity has been linked to various types of psychopathology (Whiteside, Lynam, Miller, & Reynolds, 2005). It has also been shown to predict institutional misconduct, such as aggression, in adult psychiatric inpatients (Ferguson, Rhoades, & Gruber, 2005). Within adolescents, impulsivity has been correlated with misconduct in school (Vogel & Barton, 2013) and externalizing behaviors such as substance use (Wulfert, Block, Santa Ana, Rodriguez, & Colman, 2002). These relationships may be especially pronounced among at-risk youth with histories of externalizing behaviors, such as those residing in a residential boot camp facility. Additionally, sex differences have been found in self-reported patterns of impulsivity-related traits (Cyders, 2013); therefore, it is also important to understand how impulsivity-behavior associations may vary between boys and girls.

The current study assessed impulsivity and its connection to misconduct at a boot camp facility for at-risk adolescents. It was hypothesized that impulsivity would positively correlate with the number of incidents of misconduct. It was also hypothesized that there would be significant gender differences in the pattern of associations between facets of impulsivity and types of misconduct.

Methods

Implications

Sample

- 196 at-risk adolescents solicited from a residential boot camp facility in the southeastern U.S.
- 83% male, average age of 16.8 (SD = 0.77)
- 62% Caucasian, 33% African-American, 4% Multiracial, and 1% Other.

Procedure

- Part of a larger data collection at residential facility
- Computerized administration of the UPPS-P (Whiteside & Lynam, 2001) to assess impulsivity.
- Disciplinary records were collected and misconduct was coded into one of the following categories: Peer Physical Aggression, Peer Verbal Aggression, Defiance, Rule Breaking, and Disruption.

Table 1
Sex Differences in UPPS-P Scores and Institutional Misconduct

UPPS-S Means	Male (N = 163) (M, SD)	Female (N = 33) (M, SD)	t-value	p (two-tailed)
Negative Urgency	2.69, .628	2.85, .650	-1.300	.200
Lack of Premeditation	1.94, .623	2.17, .676	-1.794	.080
Lack of Perseverance	1.90, .498	2.15, .533	-2.469	.018*
Sensation Seeking	3.01, .620	2.74, .751	1.956	.057
Positive Urgency	2.54, .744	2.37, .727	1.162	.251
<i>Citations</i>				
Total	12.4, 14.2	7.12, 6.68	3.276	.001*
Peer Physical Aggression	1.14, 1.88	.480, .795	4.645	.000*
Peer Verbal Aggression	1.70, 2.41	.880, 1.58	2.465	.016*
Defiance	2.46, 4.73	1.27, 2.25	2.200	.030*
Rule Breaking	3.56, 4.66	3.18, 3.16	.571	.570
Disruption	3.38, 5.19	1.18, 1.29	4.741	.000*

- Significant sex differences were present (Table 1). Most notably, male cadets were significantly more likely to receive infractions than their female counterparts ($t = 3.276, p = .001$).
- One significant sex difference was present in impulsivity scores on the Lack of Perseverance subscale ($t = -2.469, p = .018$).

Table 2
Correlations Between UPPS-P Scores, Impulsivity Means, and Institutional Misconduct

Sex	UPPS-S	Total Number of Citations	Peer Physical Aggression	Peer Verbal Aggression	Defiance	Rule Breaking	Disruption
Male	Negative Urgency	.121	.200*	.095	.115	.126	.015
	Lack of Premeditation	.100	.030	.078	.006	.056	.151
	Lack of Perseverance	.105	.007	.080	.013	.082	.150
	Sensation Seeking	-.005	.052	-.077	.069	.055	-.072
	Positive Urgency	.208**	.198*	.110	.125	.217**	.155*
Female	Negative Urgency	.343	.216	.140	.346*	.332	.029
	Lack of Premeditation	.368*	-.249	.395*	.253	.251	.347*
	Lack of Perseverance	-.077	-.104	.187	-.153	-.203	.104
	Sensation Seeking	.346*	.128	.031	.353*	.392*	.047
	Positive Urgency	.239	-.118	.048	.292	.310	-.146

Note * = correlations with $p < .05$ significance, ** = correlations with $p < .01$ significance

- Overall, impulsivity was positively correlated with both male and female institutional misconduct (Table 2).
- Among males, there were correlations between both urgency subscales and several types of misconduct; in contrast, results for females showed more associations involving sensation seeking and lack of premeditation.
- Results relating impulsivity to physical aggression were only significant among males, though the magnitude and direction of the association involving negative urgency was similar in the smaller sample of females.

Results are consistent with previous research suggesting that impulsivity is related to externalizing and other problem behaviors (e.g., Whiteside & Lynam, 2003; Lynam & Miller, 2004; Derefinco, DeWall, Metzger, Walsh, & Lyman, 2011). Significant sex differences were also present within the sample, supporting existing literature (Waldeck & Miller, 1997; Cyders, 2013). More specifically, the results showed higher correlations between misconduct and positive urgency for males, which is congruent to Cyders' (2013) findings; however, females displayed more significant correlations with misconduct and sensation seeking. This finding is interesting considering previous research has found that females engage in less sensation seeking impulsivity than males (Costa, Terraciano, & McCrae, 2001; Cyders, 2013). Therefore it is suggested that although females engage in less sensation seeking impulsivity, when they do, it is more likely to result in problematic behavior.

Findings surrounding sex differences in problematic behavior is also consistent with previous literature, providing evidence to the theory that boys are more likely engage in physical aggression whereas girls are more likely to engage in relational aggression such as verbal aggression and defiance (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995).

- Significant correlations between impulsivity and misconduct suggest that decreasing impulsivity in adolescents is a relevant point of intervention when trying to reduce problematic behaviors in at-risk youth.
- Significant sex differences amongst the sample imply that interventions may need to differ between male and female youth to target different facets of impulsivity.
- More specifically, interventions should be targeted for reducing positive urgency impulsivity in males, and reducing sensation seeking and lack of premeditation impulsivity in females.