



Psychopathic Traits and Violent Co-Offending in Adolescence: A Narrative Review of Peer Influence, Group Dynamics, and Moral Disengagement

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Abstract

Adolescent violence often occurs in social settings rather than as an isolated individual act. This narrative review examines how adolescent psychopathic traits may contribute to violent co-offending through peer selection, peer influence, group-role differentiation, and moral disengagement. The reviewed literature supports a multidimensional interpretation of psychopathic traits. Callous-unemotional traits are most consistently linked to persistent and severe antisocial behavior, especially among high-risk youths with early conduct problems. Grandiose-manipulative traits may increase social influence within delinquent peer networks and help explain why some adolescents become more central, directive, or instigating in group offending. Impulsive-irresponsible traits appear especially relevant to opportunity-driven offending, gang involvement, and rapid escalation under weak supervision. Moral disengagement provides a cognitive pathway through which adolescents justify harm, minimize responsibility, and neutralize guilt. However, the evidence base remains uneven: many studies are cross-sectional, male-dominated, and focused on serious offenders; direct research on psychopathic traits within violent co-offending events remains limited. A more precise developmental model should integrate individual traits with peer-network structure, situational opportunity, leadership roles, and moral cognition. Future work should use longitudinal, multi-informant, event-level, and network-based designs to clarify which adolescents initiate group violence, which are recruited into it, and which mechanisms are most responsive to intervention.

Keywords: *adolescent psychopathy; callous-unemotional traits; co-offending; juvenile violence; peer influence; moral disengagement; gang involvement; developmental criminology.*

1. Introduction

Psychopathy is a multidimensional construct involving affective, interpersonal, lifestyle, and antisocial features. In adolescents, these features are more appropriately discussed as psychopathic traits rather than as a fixed adult personality disorder. Youth psychopathic traits are commonly separated into callous-unemotional (CU), grandiose-manipulative (GM), and impulsive-irresponsible (II) dimensions. This distinction matters because adolescence is a period of personality development, neurobiological change, identity formation, and heightened sensitivity to peer context. A developmental frame therefore treats adolescent psychopathic traits as risk markers that interact with social environments, not as deterministic labels [1,2]. Longitudinal evidence that psychopathy scores in early adolescence predict adult psychopathy further supports their relevance as developmental risk indicators [3]. Their importance is also reinforced by evidence linking psychopathy to persistent antisocial and criminal behavior [4].

Violent delinquency during adolescence is frequently embedded in peer relationships. Youths may offend with others

because peers provide encouragement, status rewards, practical assistance, perceived protection, or diffusion of responsibility. Co-offending is therefore not merely a statistical form of delinquency; it is a social process. This point is especially important for adolescents with elevated psychopathic traits because the interpersonal and affective components of psychopathy may shape how youths select peers, respond to peer pressure, influence others, and justify harm [5-7]. Research on peer influence and co-offending further shows that adolescents' delinquency develops in relation to friends' delinquency and that group offending can alter the strength of peer-related risk [8-10]. Existing research on adolescent psychopathic traits has focused more heavily on individual offending than on event-level co-offending dynamics, leaving a gap between developmental psychopathology and criminological research on group crime.

This review addresses the question: how do adolescent psychopathic traits contribute to violent co-offending through peer influence and moral disengagement? The central argument is that psychopathic traits do not produce group violence through a single pathway. Instead, CU traits may reduce emotional barriers to harm,

GM traits may facilitate dominance and influence within peer networks, and II traits may increase opportunistic participation and escalation. Moral disengagement links these traits to action by allowing adolescents and groups to reinterpret violence as justified, deserved, minimized, or not personally owned [7,11,12]. The review therefore organizes the evidence around a developmental-social mechanism: traits shape peer affiliation and group roles; group contexts amplify risk; moral cognition legitimizes violence; and repeated co-offending may consolidate antisocial trajectories [13].

2. Conceptualizing Psychopathic Traits in Adolescence

2.1 Psychopathy as a multidimensional developmental construct

Adolescent psychopathic traits should not be treated as a unitary diagnosis. Adult psychopathy is commonly described through interpersonal, affective, lifestyle, and antisocial features, but adolescent research often separates traits into GM, CU, and II dimensions. GM traits capture charm, deceitfulness, manipulation, and grandiosity; CU traits capture lack of guilt, low empathy, shallow affect, and callousness; II traits capture impulsivity, irresponsibility, thrill-seeking, and poor behavioral control. These dimensions may predict different forms of social behavior within delinquent groups [6,14,15].

CU traits have received the most attention because they identify youths with conduct problems who are at elevated risk for severe, persistent, and aggressive antisocial behavior. Frick and White [16] reviewed evidence that CU traits designate a subgroup of antisocial youth with distinct emotional, cognitive, and motivational characteristics, including reduced sensitivity to others' distress and reduced guilt after harm. Frick et al., [17] later framed CU traits within developmental psychopathology, emphasizing that they can alter the severity, developmental meaning, and treatment responsiveness of conduct problems. These findings support attention to CU traits, but the claim should be narrow: CU traits are not uniformly predictive of every form of delinquency in every setting. Their strongest relevance appears when combined with conduct problems, violence exposure, weak supervision, or high-risk peer contexts.

GM and II traits deserve parallel attention. GM traits are particularly relevant to peer influence because adolescents high in manipulation and grandiosity may be better positioned to recruit, pressure, or steer peers. II traits are relevant to co-offending because group crime often unfolds under conditions of excitement, low adult monitoring, substance use, and rapid decision-making. A balanced review should therefore avoid a CU-only model and instead ask which psychopathic dimension matters at each stage of co-offending: peer selection, initiation, escalation, justification, and repetition.

2.2 Measurement issues and interpretive caution

The PCL: YV is widely used in forensic settings and is adapted from the adult PCL-R. It relies on interview and collateral file information, making it more suitable for justice-involved youth than for ordinary school or community samples [18,19]. Self-report and informant-report measures, including the APSD and YPI, are more feasible in community or large-scale research. The YPI was designed to assess GM, CU, and II dimensions in youth and has been used in studies examining peer influence and delinquency [6,15].

Measurement choice affects interpretation. Interview-based tools may capture more severe, clinically meaningful traits in high-risk samples, whereas self-report instruments may be vulnerable to social desirability, limited insight, and strategic self-presentation.

This is particularly problematic for traits involving deceitfulness, lack of remorse, or manipulation. Findings from detained males, serious offenders, community adolescents, and mixed-risk samples should therefore not be pooled as if they reflect the same population.

3. Developmental Pathways from Psychopathic Traits to Violence

3.1 CU traits, conduct problems, and persistent violence

Longitudinal evidence indicates that CU traits can follow relatively stable trajectories and may identify adolescents at risk for persistent violent behavior. Baskin-Sommers et al., [20] reported that high CU trajectories among high-risk male adolescents were associated with elevated violence and substance use, particularly when earlier conduct problems and executive-control deficits were present. This supports a developmental model in which CU traits intensify the severity of an already antisocial pathway rather than simply causing violence in isolation.

A useful contrast comes from Salihovic and Stattin [21], who found more context-dependent associations between psychopathic traits and delinquency trajectories in a community sample. This contrast prevents overclaiming. A careful interpretation is that CU traits may have greater predictive value in high-risk, justice-involved, or conduct-problem samples than in general community samples. In community settings, broad antisocial behavior may be shaped more strongly by supervision, peer context, opportunity, school engagement, and family environment.

3.2 Friendship quality, peer rejection, and drift toward deviant networks

Psychopathic traits may affect violence indirectly by disrupting conventional peer relationships. Miron et al., [22] found longitudinal associations between CU traits and poorer friendship quality among adjudicated adolescents. Poor friendship quality may reduce access to supportive, prosocial relationships and increase the likelihood of affiliation with peers who tolerate or reward aggression. This does not mean that all youths with CU traits lack peers. Rather, their friendships may be less emotionally supportive, more conflictual, or more instrumentally organized around status, excitement, or antisocial goals.

This mechanism is important because co-offending requires social connection. Adolescents with psychopathic traits may not simply be influenced by deviant peers; they may also select, shape, and use peer networks. The key developmental question is bidirectional: do psychopathic traits lead youths into delinquent peer networks, or do delinquent networks strengthen psychopathic behavior patterns? The most defensible model is reciprocal rather than one-directional [5,23].

4. Co-Offending as a Social Context for Adolescent Violence

4.1 Why adolescence is a high-risk period for co-offending

Adolescence is a high-risk period for co-offending because peer approval becomes especially salient, unsupervised peer time increases, and risk-taking is more likely in emotionally charged social contexts. Steinberg's social-neuroscience model of adolescent risk-taking emphasizes that reward sensitivity and peer presence can heighten risk-taking during adolescence [24]. Monahan et al., [5] further showed that susceptibility to peer influence and affiliation with antisocial peers are linked to antisocial behavior during the transition to adulthood.

Criminological research similarly treats peer influence as a central explanation for delinquency while acknowledging a persistent selection problem: delinquent youth choose delinquent peers, and delinquent peers also influence behavior. McGloin and Thomas²³ argued that peer influence remains theoretically important but must be studied with designs that separate influence from selection. So, psychopathic traits should therefore be framed as both selection factors and influence moderators.

4.2 Co-offending, responsibility diffusion, and role differentiation

Co-offending can increase violence by reducing perceived personal responsibility. Rowan et al.,^[7] found that adolescents perceived less responsibility for criminal behavior when they co-offended, when group size increased, and when the crime was not solely their idea. This finding strengthens the moral-disengagement argument: diffusion of responsibility is not only an abstract mechanism from moral psychology; it appears in adolescent co-offending contexts.

Group offending also involves role differentiation. Some adolescents initiate, plan, command, or escalate; others follow, assist, observe, or provide status reinforcement. Cooke et al.,^[25] showed that leadership, coercion, group pressure, and role asymmetry can shape multiple-perpetrator sexual offenses. This evidence is useful conceptually but should be generalized carefully because multiple-perpetrator sexual violence is a severe and specific form of group offending, not a universal model for all adolescent co-offending.

5. Peer Influence, Psychopathic Traits, and Group Violence

5.1 Peer selection and peer influence

The peer pathway contains two related processes. Peer selection occurs when adolescents choose friends or groups with similar antisocial attitudes or behaviors. Peer influence occurs when peers change one another's behavior over time. Both processes are relevant to psychopathic traits. Youths high in II traits may seek high-stimulation peer environments, youths high in CU traits may be less deterred by others' distress, and youths high in GM traits may use social relationships strategically.

Kerr et al.,^[6] directly tested whether psychopathic traits moderated peer influence on adolescent delinquency using peer-network methods that controlled for selection. Their study found that CU and GM traits moderated peer influence, with GM traits especially relevant to influence processes. This is one of the most important studies for the present review because it directly connects psychopathic traits to peer-network dynamics rather than only to individual offending.

5.2 Grandiose-manipulative traits and influence within delinquent groups

GM traits may make some adolescents more influential within delinquent peer networks. These traits include manipulateness, deceitfulness, and grandiosity; in a co-offending event, they may help an adolescent frame violence as exciting, deserved, necessary, or status-enhancing. Such influence need not require formal leadership. It can occur through ridicule, provocation, dare-making, status competition, selective encouragement, or strategic withdrawal of approval.

The evidence does not yet prove that adolescents high in GM traits are usually leaders of violent co-offending groups. That claim would be too strong. A more defensible statement is that GM traits are plausible markers of social influence and dominance in delinquent peer networks, and at least one network study suggests

that these traits moderate peer influence on delinquency ^[6]. Future research should examine whether GM traits predict event-level roles such as instigator, planner, recruiter, or escalator.

5.3 CU traits and emotional barriers to harming others

CU traits may contribute to group violence by weakening emotional barriers that normally inhibit harm, such as empathy, guilt, and distress at victims' suffering. In group settings, this may allow high-CU adolescents to appear calm, intimidating, or unmoved during aggressive encounters. Their emotional style may influence peers by making violence seem acceptable or by reducing hesitation within the group ^[16,17].

Still, CU traits should not be treated as the only or automatic driver of co-offending. Some findings suggest that CU traits are most predictive when combined with conduct problems, violence exposure, substance use, or poor executive control ^[20]. In lower-risk samples, CU traits may predict bullying, relational aggression, or broader antisocial behavior more clearly than serious violence. The review therefore presents CU traits as a severity and persistence marker, not as a universal explanation for co-offending.

5.4 Impulsive-irresponsible traits, opportunity, and escalation

II traits may be especially relevant to the situational dynamics of co-offending. Group violence often develops quickly from unstructured socializing, provocation, intoxication, or perceived disrespect. Youths high in impulsivity and irresponsibility may be more likely to act without considering consequences, join a risky group plan, or escalate from intimidation to physical violence. Joseph's ^[26] longitudinal study of gang-involved youth supports the relevance of psychopathic traits for long-term offending, including violent and property offending, and helps connect psychopathy research to gang-related co-offending.

The most precise interpretation is that II traits may explain participation and escalation more than leadership. A youth high in II traits may not organize the group but may intensify the event by acting first, using excessive force, or failing to withdraw when risk rises. This distinction improves analytic precision because it separates social influence from situational impulsivity.

6. Moral Disengagement as the Cognitive Bridge Between Traits and Violence

6.1 Definition and mechanisms

Moral disengagement refers to cognitive mechanisms that enable individuals to commit harmful acts while reducing or avoiding self-condemnation. Bandura⁶ identified several such mechanisms, including moral justification, euphemistic labeling, advantageous comparison, displacement or diffusion of responsibility, disregard or distortion of consequences, dehumanization, and attribution of blame. These mechanisms are highly relevant to violent co-offending. Within a group, violence may be reframed as loyalty, self-defense, retaliation, or entertainment; responsibility may be distributed across participants; and victims may be blamed, minimized, or dehumanized.

Moral disengagement provides an important cognitive link between psychopathic traits, peer context, and violent behavior. Psychopathic traits may weaken emotional restraints against harm, while delinquent peer groups may reinforce aggression through approval, status rewards, and shared justifications. Moral disengagement allows these emotional and social risk factors to translate into action by making violence appear acceptable, necessary, or less personally accountable. In this way, moral disengagement helps explain how individual traits and group dynamics converge to facilitate violent co-offending.

6.2 Moral disengagement among serious juvenile offenders

Shulman et al.,[12] found that moral disengagement among serious juvenile offenders was longitudinally associated with offending while also examining whether CU traits accounted for the association. Hyde et al.,[27] similarly linked developmental precursors of moral disengagement to later antisocial behavior and examined psychopathic traits in a serious-offender developmental framework. Dhingra et al.,[28], using Pathways to Desistance data from serious juvenile offenders, found that psychopathy factors and gang membership contributed to moral disengagement, with Factor 1 traits emerging as the strongest predictor. These findings support the argument that adolescents with psychopathic traits are more likely to rationalize harmful conduct.

Walters [29] further showed that proactive criminal thinking mediated peer delinquency and subsequent offending among male delinquents. Although proactive criminal thinking is not identical to moral disengagement, it overlaps conceptually because both involve justification, planning, and cognitive support for harmful behavior. Together, these studies suggest that antisocial peers may transmit not only opportunities for crime but also ways of thinking that make crime easier to justify.

6.3 Moral disengagement in group contexts

Moral disengagement may be stronger in co-offending contexts than in solitary offending because the group supplies both audience and justification. Diffusion of responsibility is particularly important: adolescents may feel less personally accountable when others are involved, when the plan seems collectively formed, or when a dominant peer frames the act as necessary. Rowan et al.'s [7] finding that responsibility judgments decrease in co-offending directly supports this mechanism.

Recent work on CU traits and moral disengagement in bullying and externalizing behavior also supports the broader mechanism. Paciello et al.,[30] reviewed the interplay of CU traits and moral disengagement and found that high levels of both were associated with more severe externalizing behaviors. This literature is not identical to violent co-offending, but it helps explain how emotional detachment and cognitive justification can combine to increase harm.

7. Gang Involvement and Violent Co-Offending

7.1 Gang membership as a concentrated co-offending environment

Gang involvement provides a concentrated context for co-offending because it combines deviant peer affiliation, identity, loyalty, status hierarchy, retaliation norms, and frequent exposure to violence. Gang members should not be described simply as psychopaths. That would be scientifically weak and stigmatizing. The better question is whether specific psychopathic traits increase the likelihood of joining, remaining in, or escalating within gangs.

Carson and Ray [31] examined whether psychopathic traits distinguish trajectories of gang membership, while Tostlebe and Pyrooz [32] reviewed evidence on psychopathy and gang involvement. Joseph [26] further examined psychopathic traits in gang-involved youth and long-term offending. These studies justify including gang involvement, but the review should avoid implying that psychopathy fully explains gang membership. Structural disadvantage, neighborhood violence, protection, identity, family processes, and opportunity also matter.

7.2 Status, dominance, and coercion

Within gangs or delinquent groups, violence can serve instrumental goals: status display, retaliation, coercion, resource acquisition, or

defense of reputation. GM traits may support status-seeking and manipulation; CU traits may reduce concern for victims; II traits may increase reckless escalation. This integrated model is stronger than saying that psychopathic youth join gangs and become violent. The key is interaction: traits shape how a youth uses the group, and the group shapes how traits are expressed.

8. Integrative Narrative Model

The evidence can be organized into a five-stage narrative model. First, dispositional vulnerabilities emerge: CU traits reduce empathic concern and guilt, GM traits promote manipulation and dominance, and II traits increase impulsive risk-taking. Second, these traits affect peer selection and relationship quality, increasing the probability that some adolescents drift toward delinquent peers or become embedded in antisocial networks. Third, peer contexts provide opportunity, reinforcement, and role differentiation. Fourth, moral disengagement translates risk into action by justifying harm, diffusing responsibility, and minimizing consequences. Fifth, repeated co-offending reinforces identity, status, and antisocial cognition, increasing the probability of persistent violence.

This model is probabilistic, not deterministic. Many adolescents with elevated psychopathic traits will not become violent co-offenders, and many violent co-offenders will not have high psychopathic traits. The strongest claim is interactional: psychopathic traits may increase risk when they converge with deviant peers, weak supervision, opportunity, violence exposure, substance use, and moral disengagement. This standard keeps the review scientifically credible and avoids pathologizing adolescents whose personalities are still developing.

9. Implications for Prevention, Assessment, and Intervention

9.1 Risk assessment

Risk assessment should evaluate traits, peer networks, and cognitive justifications together. A youth with elevated CU traits but strong supervision and prosocial peer ties may have a different risk profile from a youth with moderate CU traits embedded in a violent group. Similarly, GM traits may be especially important when a youth occupies a central social position or repeatedly instigates group conflict. Assessment should therefore include multi-informant reports, school and family context, peer-network information, offense narratives, and measures of moral disengagement.

9.2 Intervention targets

Interventions should not rely only on punishment or generic deterrence. For youths with CU traits, reward-oriented approaches, emotion-recognition work, and relationship-based interventions may be more useful than strategies that assume guilt or anxiety will motivate change. For youths high in II traits, impulse control, structured supervision, and alternative high-stimulation prosocial activities may be important. For youths high in GM traits, interventions should address manipulation, dominance, accountability, and prosocial leadership.

Moral disengagement is a promising target because it may be modifiable. Programs can challenge victim-blaming, dehumanization, minimization of harm, and responsibility diffusion. In co-offending contexts, interventions should also disrupt group reinforcement: separating high-risk peer clusters, building prosocial peer networks, mentoring, restorative practices when appropriate, and strengthening adult monitoring may reduce the social rewards of violence.

10. Limitations of the Current Evidence

The evidence base has several limitations. First, much of the research is cross-sectional, making causal direction difficult to establish. Second, many studies rely on self-report data, which is especially problematic when studying deception, manipulation, guiltlessness, and delinquency. Third, samples vary widely: detained male offenders, community adolescents, gang-involved youths, and school-based samples may produce different results. Fourth, direct event-level studies of psychopathic traits in violent co-offending are scarce. Many studies examine delinquency, bullying, gang membership, or antisocial peer affiliation, then infer relevance to co-offending. Fifth, female adolescents remain understudied. Gender may shape how psychopathic traits are expressed, how peer influence operates, and how co-offending roles are assigned. Sixth, race, socioeconomic status, neighborhood disadvantage, trauma exposure, and justice-system bias must be handled carefully. A trait-based explanation that ignores structural and contextual factors risks overstating individual pathology and understating environmental risk.

The present review also has limitations. It is narrative rather than systematic, and it did not apply formal inclusion and exclusion criteria. The goal was conceptual integration, not exhaustive evidence grading. Future systematic reviews or meta-analyses should test the strength of specific pathways, including the trait-by-peer-context and trait-by-moral-disengagement interactions proposed here.

11. Future Directions

Future studies should use longitudinal peer-network designs that can separate selection from influence and test whether psychopathic dimensions predict changes in network centrality, instigation, and role differentiation. Event-level studies should examine actual co-offending incidents, identifying who proposed the offense, who escalated it, who used violence, who withdrew, and how participants later explained responsibility. This would directly address the central question more effectively than broad delinquency measures alone.

Future research should also integrate moral cognition with peer-network structure. For example, studies could test whether moral disengagement mediates the association between GM traits and instigation, between CU traits and severity of harm, or between II traits and escalation. Finally, intervention studies should test whether reducing moral disengagement and altering peer networks lowers violent co-offending among youths with elevated psychopathic traits.

12. Conclusion

Adolescent psychopathic traits contribute to violent co-offending most plausibly through the interaction of personality, peer context, and moral cognition. CU traits may weaken emotional restraints against harm; GM traits may support influence, dominance, and recruitment within delinquent peer networks; and II traits may increase impulsive participation and escalation during high-risk group situations. Peer groups provide the social setting in which these traits can become behaviorally significant, while moral disengagement provides the cognitive mechanism through which harm is justified, responsibility is diffused, and guilt is neutralized. Together, these processes suggest that adolescent violent co-offending is best understood as a developmental-social pathway in

which trait-based vulnerabilities are activated, reinforced, and legitimized within antisocial peer contexts.

Abbreviations

APSD: Antisocial Process Screening Device
CU: Callous-unemotional
F1: Factor 1, affective/interpersonal psychopathy traits
F2: Factor 2, antisocial/lifestyle psychopathy traits
GM: Grandiose-manipulative
II: Impulsive-irresponsible
PCL-R: Psychopathy Checklist-Revised
PCL: YV: Psychopathy Checklist: Youth Version
YPI: Youth Psychopathic Traits Inventory

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NA

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JL conceived the idea, initiated, and composed the manuscript. JL conducted the literature search and summary, FF oversaw the manuscript preparation process. All authors critically reviewed and endorsed the final manuscript.

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