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*Research Article*

# The Interplay Of Aggression And Self-Esteem In Juvenile Delinquents: A Correlational Study

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## ABSTRACT

Juvenile delinquency is a significant concern in the field of criminology and psychology, with far-reaching implications for society. This study aims to investigate the relationship between aggression and self-esteem in juvenile delinquents. Aggression and self-esteem are crucial psychological factors that influence behavior. Previous research has highlighted the role of aggression in criminal activities, while self-esteem has been linked to various behavioral outcomes. However, there is a paucity of studies exploring the direct correlation between aggression and self-esteem in juveniles. The study involved 65 juvenile delinquents who were assessed for levels of self-esteem and various forms of aggression, including physical aggression, verbal aggression, anger, and hostility. Descriptive statistics and correlation analyses were employed to examine the relationships between these variables. The findings indicate a complex interplay between self-esteem and aggression in juvenile delinquents. While self-esteem did not show a significant direct correlation with physical aggression ( $r = .005$ ) or overall aggression ( $r = .038$ ), there were notable correlations between different forms of aggression. Physical aggression correlated strongly with verbal aggression ( $r = .582, p < .01$ ), anger ( $r = .562, p < .01$ ), and overall aggression ( $r = .862, p < .01$ ). These results suggest that while self-esteem may not directly influence aggressive behaviour, different types of aggression are interrelated and collectively contribute to delinquent behaviour. In future, longitudinal research could provide insights into how these variables interact over time and influence the trail of delinquent behaviour. Additionally, interventions designed to enhance self-esteem and manage aggression could be evaluated for their efficacy in reducing juvenile delinquency.

**Keywords:** Juvenile delinquency, Aggression, Self-esteem, Physical aggression, Verbal aggression, Anger, Hostility, Crime.

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## Introduction

Juvenile delinquency refers to the participation of minors, ie, individuals below the age of 18, in illegal or antisocial activities (Kennedy et al., 2020). Juvenile delinquency can constitute crimes like vandalism, petty theft, and truancy. This definition of juvenile delinquency changes from one country to the next. Since

the age of responsibility changes, so does the definition of who constitutes a juvenile delinquent (Kennedy et al., 2020). Studying juvenile delinquency is pertinent to psychology, law, and criminology. Regarding psychology, juvenile delinquency is studied concerning the minor's family, peers, and socioeconomic status (Bobbio et al., 2020; Ciceralli & Ciceralli, 2018). By

understanding the causes and consequences of juvenile delinquency, psychologists can shed light on the psychological processes behind criminal conduct and antisocial behavior (Abrams, 2022). Additionally, by understanding the risk factors and the contexts leading to a minor committing an offense or a crime, psychologists can offer mitigation strategies to help at-risk youths. (Aazami et al., 2023). Similarly, when it comes to criminology, juvenile delinquency needs to be studied so that the intersections between adolescents and the legal system can be navigated with sensitivity (Delcea et al., 2019). From examining the patterns of delinquency to understanding the impact of the intervention programs, criminologists need to study this to improve cases involving minors. Rather than pushing adolescents into the prison system, criminologists need to understand these phenomena so that rates of recidivism decrease and rehabilitation programs can be re-focused (Delcea et al., 2019).

When it comes to the impacts of juvenile delinquency, its ripples can be felt on the individual scale as well as on a community level. One of the most far-reaching effects of juvenile delinquency is that it contributes to a life of crime (Young et al., 2017). With every interaction with the legal system, the minor's crimes only escalate, pigeonholing them into prison. Once such strikes go on the minor's criminal record, their future gets bleak since it will affect their chances of attaining higher education and landing a job. On top of that, the minor also has to face social stigma and be looked down upon by their community (Young et al., 2017). This, in turn, will put excessive strain on the community, to cough up more in taxes (Hoffman & Dufur, 2018). The community will feel unsafe, property values will go down due to an increase in crime rates, and there will be an increase in the need for law enforcement to patrol the neighborhoods (Hoofman & Dufur, 2018).

Juvenile delinquency can be addressed if there are interventions made at the right time (National Institute of Justice, [NIJ], 2022; Zeigler et al., 1992). The aim of intervention is not to eradicate the incidence of juvenile delinquency, but to reduce rates of re-offending and prevent a life of crime for the minors involved (NIJ, 2022; Zeigler et al., 1992). However, it is to be noted that interventions can label certain types of minors as "confirmed delinquents" and contrast them with "normal" minors (Wright, 2017). Such labeling can counter the early intervention and cause more damage rather than repair previous damage that was meted out (Wright, 2017).

Moving on, we can define aggression as actions that are a range of behaviors that can result in physical or psychological harm to oneself or to others (Krahé, 2020). Anger is the driving emotion behind aggression and aggression is the behavioral component intended to cause harm. Now, hostility can be a cause and a byproduct of aggression. It refers to an enduring attitude or mindset that makes an individual more likely to engage in destructive or aggressive behaviors (Krahé, 2020). There are several types of aggression, including verbal, physical, reactive, and proactive. Verbal aggression refers to the act where a person is using language and words to cause harm (Liu, 2004). It can

include yelling, threatening, and insulting the other person. Physical aggression refers to the use of the body to harm someone else. Common examples of physical aggression include pushing, shoving, and kicking. Reactive aggression is seen when the person is acting in the heat of the moment, and they are acting on emotions rather than on rational thought. Lastly, proactive aggression refers to the individual using logic and rationale to achieve a desired goal. Think of it as the opposite of reactive violence (Liu, 2004).

The second component of this correlational study is self-esteem. Self-esteem refers to how an individual perceives themselves (Gomez et al., 2018). It is how a person values themselves, including an appraisal of their abilities, appearance, and overall worth as a person (Gomez et al., 2018). When a person has high self-esteem, they have a positive view of themselves (Harris & Orth, 2020). High self-esteem is characterized by a positive self-image, assertiveness, optimism, and healthy relationships (Harris & Orth, 2020). Conversely, individuals who have low self-esteem tend to have a negative self-image, are sensitive to criticism, lack assertiveness, and are usually pessimistic (Hilbert et al., 2019).

Another dimension of self-esteem is its stability. On one hand, we have stable self-esteem, and on the other, we have unstable self-esteem. Stable self-esteem refers to a consistent sense of self-worth, self-image, and perception of the self (Rentzsch & Schröder-Abé, 2018). An individual that has stable self-esteem, would not be easily influenced by external events or setbacks in life. They are resilient and bounce back easily from setbacks (Rentzsch & Schröder-Abé, 2018). On the other side, unstable self-esteem refers to a fluctuating sense of self, perception of one's personality, and self-worth (Sowislo et al., 2014). Individuals who have unstable self-esteem are more likely to base their self-esteem on external events, perceptions, and setbacks in life. They have a see-saw pattern of self-esteem, wherein they would feel secure one moment and insecure the next. Their sense of self-worth is easily shaken up and they also highly depend on external validation to maintain their self-esteem (Sowislo et al., 2014). By establishing a clear link between self-esteem and aggression, we would be able to understand the nature and extent of juvenile delinquency in India.

### **Literature Review**

When it comes to establishing the relationship between aggression and self-esteem, various components can affect our understanding of these two related concepts. From the level of self-esteem, low self-esteem versus high self-esteem, and the nature of aggression, ie reactive, proactive, or instrumental aggression, many factors need to be taken into consideration before concluding their relationship.

When minors have low self-esteem, they are likely to use aggression as a defense mechanism (Finzi-Dottan & Karu, 2006). In this case, minors might use aggression as a way of overcompensating their poor self-esteem. This can be a result of many factors, some of them being, feeling insecure, threatened, or provoked by peers or family members. From then on, this is a cycle, where the

minor would try to protect their fragile self-esteem with aggression (Finzi-Dottan & Karu, 2006). Additionally, when adolescents have feelings of inadequacy, they are also more likely to be sensitive to rejection (Velotti et al., 2018). Just like using aggression as a defense mechanism, minors who might feel rejected or criticized might use aggression as a coping mechanism. Additionally, there are gender differences when it comes to dealing with rejection and criticism. Male adolescents are more likely to engage in hostility and physical aggression while also suppressing their emotions. Female adolescents were more likely to experience feelings of psychological distress and guilt along with hostile behavior usually directed towards the self (Velotti et al., 2018). According to Tracy & Robins (2003), minors and adults who have low self-esteem tend to externalize their problems by blaming the people around them for their failures, thereby leading to feelings of aggression and hostility. Additionally, there was also an escalation in the level of aggression displayed by minors between the ages of 11 and 13 (Donnellan et al., 2005).

On the other hand, having high self-esteem might not always serve as a protective factor. Narcissism can be said to be an extreme manifestation of having high self-esteem (Baumeister et al., 1996; Miller et al., 2021). Psychologically, the traits associated with narcissism are an inflated sense of self, a deep-seated need for admiration and attention, a lack of empathy for other people, and a fragile self-esteem that can be easily threatened (Miller et al., 2021). However, clinically speaking, narcissism is a personality trait that the individual does not know they possess (Schalkwijk et al., 2016). In a study conducted by Reijntjes et al., (2016), it was found that boys with high levels of narcissistic personality traits tended to bully their peers. All in all, a general observation was made that asserted minors with high self-esteem who had narcissistic personality traits were relying on external validation to boost their sense of self (Amad et al., 2020). When this sense of self and narcissism was threatened, they usually resorted to aggression and hostile behavior. Additionally, individuals who had narcissistic personality traits were more likely to engage in instrumental aggression that was planned, deliberate, and controlled. This finding was stable across genders and cultures, as a way to achieve a goal (Amad et al., 2020). Minors and adults who have high but unstable self-esteem tend to engage in proactive aggression (Lee, 2014). Some common reasons why minors would engage in proactive aggression might be to assert dominance, maintain their social status, or enforce their authority (Lee, 2014).

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

One of the most common and easily accessible theoretical frameworks that laid down the interaction between aggression, self-esteem, and juvenile delinquency was the social learning theory (Akers & Jennings, 2015). This theory was given by Albert Bandura states that aggression is learned through the observation and imitation of others during childhood (Akers & Jennings, 2015; Allan, 2017). In the case of

juvenile delinquents, minors may see their peers breaking laws and going unpunished, which may enforce their belief that they may get away with breaking the law without any consequences (Allan, 2017). Additionally, when aggressive, criminal, or violent behavior by minors is appreciated by their peers or goes unpunished by the judicial system, it increases its incidence (Allan, 2017). When it comes to minors who have low self-esteem, they might use aggression as a tool to seek approval from their delinquent peers and gain acceptance from them (Akers & Jennings, 2019). In cases where a minor has inflated self-esteem and narcissistic personality traits, they might engage in aggressive delinquency to assert dominance over others (Akers & Jennings, 2016).

Another theoretical model that addresses the intersections between aggression, self-esteem, and juvenile delinquency is the general strain theory proposed by Robert Agnew (Agnew & Brezina, 2019). Agnew asserts that delinquency is an adolescent's response to any strain or stressor. Common sources of strain in an adolescent's life can include a failure to achieve goals, the removal of a positive influence in their lives, or an addition of negative stimuli in their lives. Such strain in an adolescent's life can lead to strong emotional responses resulting in anger and a drastic change in their self-esteem levels or stability. Both anger and changes in self-esteem can lead to aggressive behavior. Usually, the adolescent's self-esteem is lowered and becomes unstable. This affects their rational perception and appraisal of the strain, making them more likely to engage in delinquency to cope with the strain (Agnew & Brezina, 2019).

The social control theory argues that delinquency occurs when a minor's bond with society is weakened or broken (Hirschi, 1998). Several components comprise the social control theory, including attachment, belief, commitment, and involvement. Owing to such weak external bonds it leads to an internalization of different norms within the minor. These norms are usually deviant due to the weakened social relationship between the minor and their community. Low self-esteem might exacerbate the situation, making minors more likely to engage in aggressive and delinquent behaviors (Hirschi, 1998).

These are some of the theoretical frameworks that posit an explanation for juvenile delinquency. However, that being said, other subjective and individual factors contribute to the occurrence of juvenile delinquency. Some factors that influence the incidence of juvenile delinquency include community values, culture, and contexts. In those cases, different theoretical frameworks might be able to enhance our understanding of juvenile delinquency.

### **Rationale for the study**

This correlational study can address various issues pertinent to the Indian judicial, legal, and cultural spheres that can inform policies, intervention strategies, and laws relating to juvenile delinquents. Moreover, India is a melting pot of various cultures (Gajrani, 2004; Sivaramakrishnan & Agarwal, 2003). Each region and state in India have vastly different cultural practices. In

such cases, the studies conducted in Western nations do not translate to the Indian context (Malhotra, 2013). Studying the environmental, cultural, and social factors that contribute to the development of self-esteem and the expression of aggression might help policymakers formulate better strategies and intervention plans. Additionally, there is a stark contrast between urban life and rural dwellings (Kothari et al., 2009). Here, there would be a contrast in values and it would lead to a change in the expression and manifestation of self-esteem, aggression, and juvenile delinquency. Another issue that goes unaddressed in various studies is the effect of urbanization and nuclear families on minors (Sadashivam & Tabassum, 2016). Nuclear families imply that there is a decreasing safety net and social support networks available to troubled minors (Sadashivam & Tabassum, 2016). Other factors that contribute to delinquency can be academic stress since students might want to rebel or cope with these stressors by engaging in delinquent behavior (Reddy et al., 2018). In a preliminary study conducted by Mishra & Biswal (2018), they assert that poverty and poor living conditions may lead to juvenile delinquency since it might lead to low self-esteem and an increase in aggression. That being said, it is a preliminary study, and further research needs to be conducted to examine such intersections of psychological and economic factors.

#### Objectives

The primary objective of this correlational study is to understand and investigate the relationship between aggression and self-esteem in juvenile delinquents. There are other specific objectives to this correlational study as well. The first is to assess the different types of aggression displayed by juvenile delinquents. The

second is to evaluate and assess the self-esteem levels of juvenile delinquents. The third is to determine the correlation between self-esteem and various forms of aggression.

#### Hypothesis

There is a significant relationship between levels of self-esteem, types of aggression, and juvenile delinquency. Especially, there is a significant correlation between juvenile delinquents who have low self-esteem and various types of aggression, including verbal, physical, and relational aggression.

**H1:** There is a significant negative correlation between self-esteem and physical aggression among juvenile delinquents.

**H2:** There is a significant negative correlation between self-esteem and verbal aggression among juvenile delinquents.

**H3:** There is a significant negative correlation between self-esteem and anger among juvenile delinquents.

**H4:** There is a significant negative correlation between self-esteem and hostility among juvenile delinquents.

#### Conceptual Model

[Low Self-Esteem]

| v

[Frustration] --> [Cognitive Distortions] --> [Aggressive Behavior]

(Physical, Verbal, Anger, Hostility)

#### Result:

Mean score

#### Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
SE	14.97	1.677	65
PA	27.89	5.440	65
VA	15.20	3.962	65
Anger	19.72	4.079	65
Hostile	21.68	3.687	65
Aggression	84.49	12.320	65

#### Correlation

Variable	Self Esteem	Physical Aggression	Verbal Aggression	Anger	Hostile	Aggression
Self Esteem	1					
Physical Aggression	.005	1				
Verbal Aggression	-.190	.582**	1			
Anger	.165	.562**	.458**	1		
Hostile	.140	.158	.036	.134	1	

Aggression	.038	.862**	.741**	.767**	.425**	1
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\*0.05 \*\*0.01

The results indicate that different forms of aggression—physical, verbal, anger, and hostility—are interrelated and collectively contribute to overall aggression. Specifically, the correlation between physical aggression and verbal aggression is  $r=.582^{**}$ , and between physical aggression and anger, it is  $r=.562^{**}$ . Physical aggression shows the strongest correlation to overall aggression with  $r=.862^{**}$ . Verbal aggression correlates with anger at  $r=.458^{**}$  and with overall aggression at  $r=.741^{**}$ . Anger and overall aggression have a correlation of  $r=.767^{**}$ , while hostility and overall aggression are correlated at  $r=.425^{**}$ . These moderate to strong relationships suggest that these different forms of aggression are significantly interlinked and together contribute to the overall aggression observed in the participants.

In contrast, self-esteem shows very weak correlations with these forms of aggression, indicating that factors other than self-esteem might play a more significant role in influencing aggressive behaviors among juvenile delinquents. The correlation between self-esteem and physical aggression is  $r=.005$ , suggesting virtually no relationship. Self-esteem and verbal aggression are weakly negatively correlated at  $r=-.190$ , while self-esteem and anger show a weak positive correlation at  $r=.165$ . The correlation between self-esteem and hostility is  $r=.140$ , and between self-esteem and overall aggression, it is  $r=.038$ . These values indicate that self-esteem has a negligible to weak relationship with physical aggression, verbal aggression, anger, hostility, and overall aggression. This suggests that other factors beyond self-esteem are likely more influential in driving aggressive behaviors in juvenile delinquents.

### Discussion:

The findings of this study shed light on the relationship between self-esteem and different forms of aggression—physical, verbal, anger, and hostility—among juvenile delinquents. The results highlight that while different forms of aggression are strongly interrelated and collectively contribute to overall aggression, self-esteem exhibits only weak or negligible correlations with these aggression variables. These findings align with prior studies indicating that aggression is a multifaceted behavior influenced by various psychological and situational factors. Previous research has identified strong correlations among different forms of aggression, which this study corroborates. However, the weak correlation between self-esteem and aggression contrasts with some earlier studies suggesting a stronger link. This discrepancy could be attributed to differences in sample characteristics, methodologies, or cultural contexts.

The results underscore the importance of targeting

aggression directly in interventions for juvenile delinquents. Programs that address emotional regulation, anger management, and conflict resolution may be particularly effective given the strong interrelations among aggression variables. For example, cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) and social-emotional learning (SEL) programs can help juveniles develop healthier coping strategies and reduce aggressive tendencies.

While self-esteem was not strongly associated with aggression in this study, enhancing self-esteem may still have indirect benefits, such as improving overall mental well-being and reducing vulnerability to peer pressure or risky behaviors. Comprehensive interventions that address both internal factors (e.g., self-esteem) and external influences (e.g., family dynamics and peer relationships) are recommended.

### Limitations

The study's reliance on self-report measures may introduce bias, as participants might underreport or exaggerate their behaviors and feelings. Additionally, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to infer causation between self-esteem and aggression. Future research should consider longitudinal designs and incorporate observational or third-party assessments to strengthen the validity of findings.

### Future Research Directions

Further research is needed to explore the broader environmental and situational factors that may mediate or moderate the relationship between self-esteem and aggression. Longitudinal studies could provide insights into how these relationships evolve over time and whether changes in self-esteem predict changes in aggression. Additionally, examining cultural and socio-economic differences could help identify context-specific drivers of aggression in juvenile delinquents.

### Conclusion

This study highlights the complexity of aggressive behaviors among juvenile delinquents and suggests that while aggression types are interrelated, self-esteem plays a relatively minor role in influencing these behaviors. Addressing aggression directly through targeted interventions, while also considering the broader psychosocial context, is crucial for reducing delinquent behavior and improving outcomes for at-risk youth.

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