Depression and Suicidal Behavior Among Delinquent Females

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Depressive symptomatology and suicidal behavior were evaluated in a multiethnic sample of 48 delinquent females through ratings on self-reports and probation officers' reports. Psychological functioning of the subjects was also evaluated through the Diagnostic Interview for Borderlines, the Rorschach, and the WAIS or WISC-R in order to identify delinquent personality patterns. Four personality patterns were identified: the borderline, the antisocial, the neurotic, and the socialized delinquent personalities. A chi-square analysis of the data demonstrated that level of depression and frequency of suicidal behavior were both significantly related to personality patterns. Level of depression was also significantly related to ethnicity, but not to socioeconomic status. The results have implications for assessment and treatment of delinquent females and also raise issues concerning the interaction of personality, cultural factors, and delinquent behavior which should be addressed in future research with larger, socioculturally diverse samples.

INTRODUCTION

Female delinquency is, simultaneously, one of the most disturbing and one of the least understood phenomena in contemporary American society. While the incidence of delinquency among females has steadily increased since the end of World War II, behavioral scientists have largely ignored this adolescent subgroup. Thus, efforts to describe and analyze the psychological problems of female delinquents are still in a nascent stage of development.

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Psychodynamically, delinquent behavior in females has been traditionally viewed as a defense against underlying feelings of depression, helplessness, and low self-esteem (Blos, 1962; Herskovitz, 1969; Sperling, 1974). This theoretical formulation has been supported by clinical findings in a number of studies of delinquent samples (Fine and Fishman, 1968; Lewis and Balla, 1976; Offer et al., 1975; Stephenson et al., 1973). In their study of delinquent girls at the Judge Baker Clinic in Boston, Kaufman et al. (1959) formulated the concept of a “depressive nucleus” in these girls, an internalized response to their perceived parental deprivation. Their acting-out behavior was viewed as an inappropriate method of coping with this depressive nucleus.

This interpretation finds support in the more recent work of Offer and colleagues (1972, 1975), who found that female delinquents viewed themselves as having greater problems than male delinquents and that the former tended to act out when feelings of depression, anxiety, shame, or guilt overwhelmed them.

In his study of psychological reports of a multiethnic sample of delinquents, Chwast (1967) concluded that delinquent females were more depressed and more generally disturbed than delinquent males. Finally, Lewis and Balla (1976) noted that depressive symptoms occurred frequently among delinquents who were referred for court-ordered psychiatric evaluations.

Delinquent behavior has also been conceptualized as a pathological grief reaction to the death of a parent or close relative (Keeler, 1954; Bonnard, 1961; Shoor and Speed, 1963). Studies of delinquent females in institutions and residential treatment programs have noted a relationship between perceived parental deprivation, severe depression, and suicidal behavior (Marohn et al., 1979; Fine and Fishman, 1968; Rosenthal, 1979; Scharfman and Clark, 1967).

While there have been few attempts to construct behavior typologies and personality categories among female delinquents, these empirical approaches have consistently identified depression as one of the major affects among the neurotic subgroup of delinquents (Butler, 1965; Hetherington et al., 1971). Konopka (1966), in her description of the characteristic traits of institutionalized delinquent girls, noted their interrelated feelings of depression, low self-esteem, negative feminine identity, and feelings of loneliness, rejection, and worthlessness.

The purpose of this paper is to report on the occurrence of depression and suicidal behavior in a group of delinquent females whose personality patterns and offense patterns have been described in a previous work (Gibbs, 1980). The effects of personality pattern and ethnicity on depression and suicidal behavior of these delinquent females are also discussed.

METHOD

This study involved a multiethnic sample of 48 delinquent females, aged 13-18, who were obtained from a suburban San Francisco County probation