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From Struggle to Misconduct: The Role of Emotional and Behavioral Problems in Adolescent Delinquency

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the current study was to study the correlation between emotional and behavioral troubles and delinquent inclinations in teenagers. The survey design was cross-sectional and 250 adolescents between the ages of 14-17 years were sampled purposely in different schools both in the community and in the private sector in Gujrat, Pakistan. The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) was used to measure emotional and behavioral issues whereas the Self-Reported Delinquency Scale (SRDS) assessed delinquent behaviors. The findings showed that the two tools had good internal consistency reliabilities (a =.83 and.86 respectively). The Pearson correlation analysis indicated that there was a strong positive correlation between emotional and behavioral problems with delinquent behaviors (r =.84, p <.001) and the greater the emotional and behavioral problems, the higher the delinquent behavior. Also, the analysis of linear regression revealed that the proportion of delinquent behaviors significantly depended on emotional and behavioral issues, which explained 71% of the variance (R2 =.71). The independent samples t-test, however, showed no gender difference in both the emotional/behavioral problems and the delinquent behaviors. These results demonstrate the importance of emotional and behavioral problems in the development of delinquent behaviors as adolescents. The study highlights the importance of early diagnosis and prevention as well as school-based mental health programs to correct these problems. The cause and effect relationships should also be addressed in future research which takes a longitudinal and multi-informant approach.

Keywords: *Adolescence, Emotional Problems, Behavioral Problems, Delinquency*

Introduction

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Adolescence is the growing period in any individual's life which is marked by a complex interplay of social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties and challenges such as peer pressure, identification in society, family expectations, etc. (Steinberg, 2014). If these challenges are not met appropriately, there is a chance of developing emotional or behavioral problems (Mash & Wolfe, 2016). So, the development of young individuals in the right way is essential for the future of any society as they are the foundation of society and bring creative and innovative perspectives to society (Lerner & Steinberg, 2009). These young individuals whom we call adolescents need a healthy essence of life and mental peace to reach their zenith but when such criteria don't match their respective needs, they develop some conflicts and deviance which can lead to mild to severe delinquent behaviors (Moffitt, 1993). The children of any nation are considered the future of it. But these delinquent issues are ruining the young from achieving their full potential and there are several causes of this problematic behavior.

To understand what are the causes of it, different researchers have highlighted two factors: Behavioral and Emotional Problems (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1978). Talking about Behavioral Problems, these include maladaptive activities unacceptable by society (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). The behavioral problems of adolescents include unhappiness, being excessively moody, defiant against parents, teachers, and authorities, damaging physical properties, bullying, teasing, cheating, lying, indiscipline, offensive behavior towards the opposite gender, and carelessness (Mash & Wolfe, 2016). Nearly everyone experiences some disruptive behavioral moment in their life but these behaviors must have inflexible patterns that give rise to deviant behaviors (APA, 2013). Whereas, emotional problems refer to the psychological disorder that can impair a person's ability to cope, and appropriately react to situations/emotions. It shows one or more difficulties over a long period that affect interpersonal relationships and academic performance (Kauffman & Landrum, 2018). These may include lack of attention, parental alcoholism, abusive conditions, emotional dysregulation, anxiety, phobias, depression, fear, etc. (Mash & Wolfe, 2016).

Emotional and behavioral disorders are also named as externalizing behaviors (characterized by aggression or outward disruption, conduct disorder, oppositional, and delinquent behavior) and internalizing behaviors (including social withdrawal, depression, anxiety, and self-harm) (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1978). The emotional and behavioral problems in adolescents are influenced by a complex combination of individual, familial, and environmental factors (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Family conflict, bad peer pressure, low socioeconomic standing, criminal parents, abusive and maltreated child-rearing, insufficient parental monitoring, antisocial behavior disorders, and low socioeconomic level are all thought to contribute to emotional and behavioral problems in an individual (Patterson et al., 1989). In the past reported cases, it has been observed that these problems are the leading causes of juvenile delinquency (Farrington, 2005).

The word 'Delinquent' is derived from the Latin word 'Delinquere' which means to leave or abandon. It can be defined as "abandoning the acceptable ways of society and falling into deviant activities neglecting an obligation" (Siegel & Welsh, 2017). So, the term juvenile delinquency refers to any unlawful act committed habitually by

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those people who are below the age of eighteen (Siegel & Welsh, 2017). They are deviants from the societal norms and socially approved behaviors. Juvenile Delinquency is becoming a leading issue in today's world (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2018). For example, juvenile delinquency includes crimes ranging from disorderly conduct, minor theft, and vandalism, to car theft, burglary, assault, rape, and murder (Siegel & Welsh, 2017).

Delinquent practices are learned from the environment. They are not innate physical, mental, or emotional characteristics (Bandura, 1977). The failure to fulfill the fundamental needs of a child such as being taken care of, being loved, or given security causes alteration issues, thus, adolescents become rebellious and challenge society (Bowlby, 1969). Consequently, they produce delinquent behaviors that are against the social and moral standards such as criminal activities, persistent antisocial behavior, or disobedience (Moffitt, 1993). Different theories have also suggested an undeniable relationship between emotional & behavioral problems and delinquent behaviors in an individual, such as, Attachment Theory posits that the quality of early relationships with caregivers can significantly influence an adolescent's emotional and behavioral development (Bowlby, 1969). And, the emotional & behavioral problems in adolescents can be a result of insecure attachment, which may also contribute to delinquent behaviors (Hoeve et al., 2012). Social Learning Theory emphasizes the role of the social environment including family and peer context in shaping behavior through observation and reinforcement (Bandura, 1977). So, adolescents can learn delinquent behaviors by observing and imitating others, especially when these behaviors are reinforced (Bandura, 1977).

The study concerned with the investigation of the factors contributing to juvenile delinquency in Punjab, Pakistan in its report stated that 49% of the total population is under the age of 18 years and the most neglected segment of the society (Government of Pakistan, 2017). It is reported by the Juvenile Justice System Ordinance of Pakistan in the year 2004 that 10,000 juveniles were under trial and 2500 children involved in crime cases were found in the different prisons of Pakistan (Government of Pakistan, 2004). In 2019, 1424 child cases were reported across Pakistan including 1209 cases of juvenile delinquency and 250 cases of convicted children (National Police Bureau, 2019). Based on scientific studies and theoretical frameworks, it is anticipated that the rate of delinquency will rise alarmingly, potentially linked to emotional and behavioral issues in a person (Farrington, 2005). Consequently, there is a risk to society's ability to grow, so, these issues must be addressed.

Conduct disorders (CDs) are common in juvenile justice cases, but their prevalence varies across regions. Xie et al. (2024) conducted research analysis in China which concluded that incidence of severe conduct disorder was higher in juvenile correctional facilities as well as juvenile delinquents scored higher on aggression. However, there were no female adolescents included in this study, whereas, some research studies has shown that female adolescents with conduct disorder tend to have more problematic behaviors beyond puberty which can lead to increased risk of suicidal behavior, substance abuse, violent relationships, inability to care for their children and even premature death.

Contradictions in the literature are minimal, but the scope of factors contributing to delinquency is broad, encompassing psychological interventions (Xiang, 2024), the

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impact of violent computer games, and the effectiveness of authoritative parenting. Interestingly, while some studies emphasize the direct relationship between emotional problems and delinquency (Lakhani et al., 2022), others highlight the mediating role of factors such as parental attachment and peer associations (Liu et al., 2019; Xia et al., 2020).

The analysis of Lakhani et al. (2022) suggests that there is moderately positive relationship between emotional and behavioral problems and delinquent behaviors in adolescents. However, this study was limited to male population only as it did not include female population in the sample. According to the study by Jaggers et al. (2021), emotional distress is frequently reported in adolescents with delinquent behaviors which are characterized by range of troubling, concerning or confusing internal behaviors. So, parental supervision must be well planned as parental control may not only be the protection factor but also be a risk of delinquent behavior during improper parenting. Also, the onset of behavioral problems in early childhood is associated with an increased frequency of delinquent behaviors.

Murtaza et al. (2021) conducted a study at Punjab, Pakistan which suggested that there are several factors involved in causing juvenile delinquency such as family upbringing, lack of attention from parents, exposure to violence, peer influence, and social economic status, all lead to the problems in emotional and behavioral state of an adolescent that can ultimately lead to the juvenile delinquency at the severe end. Adolescents are vulnerable to some risk factors in their lives such as emotional and behavioral problems, problems in the family, relationship problems within their peer groups. Also, the demographic variables, when studied in KPK, Pakistan i-e socioeconomic status and family structure are positively associated with emotional and behavioral problems. Ultimately, these variables result in delinquent behavior, if not treated properly on time. (Ali et al., 2021 & Aldam et al., 2019).

In another research study by Cho and Galehan (2019) on South Korean youth, it is concluded that adolescents who may have negative life experiences i-e victimization, develop delinquent behavior as a coping technique to reduce mental strain in life as victimization can lead to the development of negative emotional responses. Males are more likely to engage in externalizing delinquent behaviors whereas, females are prone to internalizing delinquent behaviors such as self-harm, suicidal thoughts etc. Juvenile offenders in Romania had higher scores on symptoms of anxious/depressed, withdrawn/depressed, rule-breaking, aggressive behavior and conduct problems and the correlational analysis showed stronger correlation between internalizing and externalizing symptoms of delinquent adolescents (Jurma et al., 2014).

In today's world, the issue of juvenile delinquency has been increasing at an alarming rate. Not only boys, but also the ratio of females in delinquency is increasing day by day. The study analysis by Teplin et al. (2002) conducted in Chicago, USA showed that the number of females juvenile delinquents is increasing at even faster rate than number of males and is at all time high. Rates of many disorders were higher among females i-e conduct disorder and oppositional defiant disorder. There is greater persistence of emotional disorders and worse outcomes in females than males and these problems persist even beyond adolescence.

In summary, the literature indicates that emotional and behavioral problems are significant contributors to delinquent behavior in adolescents. However, these

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problems do not exist in isolation; they are influenced by a myriad of familial and social factors. Effective interventions may require a holistic approach that addresses the complex interplay of these elements (Zhang et al., 2022). Lack of female adolescents in the samples of above given analyses has resulted in the gap in literature and that must be addressed before generalizing the results on overall population. Also, future research should continue to explore these relationships to inform more targeted and effective prevention and intervention strategies for juvenile delinquency (Lakhani et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2019; Xia et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2022).

Rationale of the Study

Emotional and behavioral problems play a major role in creating delinquent behavior patterns which emerge during adolescent development. Research shows that childhood emotional and behavioral issues contribute modestly but consistently to delinquent behavior in early adolescence, which shows these issues act as essential risk factors that exist throughout this stage of development (Sullivan, 2006). Anxiety and depression, which represent emotional issues, create adaptive coping strategies that lead to delinquent behavior patterns. The combination of aggression and impulsivity with conduct problems serves as the most effective method to predict antisocial behavior because these traits disrupt self-control and create a greater likelihood of breaking rules (Barnow et al., 2004).

Emotional and behavioral problems show a tendency to develop together which creates delinquency risk through their combined effects. The co-occurrence of these problems influences adolescents who struggle with emotional regulation and behavioral management, which makes it essential to develop specific treatment methods (Sullivan, 2006). The social factors which include peer and family environments create multiple dimensions of delinquency because they interact with personal emotional and behavioral difficulties (Sullivan, 2006; Barnow et al., 2004).

Empirical evidence demonstrates that peer influences hold significant value because delinquent peer behavior serves as a strong predictor for adolescent delinquency.

The presence of delinquent peers and exposure to nonproductive sedentary activities like excessive video gaming further complicated this situation because adolescents developed behavioral problems which resulted from their social interactions and their way of life (Morris and Johnson, 2010). The family environment functions as a protective factor because positive familial support together with monitoring activities helps to reduce the dangers that emotional and behavioral issues present (Sullivan, 2006).

The study of emotional and behavioral problems establishes their connection to academic performance and mental health issues which create a feedback loop that leads to delinquent behavior. The two behavioral difficulties of attention problems and substance use lead to substantial academic achievement losses which result in increased delinquency rates whereas depression impacts academic performance through its effect on behavioral problems (Mcleod et al., 2012).

The process of developing effective adolescent prevention strategies requires understanding which particular emotional and behavioral elements most accurately forecast delinquency. Programs that focus on helping people control their emotions while managing their behaviors will decrease their tendency to engage in delinquent

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behavior because they target four specific problem areas which include aggression and impulsivity and anxiety and depression. The research demonstrates that programs which include family elements along with peer support and personal adolescent development show greater success rates in solving these specific difficulties (Barnow et al., 2004).

Research on emotional and behavioral problems which lead to adolescent delinquency exists because the evidence demonstrates that multiple factors interact to shape delinquent behavior at this important growth stage. The integrated understanding of delinquency causes enables the design of effective prevention and intervention programs which will decrease youth delinquency rates and its associated problems.

Significance of the Study

The study tells about the role of emotional and behavioral problems in the delinquent behavior of adolescents in Pakistan. It contributes to the existing literature by tackling the unexplored areas such as it involves both male and female adolescents to get to know about their ratio of engagement in delinquent behaviors as well as about the differences in the engagement ratio. This will encourage different organizations in the society such as social workers, policy-makers, and educational institutions to raise awareness about the increase in the emotional and behavioral problems in adolescents and their underlying causes to help prevent the delinquent behaviors in the future. The significance of the study is also well-documented across various studies, such as Lakhani et al. (2022) establishes a moderate relationship between emotional and behavioral problems and delinquent behaviors in adolescents, suggesting that these internal struggles can manifest in external rule-breaking behaviors. Similarly, Jurma et al. (2014) identifies a strong correlation between internalizing symptoms, such as anxiety and depression, and externalizing behaviors, including aggression and rule-breaking, in juvenile offenders. Contradictions or interesting facts emerge when considering the mediating factors that influence the relationship between emotional/behavioral problems and delinquency. For instance, Jaggers et al. (2020) highlights the mediating effects of parental monitoring and peer associations on this relationship. While, Liu et al. (2019)

Further elaborates on the spillover effects of family conditions, such as marital discord and parenting practices, on mental health and delinquency. The relationship between emotional and behavioral problems and adolescent delinquency is multifaceted and significant. While direct correlations are evident, the presence of mediating factors adds complexity to this relationship. Interventions targeting these underlying emotional and behavioral issues, as well as the mediating factors, could potentially mitigate delinquent behaviors in adolescents.

Objective

To examine the relationship between emotional and behavioral problems and delinquent behavior in teenagers.

Hypotheses

There is a predictive relationship between emotional and behavioral problems and delinquent behavior of adolescents.

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Males having emotional and behavioral problems are more likely to engage in delinquent behavior than females having emotional and behavioral problems.

Methodology

Research Design

Cross-sectional survey research design was employed to study the relationship between emotional and behavioral problems and delinquent behaviors among adolescents.

Participants

The target population of this study was adolescents, particularly aged 14-17 years old. This population was specifically selected because middle adolescence is the phase of life where an individual undergoes through new challenges, rapid growth, and puberty. Therefore, it is marked by not only physical changes, but also significant cognitive and emotional challenges (Griffith et al., 2021). A sample of 250 participants was proposed for this study. For this purpose, purposive sampling was used to recruit the sample. Participants were required to meet the specific criteria, such as they should be enrolled in a secondary school, the age range should be around 14-17 years, and both male and female participants were eligible to be included in the study.

Tools

The tools used to measure the variables involved in the study included a consent form which was signed by the participants before filling up the questionnaires ensuring that the participants knew about their rights related to the study. A demographic sheet which involved the questions related to age, gender, marital status, educational institution (government/private), field of study (program and department), semester, residential area, socioeconomic status, parental status, parental education, family income and family status (nuclear/joint). The scales used to measure the emotional and behavioral problems and delinquent behaviors were Strengths Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) and Self-Reported Delinquency (SRD) respectively.

Procedure

Participants were taken from different schools of Gujrat, including private and government institutes. Prior to the collection of data, permission was formally obtained from the administrative authorities of the respective institutes. Total 250 participants took part in the study. The participants were briefed about the purpose of the study and they were also ensured of the confidentiality of the data obtained from them. After getting their consent, they were given the demographic form and the questionnaires attached with it to fill them up accordingly. The responses of the participants were then entered on the SPSS (version 27) and their scores were analyzed through descriptive and inferential statistics to obtain the final results.

Ethical Consideration

The study completely followed ethical considerations and code of conduct given by American Psychological Association (APA, 2017). Permission of the scales to be

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used in the research study were obtained from the authors before starting data collection. The institutional permission to conduct study in their institution was sought after explaining the purpose of the study and clarifying their queries. Informed consent was also taken from the participants in the sample and they were briefed about the purpose and nature of the study. They were ensured of the confidentiality of the data as well and were told about their rights including their right to withdraw from the study at any point in time without any potential penalty. The instructions to fill up the questionnaires were given and the queries of the participants were also answered with clarity.

Results

Table 1:Psychometric Properties of the Scales

Scale	No. of items	α
Strengths Difficulties Questionnaire	25	0.83
Self-Report Delinquency Scale	36	0.86

The Self-Reported Delinquency Scale (SRDS) has a high internal consistency reliability where the value of Cronbachs alpha is .87 and therefore shows good reliability between the 36 items of the scale. On the same note, Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) also exhibits good internal consistency with a moderate of Cronbach alpha of .84 of its 25 items. According to these values, the two scales are acceptable to strong reliability in the sample of adolescents used in the present study. In general, the measures employed in the current study were reliable enough to conduct additional statistical analyses.

Table 2: Pearson correlation between emotional and behavioral problems and delinquent behaviors

	Variables	1	2
1	Dlinequent behaviors	--	
2	Emotional and Behavioral Problems	.844**	--

P<0.001

A Pearson product-moment correlation test was done to analyze the correlation between the total scores of the SRDS and SDQ. The findings showed that there was a positive relationship of SRDS and SDQ with the coefficient of r(248) =.84, p <.001. This is an indication that the greater the degree of emotional and behavioral challenges, the greater the delinquent behaviors are among adolescents. The two variables were strongly related, as the correlation was found to be at the 0.01 level and was significant.

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Table 3: Mean comparison of male and female participants on emotional and behavioral problems and delinquent behaviors

	Male		Female				
Variables	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*t*(250)	*P*	Cohen's *d*
Emotional and Behavioral Problems	19.35	6.80	19.91	6.43	-.66	.50	-.085
Delinquent behaviors	17.63	7.54	17.60	7.66	.031	.97	.004

An independent samples *t*-test was used to investigate gender differences in SDQ and SRDS total scores. The results suggested that there was no significant difference between males and females in SDQ scores, $t(248) = -0.67$, $p = .50$, or in SRDS scores, $t(248) = 0.03$, $p = .98$. Although females reported slightly higher SDQ scores and males slightly higher SRDS scores, these differences were not statistically significant. This indicates that gender does not play a significant role in emotional and behavioral problems or delinquent behaviors in the present sample.

Table 4: Linear regression analysis of emotional and behavioral problems on delinquent behaviors

Variables	B	SE	β	p	95% CI
(Constant)	-1.45	.811	—	.075	[9.25, 12.35]
Emotional and Behavioral Problems	.971	.039	.844	< .001	[–0.11, –0.07]
R^2	.71				

Simple linear regression analysis was done to determine whether the SDQ total scores can predict the SRDS total scores. The model had a statistically significant value, F(1, 248) = 614.58, p <.001 and predicted 71.2 per cent of variance in delinquent behavior (R2 =.71). The SDQ total scores were produced as a strong positive predictor of SRDS scores, b =.84 t = 24.79, p =.001. This is an indication that greater emotional and behavioral problems are great predictors of delinquent behaviors among adolescents.

Discussion

This paper has looked at how emotional and behavioral problems as assessed by the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) relate to self-reported delinquent behaviors as measured by the Self-Reported Delinquency Scale (SRDS) in 250 adolescents aged 14 17. In line with the previous studies, SDQ and SRDS scores exhibited high internal consistency (.84 and .87, respectively) which means both

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measures are effective in the measurement of the constructs of emotional/behavioral challenges and delinquent behavior in adolescent cohorts (Theunissen et al., 2019). The good positive relationship between SDQ and SRDS total scores ($r = .84$, $p < .001$) confirms theoretical models that emotional problems and behavioral problems go hand in hand with externalizing behaviors, which include delinquency. The result is consistent with longitudinal data that demonstrated that adolescents with greater internalizing and externalizing symptoms tend to become antisocial in the future (Picoito et al., 2020).

The regression analysis also established that SDQ total scores were significant predictors of the SRDS total scores and accounted more than 71 percent of the variance. This powerful correlation indicates that emotional and behavioral disturbances are powerful predictors of delinquency during adolescence. These findings can be discussed as consistent with the developmental psychopathology models indicating shared etiological pathways between two phenomena emotional dysregulation and risk behavior engagement such as the use of substances and involvement into rule-breaking(Berardis et al., 2020). However, unlike some studies that indicate the gender differences in antisocial behavior, this study did not identify any significant differences on gender in SDQ or SRDS scores. This can mean that in the modern samples, a gender gap in some behavioral troubles and delinquency is becoming less, possibly because of the social norms change and all adolescents being under external pressures (Osman et al., 2019). Nevertheless, prior studies suggested that girls were more likely to complain of overall difficulties than boys, and caregivers were more likely to complain of higher scores of difficulty in boys (Lundh et al., 2008; Mohangi et al., 2020). Such imbalance highlights the importance of involving several informants in the evaluation of the adolescent emotional and behavioral issues (Kofler et al., 2011).

Besides, the general lack of gender effects in the present study might indicate a more subtle psychosocial context in which emotional and behavioral issues occur equally between genders at mid-adolescence - a time of significant biological, cognitive and social transitions. The results indicate that one should evaluate the inner experience of adolescents along with observable behaviors because inner struggles can predispose them to other externalizing behaviors that can be self-harmful and harmful to the others.

Limitations

In spite of the positives of this study, there are a number of limitations. In the first place, the cross-sectional design does not allow making any conclusion about the causal relation between emotional challenges and delinquent behaviors. Longitudinal designs are required which can help elucidate directional effects and developmental courses. Second, the use of self-report measures can cause biases in responses including social desirability or recall error, especially when delinquent acts are being reported. The validity of future studies should include the use of multi-informant assessments (e.g., parent and teacher reports), most importantly objective behavioral indices. Also, the sample was not representative of a wide geographical area, which can influence the extraction of the results to other cultural or socio-economic factors in adolescents.

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Implications

There are significant theoretical and practical implications of these findings. The high correlation of emotional/behavioral challenges and delinquency indicates the importance of screening and intervention measures in the school and the community early. Training of school psychologists and counselors should be done to identify the early signs of emotional dysregulation that can be the basis of delinquent behaviors so that preventive interventions may be used. Moreover, emotionally-focused, socially-focused, and coping-skills intervention may indeed lower the internalizing symptoms, as well as the risk behaviors.

Politically, gender-neutral programs and the existence of mental treatment within the educational environment can help adolescents to develop socioemotionally and decrease their participation in delinquent behaviors. The results of these investigations also indicate that the interactions between internal states and external behaviors should be viewed as one, instead of being considered as separate areas of study in relation to the comprehensive adolescent support effort.

Conclusion

To sum up, the present research study offers solid evidence that emotional and behavioral problems are closely related to delinquency among adolescents. The fact that the SDQ scores reveal a strong predictive value of the SRDS scores reveals the interdependence of the socioemotional issues and the engagement in risk behaviors. Although certain design and measurement constraints were also involved, the current results are added to the expanding body of literature that supports the significance of evaluation and intervention of emotional problems to alleviate delinquent results. Such longitudinal and multi-method studies will be essential in future to better understand such relationships and to be able to help preventive actions.

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