



A Comparative Study of Psychological Factors among Petty and Heinous Juvenile Offenders

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Abstract

This study examines the psychological factors among juveniles involved in petty and heinous offences. It focuses on personality traits such as impulsivity, aggression, low self-control, low empathy, and emotional instability. The study highlights that petty offences are often linked with peer influence, immaturity, and poor judgement, whereas heinous offences may involve deeper psychological risks such as severe aggression, trauma, moral disengagement, and lower resilience. The study emphasizes the need for psychological assessment, counselling, family support, and rehabilitation-based intervention for juveniles in conflict with law.

Keywords

Juvenile offenders, petty offences, heinous offences, personality traits, impulsivity, aggression, self-control, empathy, emotional instability, rehabilitation.

INTRODUCTION

Juvenile offending is a serious social and psychological issue because adolescents are still developing emotionally, morally, and socially. Offences committed by juveniles may differ in seriousness, intention, and psychological background. Petty offences usually include minor theft, simple hurt, mischief, or minor property damage, while heinous offences involve serious harm to victims and society. Juveniles involved in petty offences may show immaturity, peer pressure, poor judgement, and weak supervision, whereas juveniles involved in heinous offences may show aggression, low empathy, emotional disturbance, trauma exposure, and poor impulse control. Therefore, studying psychological factors among petty and heinous juvenile offenders is important for understanding their behaviour and planning effective rehabilitation.

Objectives

1. To study the psychological factors among juveniles involved in petty and heinous offences.
2. To compare personality traits of petty and heinous juvenile offenders.
3. To examine the role of impulsivity, aggression, empathy, self-control, and emotional instability in juvenile offending.

HEINOUS AND PETTY OFFENCES

Offences committed by juveniles may vary considerably in their nature, severity, intention, psychological background, and social consequences. In juvenile justice studies, the distinction between **petty offences** and **heinous offences** is important because it helps in understanding not only the legal seriousness of the act but also the psychological condition and rehabilitation needs of the juvenile. Petty offences are generally less serious acts and may include behaviours such as minor theft, simple hurt, mischief, minor property damage, truancy-related conduct, or other low-severity unlawful behaviour. In many cases, such offences are not the result of a deeply established antisocial personality pattern. Rather, they may emerge from poor judgement, peer influence, lack of parental supervision, school disengagement, emotional immaturity, or temporary frustration. Research on juvenile delinquency suggests that early and less serious offending is often connected with social risk factors, weak family monitoring, negative peer association, and limited coping skills rather than fixed criminal intent (Aazami et al., 2023; Beelmann & Lösel, 2021).

Petty offending among juveniles may also be understood as a reflection of developmental immaturity. Adolescents are often more sensitive to peer approval, more likely to take risks, and less able to evaluate long-term consequences. Because self-control and moral reasoning are still developing during this period, some juveniles may engage in minor rule-breaking without fully understanding its legal or social impact. However, many juveniles involved in petty offences may still show guilt, fear, emotional responsiveness, family attachment, and willingness to reform. These qualities indicate that their rehabilitation potential may be comparatively strong, especially when timely counselling, family support, school reintegration, and social skills training are provided (Aazami et al., 2023; Beelmann & Lösel, 2021).

Heinous offences, on the other hand, are serious offences that involve grave harm to victims, families, and society. In the context of juveniles, heinous offending raises deeper psychological and rehabilitative concerns because such behaviour may involve violence, severe aggression, poor impulse control, low empathy, moral disengagement, trauma exposure, substance use, or conduct disorder

symptoms. Serious antisocial behaviour in adolescents is often associated with persistent aggression, repeated rule violation, callous-unemotional traits, emotional dysregulation, and weak concern for others (Fairchild et al., 2019; Xie et al., 2024). Therefore, heinous offending cannot be understood only as a legal category; it also requires psychological assessment of the juvenile's emotional condition, personality traits, family background, trauma history, peer influence, and capacity for reform.

The psychological profile of juveniles involved in heinous offences may differ from those involved in petty offences in terms of intensity and depth of risk factors. A juvenile committing a petty offence may show impulsivity, social immaturity, poor judgement, or peer-related pressure, whereas a juvenile involved in a heinous offence may show stronger aggression, hostile thinking, reduced empathy, emotional numbness, poor behavioural control, and greater exposure to traumatic or violent environments. Studies indicate that adverse childhood experiences, neglect, abuse, and unstable family conditions can increase emotional distress and antisocial behaviour among justice-involved youth (Anderson & Walerych, 2019; Folk et al., 2021). Such experiences may weaken trust, empathy, self-control, and emotional security, which are essential for healthy adjustment.

At the same time, the distinction between petty and heinous offences should not be used to permanently label a juvenile. Offence seriousness provides important information, but it does not fully explain the juvenile's personality, intention, emotional condition, or future behaviour. A juvenile involved in a serious offence may also be a victim of trauma, neglect, coercion, peer pressure, substance influence, or social failure. Similarly, a juvenile involved in a petty offence may still have deeper psychological problems that require attention. Therefore, both categories require careful assessment, but the depth and intensity of intervention may differ. Petty offenders may require early guidance, family counselling, educational support, and behavioural correction, while juveniles involved in heinous offences may need intensive psychological evaluation, trauma-informed care, anger management, empathy development, and long-term rehabilitation planning (Anderson & Walerych, 2019; Folk et al., 2021).

Thus, the comparison between heinous and petty offences is significant for the present study because it allows a deeper understanding of how personality and resilience may differ according to offence severity. Petty offences may be more closely associated with situational impulsivity, peer influence, and lower levels of behavioural control, whereas heinous offences may be linked with more serious personality-related risks such as aggression, emotional instability, low empathy, moral disengagement, and lower resilience. This distinction helps in developing a more sensitive and rehabilitation-oriented

understanding of juvenile offending rather than treating all juveniles in conflict with law as a single homogeneous group (Fairchild et al., 2019; Xie et al., 2024).

PERSONALITY: MEANING AND NATURE

Personality refers to the organized pattern of thoughts, emotions, attitudes, motives, and behaviours that shape how an individual responds to different situations. In juveniles, personality is still developing and may be influenced by family environment, peer relations, school experiences, trauma, and social conditions. Traits such as impulsivity, aggression, low empathy, emotional instability, and poor self-control are important for understanding juvenile offending (Tharshini et al., 2021; Pechorro et al., 2022).

Meaning of Personality

Personality refers to the organized pattern of thoughts, emotions, attitudes, motives, and behaviours through which an individual responds to different situations. It reflects how a person thinks, feels, controls impulses, deals with stress, and interacts with others. In adolescence, personality is still developing, and it is strongly influenced by family environment, peer relations, school experiences, trauma, and social conditions (Tharshini et al., 2021; Pechorro et al., 2022).

The study of personality is important in the context of juveniles because it helps to explain why some adolescents adjust positively to stress, while others respond through aggression, impulsivity, rule-breaking, or antisocial behaviour. Since juveniles are still developing emotionally and morally, their personality traits cannot be viewed as completely fixed. Rather, these traits should be understood as developing psychological tendencies that may either increase or reduce the risk of offending.

Nature of Personality

The nature of personality is multidimensional because it includes emotional, cognitive, behavioural, and social aspects of the individual. Emotional aspects include anger, fear, guilt, empathy, and emotional stability. Cognitive aspects include judgement, decision-making, problem-solving, and understanding of consequences. Behavioural aspects include self-control, aggression, risk-taking, cooperation, and rule-following. Social aspects include the way the juvenile relates with parents, peers, teachers, authority figures, and society.

Personality is also developmental in nature, especially during adolescence. At this stage, traits such as impulsivity, aggression, empathy, emotional stability, conscientiousness, and self-control are still being shaped. A supportive family and school environment may help a juvenile develop responsibility,

emotional control, and empathy. In contrast, neglect, harsh parenting, abuse, peer rejection, school failure, or exposure to violence may increase emotional instability, hostility, low self-control, and delinquent behaviour (Meldrum et al., 2022; Pechorro et al., 2021).

In juvenile offending, personality traits are important because they influence how a young person reacts to frustration, peer pressure, authority, temptation, and conflict. A juvenile with good self-control and emotional stability may think before acting and may avoid harmful behaviour. However, a juvenile with high impulsivity, aggression, low empathy, and weak self-control may act without considering the consequences. Studies show that low self-control, impulsivity, aggression, and antisocial personality-related traits are strongly associated with delinquent and criminal behaviour among youth (Tharshini et al., 2021; Pechorro et al., 2022).

Several personality traits are especially relevant in understanding juvenile offending. **Impulsivity** may lead juveniles to act suddenly without thinking about legal or social consequences. **Aggression** may result in fighting, violence, hostility, or revengeful behaviour. **Low empathy** may reduce concern for the suffering of others and weaken feelings of guilt. **Low self-control** may make it difficult for juveniles to regulate anger, desires, and risky behaviour. These traits become more harmful when combined with adverse childhood experiences, poor parental supervision, substance use, or deviant peer influence (Meldrum et al., 2022; Gómez Tabares et al., 2025).

Personality is particularly useful in comparing juveniles involved in petty and heinous offences. Juveniles committing petty offences may show impulsivity, weak judgement, immaturity, and peer influence, but they may still retain guilt, empathy, and willingness to improve. On the other hand, juveniles involved in heinous offences may show stronger aggression, hostility, low empathy, callous-unemotional traits, emotional disturbance, and moral disengagement. Such traits may reduce guilt and increase the possibility of serious harm to others (Gómez & Durán, 2024; Gómez Tabares et al., 2025).

Thus, personality is a key psychological construct in the present study because it helps to understand the internal tendencies behind juvenile offending. It explains how juveniles differ in emotional control, aggression, empathy, self-control, and decision-making. At the same time, personality should not be used to permanently label juveniles as criminals, because adolescence is a period of change and development. With proper counselling, family support, behavioural intervention, and rehabilitation, many negative personality-related tendencies can be modified.

MAJOR PERSONALITY TRAITS RELATED TO JUVENILE OFFENDING

Personality traits play an important role in understanding juvenile offending because they influence how adolescents think, feel, react, and control their behaviour in difficult situations. Certain traits such as impulsivity, aggression, low self-control, low empathy, and emotional instability may increase the risk of delinquent behaviour, especially when they are combined with family problems, peer pressure, trauma, school failure, or weak social support (Tharshini et al., 2021; Pechorro et al., 2022). These traits are also useful for comparing juveniles involved in petty offences and heinous offences, as the seriousness of offence may be linked with the intensity of psychological and behavioural difficulties.

Impulsivity

Impulsivity refers to the tendency to act quickly without properly thinking about the consequences. It is one of the most important personality-related factors in juvenile offending because adolescents are often influenced by emotions, excitement, anger, peer pressure, or immediate rewards. When impulse control is weak, juveniles may engage in risky or unlawful behaviour without considering its legal, social, or personal impact. Research suggests that weak impulse control and sensation-seeking tendencies are strongly associated with delinquent behaviour during adolescence (Meldrum et al., 2022).

In petty offences, impulsivity may appear in acts such as minor theft, fighting, damaging property, or violating rules without planning. These acts may be sudden and situational. In heinous offences, impulsivity may become more serious when it is combined with aggression, emotional disturbance, substance use, trauma, or violent peer influence. In such cases, impulsive behaviour may lead to more harmful outcomes and may require deeper psychological assessment and behavioural intervention (Connor et al., 2019; Xie et al., 2020).

Aggression

Aggression refers to behaviour that is intended to harm others physically, verbally, or emotionally. It may appear in the form of fighting, anger outbursts, verbal abuse, hostility, revengeful thinking, cruelty, or violent behaviour. Aggression is closely related to juvenile offending because many delinquent acts occur when adolescents are unable to manage frustration, insult, rejection, or conflict in a controlled manner. Maladaptive aggression among children and adolescents is often associated with emotional dysregulation, impulsive reactions, and poor frustration tolerance (Connor et al., 2019).

Aggression may differ according to the seriousness of the offence. Juveniles involved in petty offences may show reactive or situational aggression, such as fighting after provocation or acting angrily under peer influence. In contrast, juveniles involved in heinous offences may show stronger, repeated, or

more harmful forms of aggression. Such aggression may be linked with trauma, exposure to violence, callous traits, low self-control, or conduct-related problems. Therefore, aggression is an important trait for understanding the psychological difference between petty and heinous offenders (Xie et al., 2020; Fairchild et al., 2019).

Low Self-Control

Low self-control refers to difficulty in regulating desires, anger, impulses, and risky behaviour. Juveniles with low self-control may seek immediate pleasure, ignore rules, take unnecessary risks, and fail to evaluate long-term consequences. This trait is strongly related to juvenile delinquency because many offences occur when adolescents are unable to delay gratification or control sudden emotional reactions. Studies indicate that low self-control may also mediate the relationship between trauma and antisocial or criminal behaviour among youth (Pechorro et al., 2021).

In petty offences, low self-control may result in repeated minor rule-breaking, theft, fighting, truancy, or property damage. In heinous offences, the same trait may become more dangerous when combined with aggression, emotional instability, substance use, violent modelling, or weak moral reasoning. Therefore, self-control is an important personality dimension for understanding why some juveniles engage in minor offences while others become involved in more serious forms of offending (Meldrum et al., 2022; Pechorro et al., 2022).

Low Empathy

Empathy refers to the ability to understand and respond to the feelings, pain, and suffering of others. Low empathy may increase the risk of harmful behaviour because the juvenile may fail to recognize the emotional and physical harm caused to the victim. When empathy is weak, feelings of guilt, regret, and responsibility may also be reduced. Research on juvenile offenders shows that low empathy, callous-unemotional traits, and moral disengagement are associated with externalizing behaviour and antisocial outcomes (Gómez & Durán, 2024; Gómez Tabares et al., 2025).

In petty offences, juveniles may have immature empathy, but they may still feel guilt or fear after the offence. This indicates that their emotional responsiveness and rehabilitation potential may still be present. In heinous offences, low empathy may be more serious, especially when it is linked with emotional detachment, callous-unemotional traits, trauma-related numbness, or moral disengagement. Such juveniles may minimize the harm caused to others or justify their behaviour, which makes psychological intervention and empathy development especially important (Gómez Tabares et al., 2025; Anderson & Walerych, 2019).

Emotional Instability

Emotional instability refers to poor control over emotions such as anger, fear, anxiety, sadness, frustration, shame, and guilt. Juveniles with emotional instability may react strongly to criticism, rejection, insult, peer pressure, or family conflict. They may find it difficult to manage stress calmly and may respond through aggression, withdrawal, substance use, or impulsive behaviour. Emotional instability is therefore an important factor in juvenile offending because it can increase the possibility of sudden and uncontrolled reactions (Fairchild et al., 2019; Connor et al., 2019).

Among juveniles involved in petty offences, emotional instability may appear as anger outbursts, frustration, poor coping, or temporary loss of control. Among juveniles involved in heinous offences, emotional instability may be more severe and may be connected with trauma, conduct disorder, repeated exposure to violence, neglect, or unresolved psychological distress. In such cases, the juvenile may require careful psychological assessment, emotional regulation training, counselling, and trauma-informed intervention (Folk et al., 2021; Xie et al., 2024)

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that psychological factors play an important role in juvenile offending. Petty offences are often related to situational impulsivity, peer influence, emotional immaturity, and lack of supervision, while heinous offences may be associated with stronger aggression, low empathy, emotional instability, trauma, and poor self-control. However, juveniles should not be permanently labelled as criminals, because adolescence is a period of change and development. Proper counselling, family support, psychological assessment, and rehabilitation can help juveniles improve their behaviour and reintegrate into society.

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