

**Research Article****MENTAL DISORDERS AND CRIMINAL BEHAVIOR: AN ANALYSIS OF THE CONNECTION****\*Elvira ČEKIĆ**

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**Abstract**

This paper examines the complex relationship between mental disorders and criminal behavior, aiming to understand how specific mental disorders may influence tendencies towards criminal activity. The focus is on three key disorders: schizophrenia, antisocial personality disorder (ASPD), and psychopathy, with additional analysis of mood and anxiety disorders. Through a review of existing research and theoretical frameworks, the paper examines the strengths and limitations of current studies, including both quantitative and qualitative approaches, as well as meta-analyses. The research findings indicate that while there is an association between mental disorders and criminal behavior, this relationship is often complex and influenced by various factors. Theoretical frameworks such as the biopsychosocial model provide valuable insights, but there are also significant limitations in methodology and applicability of findings. Based on the analysis, the paper proposes recommendations for future research, including the need for longitudinal studies, exploration of the effectiveness of preventive and intervention strategies, and consideration of social and cultural factors. These findings have important implications for the judicial and healthcare systems, emphasizing the development of effective preventive and intervention programs that integrate diverse treatment and support approaches.

**Keywords:** Mental disorders, Criminal behavior, Psychopathy, Prevention strategies, Intervention programs.

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**INTRODUCTION**

Mental disorders and criminal behaviors represent a complex and significant topic in psychological and criminological research. Numerous studies and meta-analyses indicate a significant correlation between mental disorders and criminal activities, highlighting the need for a deeper understanding of this phenomenon (Warren *et al.*, 2008; Fazel, & Danesh, 2002; Douglas *et al.*, 2009; Bonta, Law, & Hanson, 1998; Whiting *et al.*, 2021). The prevalence of mental disorders among offenders is high, and these disorders can significantly influence an individual's behavior, making them a key factor in analyzing criminal behavior (Coid *et al.*, 2006). Understanding the connection between mental disorders and criminal behavior can contribute to the development of more effective prevention and intervention strategies and provide better mental health services (Monahan & Steadman, 1994). It also has significant implications for judicial and criminological systems, as it can help shape fairer and more humane approaches to the treatment of individuals with mental disorders who have committed crimes (Hiday & Burns, 2010). Analyzing this connection may impact the reduction of recidivism through the development of targeted rehabilitation programs (Lipsey & Cullen, 2007) and contribute to the creation of policies and laws that balance public safety with the rights of individuals with mental disorders (Ahonen, Loeber & Brent, 2017; Monahan & Steadman, 1994; Teplin & Pruett, 1992). Additionally, it can provide insights for training professionals in mental health and legal fields (Borum & Reddy, 2002) and reduce the stigma associated with mental disorders (Fazel & Danesh, 2002), which is crucial for the reintegration of individuals into society after serving their sentences. Furthermore, it can improve mental health services in prisons (Lurigio & Snowden, 2008). The aim of this paper is to theoretically analyze key aspects of the connection between mental disorders and criminal behavior, based on existing literature and research. Specific research questions include: How do mental disorders influence criminal behavior? What are the most common mental disorders associated with criminal acts? What mechanisms might lead from mental disorders to criminal behavior? The literature review will utilize an approach that includes examining key articles, meta-analyses, and reviews from highly cited academic journals to provide a comprehensive overview of existing knowledge and identify key patterns and gaps in the literature.

This analysis will enable a better understanding of the complex relationships between mental disorders and criminal behavior and offer recommendations for future research and practices.

**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS**

To gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between mental disorders and criminal behavior, we will rely on several key theoretical frameworks. These frameworks provide foundational insights into the complexity of this relationship and help us examine various aspects of mental health and crime. The first theoretical framework we will use is the biopsychosocial model, developed by George Engel (1977). This model emphasizes the importance of integrating biological, psychological, and social factors in understanding mental health. According to the biopsychosocial model, mental disorders and their connection to criminal behavior cannot be understood solely through biological or psychological aspects; it is essential to consider socioeconomic and social conditions as well. Recent research, such as that conducted by Iskandarov (2023), shows that this model provides a comprehensive approach to understanding how different factors can interact and influence the development of criminal behavior in individuals with mental disorders. Another key framework is criminological theories, including strain theory and social learning theory. Strain theory, developed by Robert Agnew (1992), suggests that emotional stress and frustration can increase the propensity for criminal behavior, particularly when individuals fail to achieve socially accepted goals through legitimate means. This theory helps to understand how mental disorders may increase stress and frustration, which can lead to criminal acts as a way of coping with these stressors. Social learning theory, developed by Albert Bandura (1977), emphasizes that criminal behavior can be learned through exposure to criminal norms and values. According to this theory, individuals with mental disorders may be more susceptible to adopting criminal patterns through their social interactions and environment. This theory provides insight into how social interactions and exposure to criminal models can contribute to criminal behavior in individuals with mental disorders.

**REVIEW OF RESEARCH**

Discussions on the connection between severe mental health issues and violent behavior often overlook a crucial question: Can symptoms of mental disorders explain most acts of violence, and do most

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individuals who commit violent acts have a history of serious mental health problems (Ahonen, Loeber, & Brent, 2017)?

### **Empirical research and variations in connection**

Empirical research, including longitudinal studies and meta-analyses, provides significant insights into the relationship between mental disorders and criminal behavior. These studies have demonstrated that the connection between mental disorders and criminal behavior varies across different disorders and can differ in both intensity and nature. Longitudinal studies have been instrumental in tracking the development of mental disorders over time and their potential impact on criminal behavior. They highlight how chronic or severe mental health issues can influence the likelihood of engaging in criminal activities, but they also reveal that not all individuals with mental disorders commit crimes. Meta-analyses further enhance our understanding by aggregating data from multiple studies to identify overall patterns and trends. These analyses show that while there is a notable association between certain mental disorders and criminal behavior, this relationship is not uniform. For example, some mental disorders, such as psychosis and severe personality disorders, have been more consistently linked to violent behavior, whereas other disorders may show weaker or less consistent associations.

Moreover, empirical studies emphasize the role of additional factors, such as socio-economic status, trauma history, and substance abuse, in influencing the relationship between mental disorders and criminal behavior. These factors can either exacerbate or mitigate the risk of criminal conduct, highlighting the complexity of the issue. Overall, while mental disorders can contribute to criminal behavior, they are often one of many factors involved. Understanding this nuanced relationship requires careful consideration of the specific characteristics of mental disorders, as well as the broader social and individual contexts in which criminal behavior occurs.

### **Schizophrenia**

Schizophrenia is a severe mental disorder that can manifest in various ways, including hallucinations (most commonly auditory), delusions (primarily paranoid), and severe disorganization of thought. Research has shown that individuals with schizophrenia have a higher risk of violent behavior compared to the general population; however, this risk is often associated with more severe forms of the disorder and the presence of certain symptoms, such as paranoid delusions and hallucinations, which may cause perceptions of threat or danger. Early studies, such as those conducted by Valença et al. (2011), demonstrated that individuals with schizophrenia have an increased propensity for violent behavior, especially in the presence of symptoms such as paranoia and hallucinations. Subsequent research, including that by Fazel & Danesh (2002), indicated that only a small percentage of individuals with schizophrenia commit violent crimes and that socio-economic factors, access to mental health care, and social support play crucial roles in shaping this risk. Recent research provides deeper insights into the relationship between schizophrenia and criminal behavior. For instance, a study by He et al. (2022) shows that the association between schizophrenia and violent behavior is significant but emphasizes the importance of mental health care and support in reducing this risk. Additionally, research by Naudts & Hodgins (2006) reveals that neurobiological mechanisms, such as abnormal functions in the prefrontal cortex and limbic system, may contribute to the increased risk of violent behavior in individuals with schizophrenia. According to Fazel et al. (2009), the prevalence of violent behavior among individuals with schizophrenia may be higher, but this risk significantly decreases when the disorder is adequately treated. Further studies, such as those by Whiting et al. (2021), indicate that individuals with schizophrenia who experience intense paranoid symptoms are more prone to violent behavior, while proper treatment and therapy can significantly mitigate this risk. Research by Witt et al. (2013) highlights the importance of appropriate pharmacological and psychotherapeutic interventions in reducing the risk of violent behavior among individuals with schizophrenia.

### **Antisocial Personality Disorder (APD)**

Antisocial Personality Disorder (APD) is one of the most studied mental disorders in the context of criminal behavior. It is characterized by a persistent pattern of disregard for societal norms and the rights of others, including traits such as manipulateness, impulsivity, and lack of empathy. Individuals with APD often exhibit behaviors that involve breaking laws and committing violent acts, making this group particularly relevant for study in the context of criminal activities. Studies indicate a high prevalence of APD among individuals involved in criminal activities. According to Hare (1993), APD is present in a significant proportion of criminals, particularly among serial killers and violent offenders. Individuals with APD often display specific characteristics, such as a lack of guilt, superficial charm, manipulateness, and impulsivity. These traits can significantly contribute to a propensity for violent behavior, as individuals with APD may have difficulties recognizing and responding to social norms and rules. Recent research further explores the connection between APD and criminal behavior. For example, a study by Kennealy (2010) provides a comprehensive overview of how specific characteristics of APD, such as manipulateness and lack of empathy, contribute to criminal actions. Additionally, research by Blais, Solodukhin & Fort (2014) examines the relationship between psychopathy, which is closely related to APD, and criminal behavior, emphasizing how high levels of psychopathy can increase the risk of extreme criminal acts. APD is particularly significant in the context of serious criminal offenses, including serial murders and organized crime. Research shows that individuals with APD often have a pattern of continuous and severe offenses, including violent acts. For example, a study by Decuyper (2009) reveals that individuals with APD frequently use manipulation and deceit to achieve their goals, which can result in criminal activities such as fraud and theft.

### **Psychopathy**

Psychopathy is a specific form of antisocial personality disorder that is associated with a high risk of criminal behavior. Characteristics of psychopathy include superficial charm, lack of empathy, manipulateness, impulsivity, and a high level of aggression (Hare, 1993). Individuals with high levels of psychopathy are often involved in severe criminal acts, such as serial murders, violent crimes, and organized crime. Research, including studies by Hare (1993), indicates that many serial killers and perpetrators of serious criminal acts exhibit high levels of psychopathy. Key traits such as lack of guilt and manipulative behavior contribute to their propensity for criminal conduct. Recent studies, such as those by Forth, Kosson & Hare (2003), confirm this connection and investigate how specific psychopathic traits, like manipulateness and lack of emotional attachment, directly contribute to criminal activities. Further research, including studies by Lynam et al. (1996) and Coid et al. (2006), provides a detailed analysis of how particular psychopathic traits, such as lack of empathy and extreme impulsivity, contribute to various forms of criminal behavior. High levels of psychopathy are associated with an increased risk of committing violent and organized crimes, highlighting the impact of psychopathy on an individual's ability to recognize and adhere to social norms and laws. Studies, such as the research by Porter & Porter (2007), show that individuals with psychopathy are more prone to serious criminal acts, including murder and robbery. Their ability to coldly plan and execute crimes further enhances their criminal potential, making them exceptionally dangerous in the context of criminal activities.

### **Mood Disorders**

Mood disorders, including depression and bipolar disorder, are also associated with criminal behavior. Early studies, such as those by Breslau et al. (1998), have shown that individuals with mood and anxiety disorders may be more prone to impulsive behavior and violence, especially in stressful situations. More recent research, such as studies by Swann et al. (2011), indicates that extreme cases of bipolar disorder may be linked to an increased risk of violent behavior. These disorders can affect emotional stability and decision-

making, potentially heightening the risk of criminal behavior. While recent studies offer further insights, such as research by Lindqvist & Allebeck (1990) which examines the impact of depressive symptoms on the risk of criminal behavior, emphasizing how depression can increase tendencies toward self-harm and violence against others in severe emotional states. Additionally, research by Daff & Thomas (2014) demonstrates that extreme forms of bipolar disorder, particularly during manic episodes, may be associated with a higher risk of criminal behavior, including violent offenses. This study provides insights into how manic episodes can increase impulsivity and decrease the ability to make rational decisions. These empirical findings highlight the complexity of the relationship between mental disorders and crime and underscore the need for ongoing research and the development of targeted interventions that can reduce the risk of criminal behavior among individuals with mental disorders.

### Findings from recent studies

In a study by Vinkers *et al.* (2011), a connection was identified between mental disorders and various forms of crime, including arson, assault, attempted murder, threats, sexual crimes, and violent acts. This research demonstrated that psychotic and psychiatric disorders are linked to nearly all types of crime except for rape, while developmental disorders are associated with murders, and personality disorders with murders and sexual crimes. Brugués Català & Caparrós Caparrós (2023) further investigated the links between personality disorders and specific types of criminal acts, highlighting different patterns in these relationships. Conversely, Halle *et al.* (2020) did not find a statistically significant difference in the tendency towards violence and crime between individuals with mental disorders and those without such diagnoses. Their study also did not identify a significant association between specific mental disorders and particular criminal offenses. These results suggest that mental disorders alone are not strong predictors of criminal behavior or violent activity, indicating that other factors may play a more crucial role in increasing the risk of criminal behavior. Overall, empirical research indicates that individuals with mental disorders constitute only a small percentage of overall violence, with the majority of violent acts committed by individuals without mental illnesses. Exceptions include conduct disorders in childhood and antisocial personality disorder (ASPD), where aggression and violence are part of the diagnostic criteria. Compared to schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, conduct disorders and ASPD are more often predictors of violence (Ahonen, Loeber & Brent, 2017). Thus, preventive measures should primarily focus on recognizing and treating conduct disorders and ASPD, as these are associated with a higher risk of violence than schizophrenia or bipolar disorder. Such a focus could enhance strategies for reducing violence in communities. The prevalence of mental disorders among offenders is higher than in the general population. However, it is crucial to distinguish whether mental disorders are a direct cause of criminal behavior or merely one of many contributing factors. Understanding this distinction is essential for developing effective prevention and intervention strategies (Coid *et al.*, 2006).

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION

#### Prevention strategies

Preventing criminal behavior among individuals with mental disorders is essential for reducing risk and improving quality of life. Various approaches include early detection and treatment of mental disorders, educational programs, and public health policies. One key approach is early detection and intervention. Early intervention programs, particularly for psychotic disorders like schizophrenia, can significantly reduce the incidence of violent behavior and improve long-term outcomes. According to Marshal & Rathbone (2006), early recognition and intervention programs for schizophrenia can decrease the risk of violence and enhance overall treatment outcomes. Community-based preventive programs that include education and support for individuals with mental disorders can also help reduce the risk of criminal behavior. Programs such as mental health education,

copied strategies, and social skills training have been shown to be effective in reducing violence and crime (Skeem, Manchak, & Peterson, 2011). Specific examples of such programs can further illustrate their effectiveness in various communities.

#### Intervention programs

Intervention programs for individuals with mental disorders who have committed criminal acts often involve a combination of psychotherapy, pharmacotherapy, and community support.

- **Psychotherapy:** Psychotherapy is a crucial component in treating mental disorders and can play a significant role in reducing criminal behavior. Therapies such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) and problem-solving therapy have been shown to be effective in reducing symptoms and improving functioning in individuals with mental disorders. For example, CBT can help reduce aggressive behavior and improve social skills in individuals with schizophrenia (Kart, Özdel, & Türkçapar, 2021).
- **Pharmacotherapy:** Pharmacotherapy also plays an important role in treating mental disorders, particularly in managing symptoms that may contribute to criminal behavior. Antipsychotics for schizophrenia and mood stabilizers for bipolar disorder can reduce symptoms associated with violent behavior (Naudts & Hodgins, 2006). It is also crucial to consider potential side effects of medications that may impact behavior.
- **Community support programs:** Community support programs include various forms of assistance, such as social services, group therapies, and rehabilitation programs. These programs can aid in the reintegration of individuals into the community and reduce the risk of recidivism. Studies have shown that programs offering support in employment, housing, and social integration can significantly reduce criminal behavior and improve outcomes for individuals with mental disorders (Fazel & Danesh, 2002). Specific examples of such programs can further emphasize their importance in reducing the risk of criminal behavior. Overall, the implementation of comprehensive prevention and intervention strategies tailored to individuals with mental disorders is essential for addressing the complexities of criminal behavior and improving outcomes for affected individuals.

### DISCUSSION

#### Critical Analysis

The review of existing research and theoretical frameworks regarding the link between mental disorders and criminal behavior provides significant insights but also reveals certain limitations.

- **Strengths of research:** Many studies offer extensive datasets and comprehensive analyses that aid in understanding various aspects of mental disorders and their impact on criminal behavior. Quantitative studies, such as those exploring the connection between schizophrenia and violent behavior, often utilize large samples and sophisticated statistical methods to identify correlations and causal relationships (He *et al.*, 2022). These studies provide valuable insights that can help shape strategies for prevention and intervention.
- **Limitations of research:** However, there are significant shortcomings. Many studies face challenges in establishing causality, making it difficult to clearly determine whether mental disorders cause criminal behavior or vice versa (Fazel & Danesh, 2002). Additionally, limited generalizability is often present due to specific samples and research contexts. For example, studies focusing on particular mental disorders within specific populations may have limited applicability to the broader population.

#### Implications for the judicial and healthcare systems

The findings from research on the relationship between mental disorders and criminal behavior have important implications for both the judicial and healthcare systems:

- **Judicial system:** Understanding this relationship can lead to changes in approaches to criminal prosecution and rehabilitation. Greater awareness of mental disorders can support the development of specialized rehabilitation programs that consider the mental health of offenders. Implementing programs such as therapeutic communities or specialized treatment centers can help reduce recidivism and support more successful reintegration of offenders (Monahan & Steadman, 1996).
- **Healthcare system:** Research findings can inform policies and practices related to the prevention and treatment of mental disorders. Strengthening preventive measures, early intervention, and integrating mental health into primary healthcare can improve outcomes and reduce the risk of criminal behavior. Introducing programs that combine pharmacotherapy, psychotherapy, and social support can provide a comprehensive approach to treatment and reduce the risk of criminal behavior (Fazel & Danesh, 2002). Understanding the connection between mental disorders and criminal behavior enables the development of more effective strategies for prevention and intervention in both systems, contributing to the reduction of crime and improvement in the quality of life for individuals with mental disorders.

## Conclusion

This paper provides a comprehensive overview of the relationship between mental disorders and criminal behavior, highlighting the complexity and multifaceted nature of this issue. Specific mental disorders, such as schizophrenia, antisocial personality disorder, psychopathy, and mood disorders, have been analyzed with an emphasis on their various impacts on criminal behavior. Key findings indicate that while mental disorders may be associated with an increased risk of criminal behavior, this association is complex and often conditioned by numerous factors, including social and biological factors. Specific theories, such as the biopsychosocial model and criminological theories, offer useful frameworks for understanding this relationship. However, existing research also reveals limitations in methodology and the applicability of findings, underscoring the need for further research.

## Recommendations for future research

Future research should focus on several key areas to improve the understanding of the relationship between mental disorders and criminal behavior. First, further studies are needed to better understand the causality and mechanisms linking mental disorders with criminal behavior. This includes longitudinal studies that can provide a clearer picture of how mental disorders may influence criminal behavior over time. Second, there is a need to investigate the effectiveness of various preventive and intervention strategies, with an emphasis on developing and implementing comprehensive approaches that integrate pharmacotherapy, psychotherapy, and social support. Research focusing on specific populations and contexts can help tailor approaches and strategies for different groups. Third, it is important to explore how social and cultural factors influence the relationship between mental disorders and criminal behavior, as well as how different policies and practices may impact prevention and treatment. All these recommendations highlight the need for a multidisciplinary approach and collaboration among researchers, clinicians, and policymakers to create more effective tools and strategies for prevention and intervention in this complex field.

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