

# MENTAL DISORDER AND OFFENDING IN PRISON

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This research uses specific diagnoses and symptoms of mental disorder (MDO) to predict whether inmates offend in prison. Social psychological theories of aggression are used to make predictions about what types of MDO affect whether inmates commit violent and nonviolent infractions. The analysis was based on a survey of a nationally representative sample of more than 16,000 inmates from state and federal facilities. The evidence suggests that psychosis and major depression have strong effects on infractions involving aggression, whereas the effects of anxiety disorders are weaker and inconsistent. Psychosis and depression are also associated with nonaggressive offenses, suggesting that they have disinhibitory effects on misconduct generally. Analyses of the effects of symptoms suggest that paranoid thinking is the best predictor of offending, particularly, offending that involves aggression. In general, the evidence suggests that both cognitive and emotional aspects of MDO lead to prison offenses.

**Keywords:** mental disorder; mental illness; offending; violence; prison; inmates

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Research shows that people with at least some types of mental disorders (MDO) are more likely to engage in violence than those without (for reviews, see Link & Stueve, 1995; Monahan, 1992, 2002; Mulvey, 1994; Silver, 2006). Although the association between MDO and violence is fairly well established, it is still unclear whether it is attributable to the causal effects of mental illness (e.g., Silver, 2006; Skeem, Manchak, & Peterson, 2010) or whether it exists in the absence of substance abuse (Elbogen & Johnson, 2009; Steadman et al., 1998). It is also unclear whether particular types of MDO have effects on particular types of aggressive or criminal behavior.

In this research, we examine whether inmates with MDO are more likely than other inmates to engage in violence and other deviant behavior while incarcerated. We use a retrospective longitudinal design in which we control for prior violence and other potentially confounding factors, such as alcohol and drug use. In addition, we examine the effects of various diagnoses and symptoms to determine which types of mental illness affect which types of misconduct. Analyzing the effects of different types of MDO and symptoms on different behavioral outcomes allows us to address the issue of why mental illness might affect deviant behavior, including violence.

## BACKGROUND

Disruptive behavior by prison inmates is a major concern for prison staff and administrators (Friedman, Melnick, Jiang, & Hamilton, 2008). Prison administrators believe that

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CRIMINAL JUSTICE AND BEHAVIOR, Vol. 39 No. 2, February 2012 125-143  
DOI: 10.1177/0093854811428565  
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