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# Criminal characteristics and psychopathy in women in prison

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## ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** To compare the factors and facets of psychopathy based on criminal characteristics in a sample of women in prison.

**Material and method:** Descriptive, comparative, cross-sectional study composed of a sample of 41 women incarcerated in the Ambato prison in Ecuador. In an individual session, the Hare Psychopathy Scale Revised was applied.

**Results:** Recidivist women, with a juvenile criminal history and who are admitted to the maximum-security ward, have a higher score in the affective facet of the PCL-R. In addition, those women who are in the maximum-security pavilion have scored high in factor 2 (social deviance), mainly in the antisocial aspect.

**Discussion:** This subgroup of women in prison is characterized by lack of remorse, emotional insensitivity, manipulation, inability to accept responsibility for their own actions, and superficial affection. Further expansion of the study of psychopathy in women is required.

**Key words:** personality disorders; women; prisons; crime.

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## INTRODUCTION

Psychopathy is a personality disorder that can present in male and female prison inmates and in the community at large<sup>1-4</sup>. It is defined as an outcome of interactions between biological and behavioural predispositions and social and environmental influences, and is regarded as a predictive factor in antisocial and criminal behaviour<sup>5</sup>.

This development of this theoretical construct commenced with the work of P. Pinel<sup>6</sup>, a French psychiatrist who is believed to have coined the term psychopathy, and who studied the clients who came to his private practice. Cleckley<sup>7</sup> later went on to describe the psychopathic personality. One of his findings was that the psychopath preserved his/her

intellectual awareness while any moral awareness was found to be severely lacking<sup>5</sup>.

Hare later used Cleckley's theories as a basis for his work and went on to become one of the leading figures in current studies on psychopathy<sup>8</sup>. Hare considers the construct of psychopathy to be made up of two factors with four facets<sup>9</sup>. Factor 1 consists of interpersonal and affective facets, while lifestyle and antisocial conduct are the facets of factor 2.

The characteristics of a person with psychopathy are low empathy, low tolerance of frustration, impulsiveness, manipulative behaviour, no feelings of guilt, and a willingness to break social rules. They are regarded as cold, calculating, egocentric and insensitive to the suffering of others<sup>10,11</sup>.

The basic difference between psychopathy and other personality disorders lies in the symptomatology. Psychiatric patients suffer from severe impairment of their mental functions, while psychopaths present specific mental and emotional problems without any notable loss of their reasoning capacities<sup>1</sup>.

Likewise, the violence committed by psychopaths usually has a specific end in mind, such as getting money or for sexual gratification, unlike patients who present psychotic disorders, who often have no clear and understandable reason for their violent behaviour<sup>11,12</sup>.

### Psychopathy in female prison inmates

While it is true that psychopathy is not limited solely to criminal offenders, most studies on the issue have been carried out with prison populations<sup>13-15</sup>, and research has focused almost exclusively on male convicts, given the larger number of male inmates<sup>4,16</sup>. The inclusion of female prisoners in this type of research is a comparatively recent phenomenon<sup>4,17,18</sup>. Initially, the use of the PCL-R as a measuring instrument for psychopathy was limited to men, but over time it has become an instrument for use in female samples<sup>19-22</sup>. However, in general terms women obtain lower scores in the PCL-R than men in prison populations<sup>23,24</sup>. Current estimates indicate that psychopaths make up approximately 20% of the prison population<sup>25</sup>, and are more likely to be men than women<sup>23,24</sup>.

Women tend to present different psychopathic traits from those found in men<sup>26,27</sup>. Behavioural problems in women first tend to appear during adolescence. Such women habitually present aggressive behaviour characterised by jealousy, self-harm, manipulation and verbal aggression<sup>28</sup>. The expression of such behaviours and the development of psychopathy is therefore different from men<sup>29</sup>. However, a small sub-category of women has been found who share the same tendencies as men<sup>28</sup>.

As regards criminal conduct, female psychopaths are more likely to be convicted for theft<sup>30</sup> or offences related to the obstruction of justice<sup>31</sup>, and are less likely to receive prison sentences<sup>30,31</sup>. But female inmates with characteristics such as insensitivity and antisocial psychopathic traits have been found to be more likely to engage in violent behaviour in prison<sup>16</sup>.

The aim of this study is to compare psychopathy and the criminal characteristics in a sample of female prison inmates and relate the results to previous studies on psychopathy in women.

## MATERIALS AND METHOD

### Design

This study is descriptive, comparative and cross-section.

### Participants

The convenience sample technique was used for this study. The total female prison population was 75 persons. The sample was made up of 41 women incarcerated in a prison in Ambato (Ecuador).

Out of the inmates who volunteered to participate in the study after being informed about its content and purpose, the authors selected the ones who met the inclusion criteria of not being in pre-trial detention.

### Instruments

Questionnaire on socio-demographic and prison variables: the questionnaire was carried out on an ad-hoc basis by the first author of this study and enabled data about the socio-demographic variables and the offence committed to be collected. The information provided was contrasted with the prison records.

The PCL-R, in this case the original version developed by Hare<sup>32</sup>: the version in Spanish by Torrubia, Poy, Moltó Philip, Grayston and Corral<sup>33</sup>, was used. It consists of a semi-structured interview and a scale. The interview has 125 open questions that are used to complete the scale. The general scale is made up of 20 items, each one with a score of 0 to 2 points (0 = item doesn't apply; 1 = item applies somewhat and 2 = item definitely applies). The total score of the scale is 40 points, and the cut-off point for psychopathy is 30. The total score obtained can also be used to place the subject in categories: very high (40-33), high (32-25), moderate (24-17), low (16-9) and very low (8-0).

This instrument also measures two factors: factor 1, which contains 8 items (evaluates interpersonal and affective aspects), and factor 2, containing 10 items (evaluates lifestyle and antisocial behaviour). Items 11 and 17 are not included in either facet.

As regards diagnostic effectiveness, the indices show the following values: sensitivity = 0.72; specificity = 0.93; positive predictive value = 0.86; negative predictive value = 0.84. The overall validity rate was 0.85, giving a kappa coefficient of 0.67. The instrument presents a Cronbach alpha coefficient of 0.82 in a sample of female offenders; CCI2 interjudge reliability is 0.97; and the corrected total-item correlation coefficients show 0.19<sup>33</sup>.

## Procedure

The study was carried out in a medium-security women's module at a prison in Ambato. It houses male and female convicts who are assigned to three units according to their levels of dangerousness.

The authors of this study obtained the necessary permits to enter the prison thanks to an inter-institutional agreement between the Pontifical Catholic University of Ecuador and Ambato Prison. The inmates then received a letter informing them about the study, and those who agreed to participate signed an informed consent document. The evaluations were carried out individually by the authors in sessions that lasted about one hour, over a period of approximately three months.

## Data analysis

The data was analysed with the Statistical Package for Social Science, version 24.0 (SPSS v24.0). The chi-squared test was carried out to compare types of offences and levels of psychopathy. To establish the comparisons between recidivists and non-recidivists and women with or without a background of juvenile delinquency, Student's *t* and Cohen's *d* parametric tests were used to calculate the size of the effects of the differences. The comparisons between the modules were carried out with an analysis of the ANOVA variance, while the size of the difference effect was calculated with the program G Power 3.1<sup>34</sup>.

## RESULTS

When the cut-off point to indicate the presence of psychopathy was applied<sup>33</sup>, the authors found that only 9.76% of the sample scored 30 or more. On the other hand, the levels of psychopathy showed that 4 women (9.76%) presented a very low level, while 26.83% (11 women), showed low levels. 34.15% presented a moderate level of psychopathy, which corresponds to 14 women, while 12 (29.27%) presented a high level. No inmate presented a very high level.

### Data: socio-demographic, criminal behaviour and psychopathy

Table 1 shows that many of the inmates (N=41) at the prison were single, with an average age of 36 years. They completed basic education (primary level) and the majority were serving prison sentences for crimes against property and drug trafficking.

## Psychopathy and types of crime

Table 2 shows that there are no differences between types of crime and levels of psychopathy. Out of the total sample, the women convicted of crimes against property presented moderate (57.14%) and high (50%) psychopathy. Likewise, the inmates serving sentences for drug-related offences showed moderate (42.86%) and high (33.33%) levels of psychopathy.

## Psychopathy and backgrounds of juvenile delinquency

Table 3 shows the results of the comparative analysis between the factors of psychopathy and their respective facets between inmates with or without a background of juvenile delinquency. A significant difference was found in the affective facet ( $t = 3.00$ ;  $p = 0.009$ ;  $d = 0.46$ ), where those women with a record of juvenile delinquency presented a greater affective deficit.

## Psychopathy and recidivism

The results of the comparative analysis between factors of psychopathy and the respective facets amongst recidivists and non-recidivists (Table 4) showed a significant difference in the affective facet ( $t = 2.36$ ;  $p = 0.024$ ;  $d = 0.35$ ), or rather, recidivists tended to present a more marked affective deficit.

## Psychopathy according to low, medium and maximum security module

The comparison between factors of psychopathy and the facets amongst the inmates according to the module where they were housed (Table 5) showed significant differences in the affective facet ( $t = 4.04$ ;  $p = 0.026$ ;  $f = 0.41$ ), in factor 2 (social deviance) ( $t = 3.92$ ;  $p = 0.028$ ;  $f = 0.41$ ) and the antisocial facet ( $t = 4.65$ ;  $p = 0.016$ ;  $f = 0.44$ ). The inmates in the maximum security module presented affective deficits and antisocial behaviour.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The studies carried out on the Ecuadorian prison population show the problems of mental health that currently exist amongst men and women<sup>35,36</sup>, brought about by a number of factors<sup>37</sup> and aggravated by the lack of psychological care and shortage of intervention programmes<sup>38</sup>.

This study examined psychopathy in a sample of female offenders in Ecuador, which excluded women

Table 1. Socio-demographic and criminal data.

	Women in prison N = 41	
	n	%
<b>Marital status</b>		
Single	20	48.78
Married/Cohabiting	17	41.46
Separated/divorced	4	9.75
<b>Education</b>		
Primary	22	53.66
Secondary	11	26.83
Baccalaureate	6	14.63
University	2	4.87
<b>Recidivism</b>		
Yes	21	51.22
No	20	48.78
<b>Type of offence</b>		
Against property	16	39.02
Drug-related	17	41.46
Bodily harm/violence	2	4.88
Conspiracy	3	7.32
Manslaughter/murder	1	2.43
Breach of trust/fraud	2	4.88
<b>Module</b>		
Module 1	7	17.07
Module 2	4	9.75
Module 3	30	73.17
	M	SD
Age	36.54	12.70
Period of sentence	31.20	52.25
Time served in prison	11.88	15.37

Note. SD: standard deviation; M: mean.

Table 2. Types of offence and levels of psychopathy.

Level of psychopathy PCL-R	Robbery/theft		Drugs		Lesions/violence		Conspiracy		Homicides/murders		Abuse of trust/fraud		$\chi^2$	p	V
	n = 16	n = 17	n = 2	n = 3	n = 1	n = 2									
	N	%	n	%	n	%	N	%	n	%	N	%			
Very low	0	0.00	2	50.00	1	25.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	1	25.0	18.29	0.091	0.406
Low	2	18.18	5	45.45	0	0	2	18.18	1	9.09	1	9.09			
Moderate	8	57.14	6	42.86	0	0	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00			
High	6	50.00	4	33.33	1	8.33	1	8.33	0	0.00	0	0.00			

Note.  $\chi^2$ : Chi squared; PCL-R: Hare Psychopathology Checklist-Revised; V: Cramer's V.

in pre-trial detention. The results show that inmates with a history of juvenile delinquency and recidivism presented higher levels of affective deficit. This subgroup often presents a lack of regret, affective insensitivity, manipulation, inability to accept responsibility for their own actions and superficial affect.

As regards the module where they are housed, the inmates in the maximum security module presented a deficit in the affective facet, and also in factor 2, with a greater emphasis on the antisocial facet. These inmates not only presented affective deficits but also showed poor control over their behaviour that commenced in their infancy and youth and is plainly evident in a wide range of adult criminal behaviours.

The evaluation of psychopathy with the scale proposed by Hare showed that they women presented a higher prevalence of psychopathy<sup>4,39,40</sup>. In this regard, Pauli, Essemeyr, Sorman, Howner, Gustavsson and Liljeberg<sup>41</sup>, emphasise the importance of considering two factors found in the results of previous studies and in this one.

On the one hand, it is unclear whether the results of this study really show a lower prevalence in psychopathic female inmates or if the PCL-R does not adequately measure psychopathy in this group of women<sup>41</sup>. Furthermore, although there is evidence that the PCL-R is a valid and reliable tool for measuring psychopathy in women, the literature offers no firm conclusions on the subject<sup>42</sup>. Although research with prison inmates in different contexts usually shows certain similarities in terms of characteristics of personality and psychopathological disorders<sup>43</sup>, it should also be pointed out that each context has its own particular features where evaluation and analysis are concerned.

Table 3. Psychopathy and record of juvenile delinquency.

Psychopathy PCL-R	Background of juvenile delinquency n = 8		No background of juvenile delinquency n = 33		t	p	d
	M	SD	M	SD			
Total	23.25	5.90	18.91	7.81	1.74	0.104	0.30
Factor 1	10.00	2.20	8.42	4.03	1.50	0.148	0.24
Interpersonal	4.25	2.25	4.55	2.55	0.32	0.752	0.06
Affective	7.25	1.70	5.06	2.46	3.00	0.009	0.46
Factor 2	12.25	3.88	9.81	4.71	1.52	0.153	0.27
Lifestyle	7.75	2.43	6.61	2.87	1.15	0.273	0.21
Antisocial	4.50	1.60	3.21	2.25	1.87	0.082	0.31

Note. d: Cohen's d; SD: standard deviation; M: mean.

Table 4. Psychopathy and prison recidivism.

Psychopathy PCL-R	Recidivists n = 21		Non-recidivists n = 20		t	p	d
	M	SD	M	SD			
Total	21.67	6.27	17.75	8.50	1.69	0.103	0.25
Factor 1	9.71	3.04	7.70	4.26	1.74	0.091	0.26
Interpersonal	4.71	2.10	4.25	2.84	0.59	0.558	0.09
Affective	6.33	2.03	4.60	2.62	2.36	0.024	0.35
Factor 2	11.33	4.14	9.20	4.94	1.50	0.143	0.23
Lifestyle	7.33	2.67	6.30	2.90	1.18	0.244	0.18
Antisocial	4.00	1.84	2.90	2.40	1.64	0.110	0.25

Note. d: Cohen's d; SD: standard deviation; M: mean; PCL-R: Hare Psychopathy Checklist-Revised.

Table 5. Psychopathy and modules (low, medium and maximum security).

Psychopathy PCL-R	Module 1 Low security n = 7		Module 2 Medium security n = 4		Module 3 Maximum security n = 30		F	p	f
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD			
Total	14.86	8.88	19.25	5.62	20.97	7.28	1.93	0.160	0.30
Factor 1	7.00	4.65	12.25	0.96	8.67	3.56	2.69	0.081	0.35
Interpersonal	4.57	3.15	6.25	0.96	4.23	2.40	1.19	0.315	0.24
Affective	3.57	2.64	7.50	0.58	5.67	2.34	4.04	0.026	0.41
Factor 2	7.29	5.82	7.00	5.22	11.43	3.81	3.92	0.028	0.41
Lifestyle	5.14	3.63	5.50	4.04	7.40	2.27	2.52	0.094	0.34
Antisocial	2.14	2.41	1.50	1.29	4.03	1.97	4.65	0.016	0.44

Note. SD: standard deviation; F: ANOVA F test; f: effect size; M: mean; PCL-R: Hare Psychopathy Checklist-Revised.

With this point in mind, perhaps future lines of research could include comparative studies between men and women, considering that psychopathy can present in different ways according to the gender<sup>26</sup>. Another interesting line of research would be a study on the reliability and validity of the PCL-R for female inmates in Ecuador, as would research on the validity of the PCL-R in predicting recidivism in male and female offenders in the same country.

This study has a number of major limitations: as is the case in other countries, the number of female inmates in Ecuador is small when compared to the male prison population<sup>44-46</sup>, and so the sample of women who participated in the study is a relatively small one. This means that any generalised extrapolation of the results is not recommended.

The Ecuadorian prison regulations imposed several contextual factors (physical, psychological, the presence of young offspring during the evaluation of the participants and the time available for the field work with the measuring instrument) that make it advisable to apply less extensive evaluation approaches or control some of the variables mentioned above.

However, despite these limitations, this study tackles an issue that is infrequently studied in the prison context, and the results enable us to obtain a better understanding of psychopathy amongst women in regions such as Latin America.

## CORRESPONDENCE

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