Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and arrest history: Differential association of clinical characteristics by sex

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Abstract

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is often cited as a risk factor for criminality. However, many studies do not take other criminogenic variables into account when reporting on this relationship. It is even less clear whether models that include ADHD as a potential risk factor for criminality consider the importance of sex differences. To answer this question, we collected data from a telephone population survey sampling adults over the age of 18 years in the province of Ontario, Canada (final sample size = 5196). Respondents were screened for ADHD using the Adult ADHD Self-Report Version 1.1 Screener (ASRS-V1.1) and four extra items. Problematic drinking was assessed using the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT), while cannabis misuse was evaluated using the Alcohol, Smoking and Substance Involvement Screening Test (ASSIST). The Antisocial Personality Disorder Scale from the Mini-International Neuropsychiatric Interview provided a measure of previous conduct disorder symptoms and the 12-item General Health Questionnaire screening procedure was used to gauge general distress. History of arrest was self-reported. Three separate logistic regression analyses (entire sample, male only, and female only) were applied to estimate the association of the foregoing variables with arrest history. In the combined sample, conduct disorder symptoms, problem alcohol use, and problem cannabis use all predicted history of arrest. With regard to the male sample, conduct disorder symptoms, elevated AUDIT and ASSIST scores, and general distress were associated with an arrest history. For the female subsample, only conduct disorder symptoms and problematic cannabis use showed a relationship with criminality. To summarize, ADHD did not predict history of arrest for either subsample or the combined sample. When comparing males and females, conduct disorder symptoms and cannabis misuse exerted stronger effects on history of arrest for females than males. These results suggest that the relative importance and type of clinical risk factors for arrest may differ according to sex. Such information could be useful for crime prevention policies and correctional programs that take into account differences in experience by sex.