

Psychopathic traits in teenagers not cast in stone

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Most youths are concerned about other people's feelings, they feel bad or guilty when they have done something wrong and they adhere to social rules. A small group of youths, however, does not. These youths express psychopathic personality traits that are associated with adult psychopathy, a serious personality disorder that is linked with antisocial behavior and criminality. A study conducted by Selma Salihovic and her research team at Örebro University in Sweden shows that for this small group of youth, psychopathic traits remain quite stable over a period of four years. Their findings are published in Springer's *Journal of Psychopathology and Behavioral Assessment*.

While other recent studies have tried to describe the relative stability of adolescent psychopathic traits, Salihovic and her colleagues are the first to examine the long-term and joint development during adolescence of three defining, yet separate, characteristics that are hallmark of psychopathy. These characteristics, which include traits such as lack of remorse or guilt, manipulateness and irresponsible behavior, are associated with juvenile delinquency, future [antisocial behavior](#) and violence.

"One of the reasons why researchers are studying earlier expressions of psychopathic [personality traits](#) is to better understand how psychopathy develops," Salihovic, [doctoral student](#) in [developmental psychology](#) and lead author of the study, said. "Knowledge about the stability and change of these traits can help us pinpoint the developmental period when they are the least stable and therefore also more amenable to treatment."

The study followed 1,068 youths in the seventh to ninth grades from a Swedish city over a period of four years. Girls and boys were represented in almost equal number and 92.5 percent of the youths were of Swedish descent. Psychopathic traits were measured with the Youth Psychopathic Traits Inventory, a self-report instrument designed to capture psychopathic traits in youths 12 years and older.

Salihovic and her colleagues found four subgroups of youths who were characterized by high, low and moderate levels of psychopathic traits and decreasing or stable development. As expected, most of the adolescents in the study had low to moderate levels of psychopathic traits that continued to decline with age. These youths had low levels of delinquent behavior and reported having warm and understanding relationships with their parents. However, for a small group of youths, these characteristics remained high and stable over the course of the study period. These teenagers maintained high levels of all psychopathic traits, despite having slight dips in the levels of the callous-unemotional traits and impulsive-irresponsive behavior that are so typical of psychopathy. Not surprisingly, these were the adolescents who also reported the highest levels of delinquency, and had the most difficult relationships with their parents.

Salihovic acknowledges that for a small group of youths, in whom high and stable levels of psychopathic characteristics were found, the study results do not bode well for the future. However, she adds:

"Psychopathic traits, like general personality traits, are in development during the teenage years, which means that developmental tracks are not cast in stone and that effective therapeutic intervention can change the course of development."

More information: Salihovic, S. et al (2013). Trajectories of Adolescent Psychopathic Traits, *Journal of Psychopathology and Behavioral Assessment*. [DOI: 10.1007/s10862-013-9375-0](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10862-013-9375-0)

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