

Traits associated with increased risk of gun use among high-risk adolescents

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Research out today identifies traits among high-risk adolescents associated with increased risk for gun use. Among high-risk adolescents, those with greater callous-unemotional traits were more likely to carry a

gun and to use a gun during a crime over a four-year period following an initial arrest, according to a study published online in the *American Journal of Psychiatry*.

Callous-unemotional traits refer to individuals with limited guilt, reduced empathy, reduced displays of appropriate emotion, and a lack of concern over performance in important activities. An estimated 25% - 30% of adolescents with serious conduct problems have callous-unemotional traits and they have more persistent and severe aggression and worse treatment outcomes than adolescents without callous-unemotional traits.

Gun [violence](#) is a serious public health concern in the U.S. and reducing [gun violence](#) by youth is of particular concern. Nearly 40,000 people in the U.S. died of gun-related violence in 2018, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Approximately 30% of gun-related homicides were committed by adolescents and [young adults](#) ages 12-24.

The study, led by researchers at the Louisiana State University, involved more than 1,200 high-risk adolescents, or male juvenile offenders from three regions of the U.S. They were assessed after their first arrest and then reassessed every six months for three years and at four years. Callous-unemotional traits were measured through a standardized self-report inventory after the first arrest. The use of a gun during a crime and peer gun carrying and ownership were self-reported.

After accounting for other factors (such as lifetime offending, impulse control, parental monitoring and exposure to violence) the study found teens with greater callous-unemotional traits were more likely to carry a gun and to use a gun during a crime in the four years after their initial arrest. Lead author Emily L. Robertson, M.A, and colleagues also found that the teens with greater callous-unemotional traits were less likely to be influenced by their peers owning/carrying guns compared to teens

with less callous-unemotional traits, suggesting the known influence of peer gun carrying and ownership may have been underestimated in past research.

The authors conclude that "callous-unemotional traits predicted increased frequency of gun carrying and a higher likelihood of using a gun in a violent crime." They note, however, callous-unemotional traits were not as strong of a predictor of carrying a gun as other risk factors (such as lifetime offending and exposure to violence).

More information: *American Journal of Psychiatry* (2020). [DOI: 10.1176/appi.ajp.2020.19080861](https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ajp.2020.19080861)

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