



## 166P Emotional Reactivity and Anxiety Among Juvenile Offenders: The Moderating Roles of School Enrollment and Alcohol Use

### Schedule:

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Marquis BR 6, ML 2 (Marriott Marquis Washington DC)

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**Background:** Juvenile offenders are disproportionately exposed to psychosocial risk factors that can amplify mental health concerns, particularly anxiety. Emotional reactivity has been identified as a key predictor of anxiety in youth. However, little is known about how contextual factors like school enrollment and substance use may influence this relationship in justice-involved populations. This study looks into whether emotional reactivity predicts anxiety levels among juvenile offenders and whether this association is moderated by school enrollment and recent alcohol use. Understanding these dynamics is crucial, as school engagement and substance use are factors that could inform intervention strategies within a context that is understudied.

**Methods:** Data were drawn from the Pathways to Desistance study, a longitudinal investigation of serious adolescent offenders across Maricopa County, AZ, and Philadelphia, PA (N = 1,354). Emotional reactivity was assessed using a modified version of the Emotionality, Activity, Sociability, and Impulsivity (EASI) temperament measure. The outcome variable, total anxiety score, was measured using the Revised Children's Manifest Anxiety Scale (RCMAS), ranging from 0 to 28. Covariates included school enrollment (enrolled vs. not enrolled) and past six-month alcohol use (yes vs. no). Interaction terms were created to test moderation effects. After excluding cases with missing data, the final analytical sample was N = 1,349. Backward stepwise linear regression was used to identify significant predictors.

**Results:** Across all four models, emotional reactivity was a consistent and significant predictor of anxiety (Model 4:  $B = 1.023$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Youth with higher emotional reactivity scores reported significantly higher anxiety. The final model ( $R^2 = .391$ ) included three significant predictors: emotional reactivity, the interaction between emotional reactivity and school enrollment ( $B = 0.006$ ,  $p = .047$ ), and the interaction between emotional reactivity and alcohol use ( $B = 0.040$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This suggests that emotional reactivity has a stronger association with anxiety for youth who are not enrolled in school and those who have recently used alcohol. In contrast, school enrollment and alcohol use alone were not significant predictors and were excluded from the final model.

**Conclusion:** The findings highlight the role of emotional reactivity in predicting anxiety among juvenile offenders and emphasize how broader contextual factors shape this relationship. The moderating effects of school engagement and substance use suggest that emotional reactivity is heightened when there is a lack of protective factors like education and the presence of behaviors like alcohol use. These findings have implications for informed interventions and mental health screenings in juvenile justice settings. Incorporating questions about school engagement and recent substance use into assessments could help identify youth at higher risk for anxiety-related difficulties, this could play an important role in strengthening behavioral health support among this population.

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