

LETTER TO EDITOR

Aggressive Behavior among Adolescent Prisoners: Insights from a Study in Indonesia

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DEAR EDITOR

Adolescence is a period of transition from childhood to adulthood. Adolescents are vulnerable to engaging in deviant activities such as smoking, addictive substance abuse, free sex, violence, suicide, murder, motorcycle accidents, and delinquency.¹ The issue of aggressive behavior among adolescent prisoners remains a pressing concern in correctional facilities worldwide, particularly in developing nations like Indonesia. Our recent study conducted at Tanjung Gusta Prison in Medan city, North Sumatra, Indonesia, during 2020, examined this phenomenon among 50 young male inmates aged 15-20 years, revealing critical insights that warrant attention from both healthcare professionals and prison administrators. This research has been approved, with ethical clearance No. 1299/UN5.2.1.13/PPM/2020 from the ethics committee, Faculty of Nursing, Universitas Sumatera Utara.

Participants responded to 4 factors of aggressive behavior (i.e., Physical Aggression, Verbal Aggression, Emotion, and Hostility) using the Aggressive Behavior Questionnaire.² We found that a significant majority (N=40, 80%) of adolescent prisoners exhibited moderate levels of aggressive behavior. The most prevalent form of aggression (N=34, 66,7%) manifested as hostility. This hostility typically presented as deep-seated distrust, unwarranted jealousy, and persistent suspicion toward others - emotional states that have likely developed from their challenging life experiences before incarceration. A particularly striking finding was the association between lower educational attainment and increased aggressive tendencies ($r=0.69$, $P=0.02$). Half of our study participants had only completed elementary education, and this group demonstrated significantly higher aggression scores compared to those with more schooling. This correlation suggests that education serves not merely as an academic pursuit but as a crucial developmental pathway that equips young individuals with better emotional regulation and conflict resolution skills.

The transitional nature of adolescence itself contributes to these behavioral challenges. As young people navigate the complex journey from childhood to adulthood, they encounter numerous physical, emotional, and social changes.¹ For those in correctional facilities, these normal developmental challenges become compounded by the stresses of incarceration, separation from family, and exposure to potentially negative peer influences within the prison environment.³ Our observations indicate that many adolescent prisoners struggle with basic assertive communication. Approximately 38% of participants reported difficulty expressing their feelings when facing

verbal abuse, often resorting to either passive acceptance or aggressive retaliation instead of appropriate assertive responses. This communication deficit points to a critical area where targeted interventions could make a substantial difference.

The physical manifestation of aggression was also notable, with 22% of respondents admitting they would use violence to defend their rights when challenged. This finding suggests that for many young inmates, physical aggression has become a learned and habitual response to conflict situations. Such patterns have likely developed from their pre-incarceration experiences and may be reinforced within the prison environment if not properly addressed.⁴

These findings carry important implications for prison management and rehabilitation programs. First, they highlight the urgent need for specialized mental health services within correctional facilities, particularly those housing adolescent offenders. Regular psychological assessments and counseling sessions could help identify and address aggressive tendencies early. Second, educational programs should be expanded and tailored to meet the specific needs of young inmates, focusing not just on academic content but also on emotional intelligence and social skills development. We recommend implementing structured assertiveness training programs to help young prisoners develop healthier communication patterns. Such programs could teach alternative conflict resolution strategies that do not rely on aggression while still allowing individuals to stand up for their rights appropriately. Additionally, vocational training, coupled with psychological support, might provide constructive outlets for energy and frustration while preparing inmates for successful reintegration into society.

The prison environment itself plays a crucial role in either exacerbating or mitigating aggressive tendencies.⁵ Creating structured routines, providing access to recreational activities, and ensuring fair treatment by the staff can all contribute to a more rehabilitative atmosphere. Staff training should emphasize de-escalation techniques and positive reinforcement methods when working with adolescent inmates.⁶

While our study focused on a single correctional facility in Medan, we believe these findings likely reflect broader patterns among adolescent prisoners in Indonesia and possibly other similar contexts. The moderate but persistent levels of aggression we observed suggest that current rehabilitation approaches may be insufficient to address the underlying psychological and social factors contributing to these behaviors. We recognize that addressing aggressive behavior in correctional settings requires a multifaceted approach involving prison staff, mental health professionals, educators, and policymakers. However, the potential benefits - reduced violence within facilities, improved rehabilitation outcomes, and decreased recidivism rates - make this effort undoubtedly worthwhile.

Further research should explore the long-term effectiveness of various intervention strategies and examine how aggressive behavior patterns evolve throughout an inmate's incarceration period. Comparative studies across different correctional facilities could also help identify environmental factors that either contribute to or help reduce aggressive tendencies among young offenders.

In conclusion, our study underscores both the challenges and opportunities in addressing aggressive behavior among adolescent prisoners. By implementing targeted psychological support, educational enhancement, and environmental modifications, correctional facilities can transform from mere holding centers into genuine rehabilitation institutions that prepare young offenders for productive, non-violent lives after release.

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Authors' Contribution

SEW, WD, and JMP contributed to the study conception and design. SEW, WD, JMP, and MLN carried out data collection. SEW, WD, and JMP conducted data analysis and interpretation. SEW, WD, JMP, and MLN participated in drafting and reviewing the manuscript. All authors approved the final version of the study and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the manuscript.

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Conflict of Interest

None declare.

Declaration on the use of AI

The authors declare that no artificial intelligence (AI) was used during the writing of the manuscript.

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