



# The Influence of Delinquent Peers: How Sub-Types of Peer Delinquency Predict Juvenile Rule-Violating Behavior



Tyler Browne, Psychology Department, University of New Hampshire

## BACKGROUND

- Adolescence is a critical period marked by increased susceptibility to peer influence, especially when delinquency is involved<sup>5</sup>. While prior research has consistently linked peer delinquency to juvenile rule-violating behavior (RVB)<sup>1</sup>, less is known about how specific sub-types of peer delinquency—such as violence, theft, substance use, and vandalism—differentially impact youth outcomes.
- This study investigates how distinct forms of peer delinquency predict RVB and whether these associations vary by age<sup>3</sup> and gender<sup>2,4</sup>. Understanding these demographic interactions can help refine risk assessments and intervention strategies tailored to developmental and gender-specific needs.
- By identifying which sub-types of delinquent peer behavior are most influential—and for whom—this research aims to inform more nuanced prevention and rehabilitation efforts for at-risk youth.

## HYPOTHESIS

- Higher levels of peer delinquency will significantly predict higher levels of general RVB among adolescents
- The relationship between peer delinquency and rule-violating behavior is stronger in males than females.
- As ones age increases, so will the influence of peer delinquency on one's RVB
- RVB Sub-types such as substance abuse and vandalism are more likely to be influenced by peers rather than sub-types such as Theft and Violence

## METHODS

### Participants:

- 831 Participants (Males: 58%, Females: 42% ; Mean Age: 14.5, SD = 1.71)
- Middle school cohort: 7<sup>th</sup> grade; 12-14 years old
- High school cohort: 10<sup>th</sup>; 15-17 years old

### Procedure:

- Data was collected using the New Hampshire Youth Study, a longitudinal survey that began in 2006
- The data used in this research is from wave 4 which was acquired in the Spring of 2008.
- A variation of the Delinquency Component of the National Youth Longitudinal Survey<sup>6</sup> was used to measure RVB and Peer Delinquency
- Measure for RVB asked adolescents to report how many times they had engaged in any of the 26 delinquent behaviors in the preceding 6 months in the following 4 areas:
  - Violent Offences ( e.g. ...gotten into a fight at school?)
  - Theft Offenses ( e.g. ...knowingly stole or held stolen goods?)
  - Substance Offenses (e.g. ...had an alcoholic drink?)
  - Property Offenses (e.g. ...intentionally damaged or destroyed property that did not belong to you/them?)
- Measure for Peer Delinquency was conducted utilizing the same set of 26 questions but asked adolescents to report how many of their close friends have engaged in any of the 26 delinquent behaviors in the preceding 6 months on a scale of 0-3:
  - 0 = Never
  - 1 = A few
  - 2 = Some
  - 3 = Many

### Measures:

- Demographics: Gender and Age
- RVB Sub-Types: Violence, Substance Abuse, Theft, and Vandalism
- Peer Delinquency Sub-Types: Violence, Substance Abuse, Theft, and Vandalism

## DISCUSSION

### Findings:

- Peer delinquency significantly predicts all forms of individual rule-violating behavior (RVB).
- Age**
  - Peer delinquency subtypes are strong predictors of RVB across all adolescent age groups, especially at age 14
  - Peer Theft and Peer Vandalism were the strongest predictors of their respective RVB subtypes, with exceptionally high standardized beta values ( $\beta = .971$  and  $\beta = 1.061$  at age 14, respectively).
- Gender**
  - Males showed consistently stronger peer effects in
    - General peer delinquency ( $\beta = .758$ ,  $R^2 = .582$ )
    - Vandalism ( $\beta = .507$ ,  $R^2 = .276$ )
    - Theft ( $\beta = .472$ ,  $R^2 = .236$ )
    - Violence ( $\beta = .221$ ,  $R^2 = .058$ )
  - Females, however, were more influenced by peer substance use ( $\beta = .236$ ,  $R^2 = .073$ ) compared to males ( $\beta = .168$ ,  $R^2 = .034$ ).

### Implications:

- Findings strongly support Social Learning Theory
- Prevention efforts should focus on:
  - Disrupting the development of deviant peer groups
  - Promoting prosocial peer environments
  - Tailoring interventions based on gender, age and delinquency subtype

### Limitations:

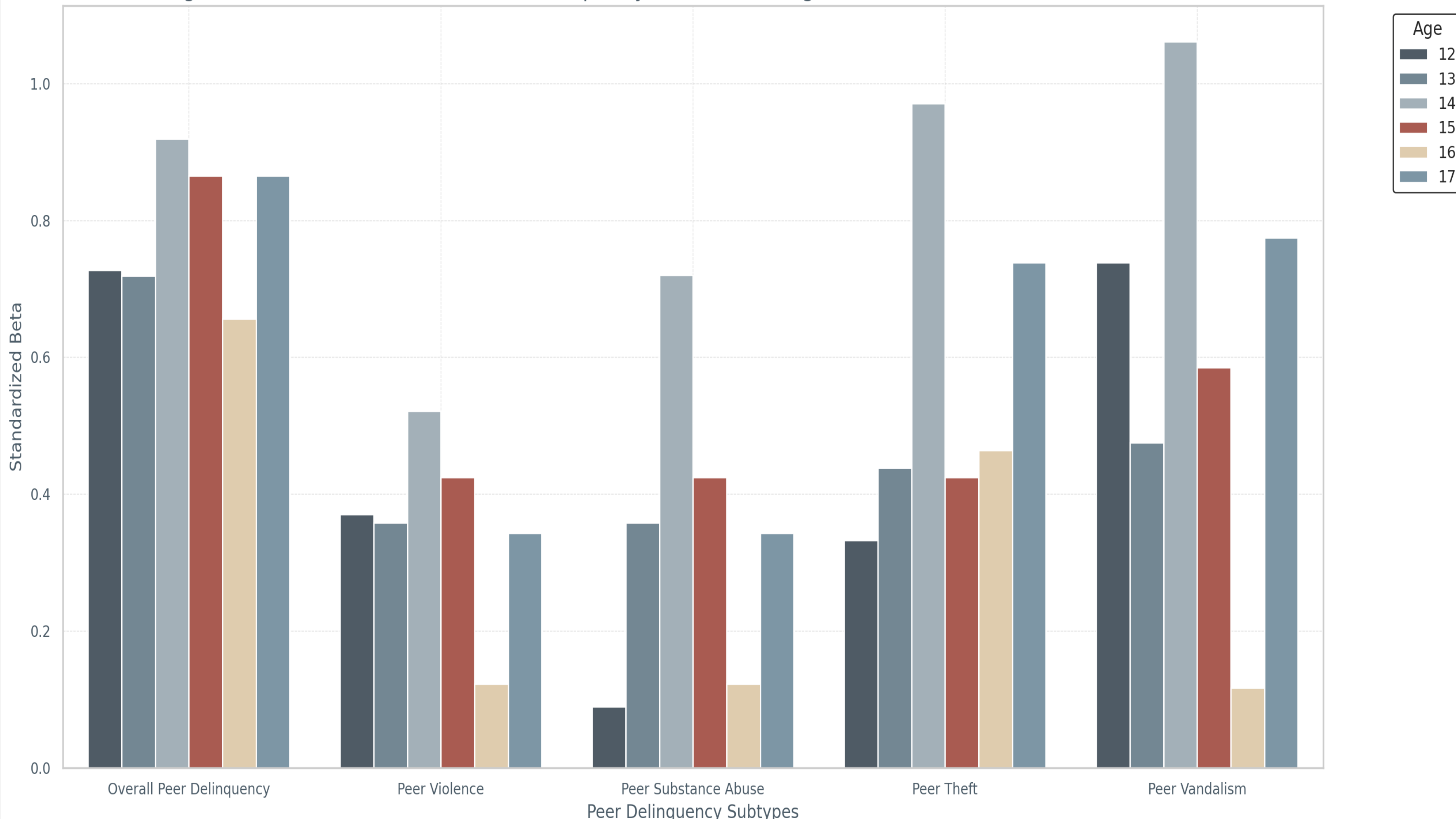
- Peer influence was assessed broadly; friendship closeness or peer group size not considered
- Data is cross-sectional (only taken at Wave 4), which limits potential conclusions on causality
- Data was only collected in NH high schools which limits generalizability

### Future Directions

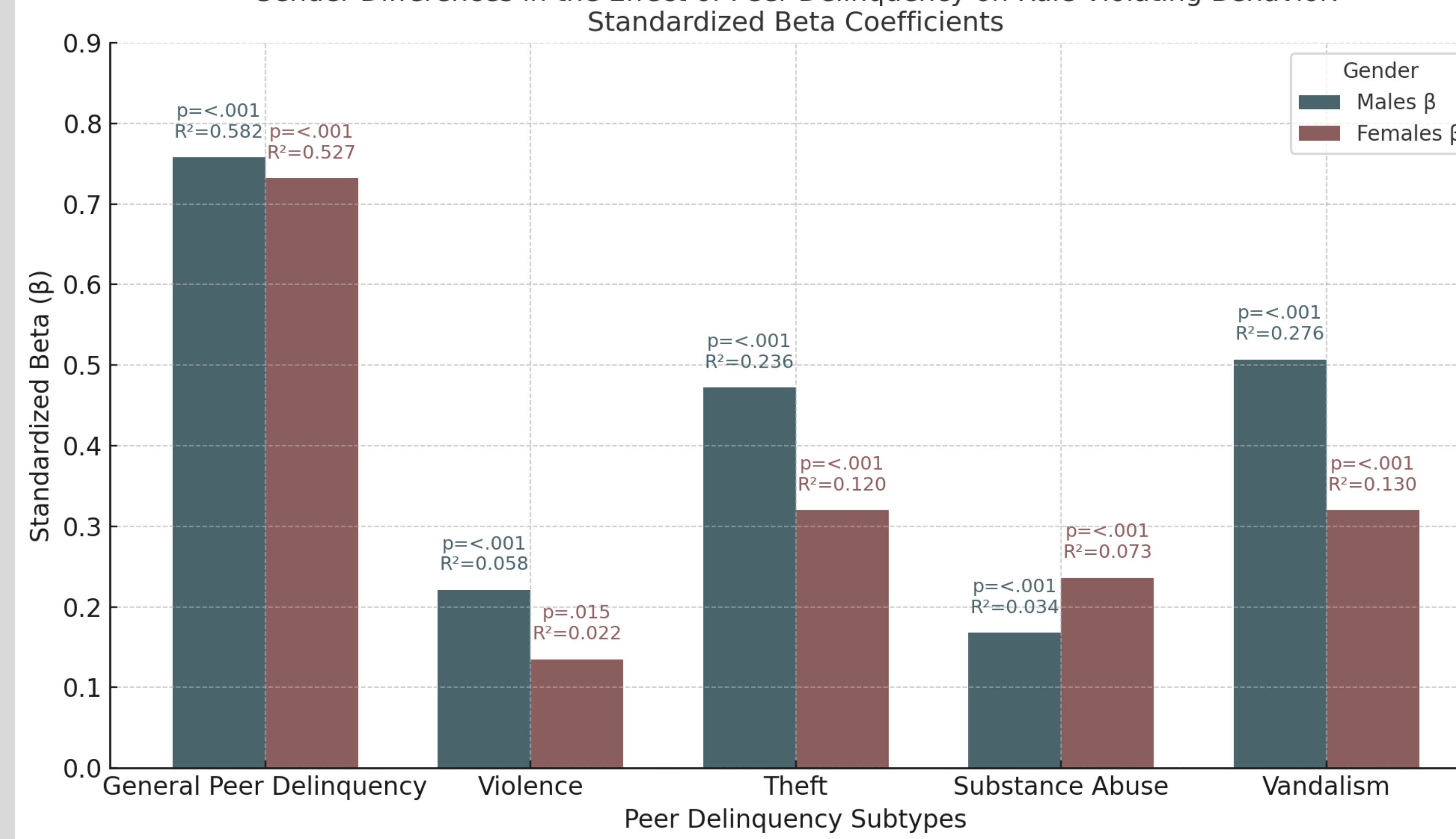
- Use longitudinal data to explore how peer influence develops over time.
- Examine other interaction effects (e.g., SES  $\times$  Peer Influence; Race  $\times$  Peer Influence).
- Diminishing Influence in Late Adolescence (Age 17+)

## RESULTS

Age Differences in the Effect of Peer Delinquency on Rule-Violating Behavior: Standardized Beta Coefficients



Gender Differences in the Effect of Peer Delinquency on Rule-Violating Behavior: Standardized Beta Coefficients



## REFERENCES

- Cohn, E. S., Bucolo, D., Rebellon, C. J., & Van Gundy, K. (2010). An integrated model of legal and moral reasoning and rule-violating behavior: The role of legal attitudes. *Law and Human Behavior, 34*(4), 295–309. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10979-009-9185-9>
- Mears, D. P., Ploeger, M., & Warr, M. (1998). Explaining the gender gap in delinquency: Peer influence and moral evaluations of behavior. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency, 35*(3), 251–266. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022427898035003001>
- Monahan, K. C., Steinberg, L., Cauffman, E., & Mulvey, E. P. (2009). Trajectories of antisocial behavior and psychosocial maturity from adolescence to young adulthood. *Developmental Psychology, 45*(6), 1654–1668. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0015862>
- Piquero, A. R., Gover, A. R., & MacDonald, J. M. (2005). The influence of delinquent peers on delinquency: Does gender matter? *Youth & Society, 36*(3), 251–275. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X04272973>
- Sun, G., & Zhang, T. H. (2023). Peer Influence on Youth Delinquency: How Does School-Level Teacher Quality Matter? *Crime & Delinquency, 0*(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/00111287231207385>
- Wolpin, K. (1983). *The national longitudinal handbook 1983-1984*. Columbus, OH: Center for Human Resource Research, Ohio State University.