C-24
The Association Between Neurocognitive Functioning of Inmates and the Frequency of Criminal Behavior
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Objective: Incarcerated individuals display cognitive deficits relative to their non-offending counterparts. New research with inmates has demonstrated that deficits in cognitive flexibility are associated with frequency of criminal behavior. The purpose of this study was to replicate and expand upon these results by assessing neurocognitive functioning of inmates and its relationship to frequency of crime. Method: One hundred randomly selected jail inmates (50% female, ages 18–71) completed diagnostic screening interviews and a brief neurocognitive battery. For the present study cognitive flexibility was measured using the Wisconsin Card Sorting Test (WCST) and the Trail Making Test (TMT) and the Color-Word Interference (CWI) subtests of the Delis-Kaplan Executive Functioning System. Specifically, the contrast score of the CWI comparing inhibition/switching to inhibition subtest was used (leaving a measure of cognitive flexibility). Frequency of convicted felonies was confirmed using the state repository system. Results: Linear regression models revealed that perseverative errors in WCST predicted convicted felonies ($b = -0.24$ (0.07), $p < 0.005$), where greater perseverative errors were associated with more convicted felonies. However, letter-number sequencing subtest scores of the TMT ($b = -0.09$ (0.28), $p = 0.73$) and contrast score of CWI ($b = -0.09$ (0.12), $p = 0.46$) did not predict convicted felonies. Conclusion: These results diverge from previous findings that have found associations between cognitive flexibility and criminal behavior. Problem-solving and concept formation abilities measured by WCST may be a more important predictor of criminal behavior than cognitive flexibility measured by TMT and CWI. Implications of these findings on the development and treatment of criminal behavior will be discussed.