



# Violent victimization, confluence of risks and the nature of criminal behavior: Testing main and interactive effects from Agnew's extension of General Strain Theory



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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** Important facets of the association between violent crime victimization and criminal offending remain unsettled. Drawing on key aspects of General Strain Theory, this study examined whether violent crime victimization affects overall offending proclivity as well as the character—violent vs. nonviolent—of criminal behavior. Additionally, it tested a recent theory extension positing that larger effects of violent victimization will be found among individuals with a greater confluence of criminogenic risk factors.

**Methods:** Multi-level latent variable item-response models are used to examine data from a sample of nearly 3,000 tenth-grade students from thirty Kentucky counties.

**Results:** Quantitative analyses indicated that greater violent victimization was associated with both higher scores on a latent index of overall offending and with an elevated propensity for *violent* criminality in particular. Contrary to expectations, effects of violent victimization on overall offending and the propensity for violence were not higher for individuals with higher scores on a multidimensional risk index.

**Conclusion:** In support of General Strain Theory, violent victimization elevates the overall amount of criminal offending and increases odds that crimes involve violent rather than nonviolent behaviors. However, variations in the preceding effects across levels of criminogenic risk are not consistent with the theory.

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## Introduction

A question of tremendous importance among criminologists centers on whether individuals who are victims of violent crime are themselves more likely to engage in crime. One major criminological theory that offers an affirmative response is Agnew's General Strain Theory (hereafter, GST). This theory contends that because violent crime victimization is a severe and unjust strain, it increases motivation for criminal behavior, which often serves as a coping strategy. Support for this core GST hypothesis has been strong with numerous studies reporting that violent victimization is positively associated with a person's involvement in various forms of criminal offending (Agnew, 2002; Baron, 2009; Hay & Evans, 2006; Jang & Johnson, 2003; Kort-Butler, 2010; Moon, Morash, McCluskey & Hwang, 2009; Piquero & Sealock, 2000, 2004; Turanovic & Pratt, 2013).

Yet other GST-inspired hypotheses regarding the relationship between violent victimization and criminal offending are less settled, primarily because empirical evidence is scarce or inconsistent. Accordingly,

this paper focuses specifically on two heretofore unresolved issues. The first is whether violent victimization has general or crime-type specific effects on offending. In other words, we ask: Do experiences with violent crime victimization elevate an individual's propensity to commit crimes of any type or do they particularly heighten one's proclivity for violence? The second issue deals with the extent to which the effects of violent victimization on offending depend on other variables. Agnew's theory predicts that the effects of strains on crime are moderated by other criminogenic risk factors, including particular personality traits, social controls and associations with criminally involved peers (e.g., Agnew, 2006; Agnew, Brezina, Wright & Cullen, 2002). But results from research testing the conditional effects of strains, including those focused on the criminogenic impact of violent victimization, have yielded mixed results with some supporting and some contradicting theoretical expectations (cf., Agnew et al., 2002; Baron, 2009; Botchkovar, Tittle & Antonaccio, 2009; Hay & Evans, 2006; Kort-Butler, 2010; Turanovic & Pratt, 2013).

In a recent extension of GST, Agnew (2013) has suggested that the inconsistent results likely stem from the fact that prior studies have not sufficiently evaluated the combination of conditions most likely to intensify criminogenic effects of severe and unjust strains. Rather, he notes that past research is limited because it typically has examined how the effects of strain are moderated by a particular risk factor

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(e.g., self-control, attachment to parents, delinquent peers) considered in isolation from others. Yet, Agnew's recent thesis is that the criminogenic impact of strains is most likely to be exacerbated when individuals face a deleterious confluence of multiple risk factors. Hence there is great need for additional research that seeks to determine if this combined risk thesis is supported empirically.

To summarize, in the current research article we attempt to better understand whether and how violent victimization spurs criminal offending, with aspects of GST providing our theoretical guidance. More specifically, using data from a large sample of adolescents we address the two unresolved theoretical issues regarding the victimization-offending relationship identified above. First, we examine whether variations in violent crime victimization predict an individual's general proclivity for crime and the nature—violent vs. nonviolent—of their criminal behavior. Next, drawing upon Agnew's (2013) recent "confluence of risk factors" conditional effects thesis, we estimate the degree to which the effects of violent victimization on criminal behavior (overall level and violence propensity) vary systematically according to where individuals are positioned on a multidimensional risk index that incorporates well-established correlates of criminality including personality traits, social relationships, and deviant attitudes. The conclusion of the article considers implications of our findings for 1) a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between violent crime victimization and criminal offending, and 2) the relevance of GST for understanding this complexity.

## Background and review of research

### *General Strain Theory, violent victimization and criminal behavior*

Criminal victimization, especially violent crime victimization, has been linked to a variety of negative outcomes including lower educational attainment, depression, sleep deprivation, poor mental and physical health, as well as several forms of delinquent/criminal behavior (Agnew, 2002; Bouffard & Koepfel, 2014; Hay & Evans, 2006; Johnson, Giordano, Longmore & Manning, 2014; Kort-Butler, 2010; MacMillan & Hagan, 2004; McGrath, Marcum & Copes, 2012; Moon, Morash, McCluskey & Hwang, 2009). Focusing on the latter, Agnew's General Strain Theory is a leading theoretical account of why violent crime victimization may lead a person to an involvement in crime (see Agnew, 1992, 2002, 2006, 2013). Extending early strain theory which attributed crime primarily to the inability to achieve desired goals (e.g., Cloward & Ohlin, 1960; Cohen, 1955; Merton, 1938), Agnew's GST posits that criminal behavior varies with two additional forms of strain, the loss of valued things and, most important for present purposes, *negative treatment from others*. These categories of strain are likely to elicit a criminal coping response when they are particularly severe and unjust. Violent criminal victimization is a primary example. It is a severe and unjust form of negative treatment that also may result in the loss of valued things. Therefore, according to the logic of the theory, it should increase overall involvement in criminal behavior as individuals use crime to escape from strains (assaulters), exact revenge against transgressors, or dull negative feelings invoked by victimization experiences. As noted above, numerous studies support this argument, reporting that violent crime victimization is positively associated with the likelihood or level of offending (e.g., Agnew, 2002; Baron, 2009; Hay & Evans, 2006; Jang & Johnson, 2003; Kort-Butler, 2010; Moon, Morash, McCluskey & Hwang, 2009; Piquero & Sealock, 2000, 2004; Turanovic & Pratt, 2013).

Yet most prior research on the relationship between violent victimization and offending has focused only on an individual's overall crime propensity (or their *quantity* of offending), not on their distinct proclivity for violence (whether they are more likely to choose violence when they do offend). Consequently, there is little certainty about whether violent crime victimization affects an individual's tendency to commit violent as opposed to nonviolent crimes, net of the impact that violent victimization has on their overall propensity for criminal offending.<sup>1</sup> Inattention to the impact of strains on the *nature* of offending may be due

to the fact that GST theory applies to "any act which is condemned by most others in the society or that carries more than a trivial risk of punishment" (Agnew, 2006: 17). However, recent work does contend that particular strains will have varying effects by crime types (Agnew, 2006, 2013). Most important for the present study, it is argued that strains involving provocations by others—including violent crime victimization—will more commonly produce violent offenses than property crimes or drug use (Agnew, 2006, 2013).<sup>2</sup> In light of this argumentation, we believe GST proposes that severe forms of negative treatment like violent victimization should systematically increase both the overall *quantity* of criminal behavior and the *propensity for that behavior to be violent rather than nonviolent*.

While some extant GST studies have examined whether measures of strain are predictive of multiple criminal offense types (see e.g., Botchkovar, Tittle, & Antonaccio, 2009; Hay & Evans, 2006; Jang, 2007; Mazerolle & Piquero, 1998; Mazerolle, Piquero & Capowich 2003; Peter, LaGrange & Silverman, 2003), they do not explicitly distinguish between the effects that strains have on an individual's overall propensity to commit crime of any type and the effects that strains have on an individual's propensity to utilize a particular criminal coping style, such as violence, more than others (i.e., nonviolence). To fill this salient gap in the research literature, the present study investigates the following two research hypotheses:

**H1.** *Violent victimization will be positively associated with the overall propensity for criminal offending.*

**H2.** *Net of its impact on the overall propensity for offending, violent victimization will be positively associated with the propensity for violent rather than nonviolent offending.*

### *Conditioning impact of a confluence of risk factors*

As noted above a key argument in GST posits that the effects of strains on criminal offending vary as a function of numerous factors including individual personality traits, sources of conventional social controls, and exposure to crime-involved peers (Agnew et al., 2002; Aseltine, Gore, & Gordon, 2000; Baron, 2009; Botchkovar, Tittle & Antonaccio, 2009; Chueng & Cheung, 2010; Kort-Butler, 2010; Mazerolle & Piquero, 1997; Moon et al., 2009; Ousey & Wilcox, 2007; Paternoster & Mazerolle, 1994; Peter, LaGrange & Silverman, 2003). Specifically, Agnew suggests that the impact of strains on offending should be strongest for individuals whose personalities feature low levels of "constraint" and high levels of "negative emotionality" (Agnew, 2006; Agnew et al., 2002). Moreover, strains are expected to have greater impact on criminal behavior for individuals with weak attachments to conventional social institutions (e.g., parents, schools) or who have greater association with friends who engage in delinquent behaviors (see Agnew, 2006, pp. 100–101).

In their initial empirical test of GST, Agnew and White (1992) investigated whether the effects of strains were dependent on measures of delinquent friends and self-efficacy. Results were mostly consistent with the theory's conditional effects expectations. Specifically, positive associations between strain and delinquency and strain and drug use were stronger for individuals with greater exposure to delinquent friends. Moreover, the effect of strain on delinquency (but not drug use) was weaker among individuals with greater self-efficacy. Reinforcing the spirit of those results, several more recent studies have found that the relationship between measures of strains and the quantity of offending are dependent on variations in personality traits or social relationships (e.g., Agnew et al., 2002; Baron, 2009; Chueng & Cheung, 2010; Kort-Butler, 2010; Moon et al., 2009).

However, findings regarding the conditional effects of strains on crime have been far from uniform. In fact, numerous studies fail to find evidence that the risk factors identified in the theory moderate the effects of strains on criminal behavior (Aseltine, Gore, & Gordon,

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