



Examining protective factors against violence among high-risk youth: Findings from the Seattle Social Development Project[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This paper examined proximal and distal effects of protective factors specified in the social development model (SDM) on youth violence among high-risk youth.

Methods: Data come from the Seattle Social Development Project, a longitudinal study of development from childhood into adulthood. A community sample of 808 participants from the Seattle Public School District was surveyed from the 5th grade through adulthood. This paper uses data from participants' adolescent years, ages 10–18.

Results: Higher levels of protective factors in early and middle adolescence reduced the odds of violence during late adolescence in the full sample and in two different risk groups (high cumulative risk and low SES). Although risk exposure increased the odds of violence, protective factors in middle adolescence predicted lower odds of violence during late adolescence. Importantly, protective factors had a greater effect in reducing violence among youth exposed to high levels of cumulative risk than among youth exposed to lower levels of cumulative risk. This difference was not observed between youth from higher and lower SES families.

Conclusion: Protective factors specified in the SDM appear to reduce violence in late adolescence even among youth from low SES families and youth exposed to high levels of cumulative risk.

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The prevention of youth violence is an important public health issue in the United States. According to the U.S. National Youth Risk Behavior Survey, in 2013, 24.7% of high school youth had engaged in a physical fight in the past year and 17.9% had carried a weapon to school in the past month (Center for Disease Control, 2013). Both the physical and fiscal consequences are devastating: violence is the 3rd leading cause of death among youth ages 15–24. An average of 1642 young people aged 10 to 24 years are treated in emergency departments each day due to physical assault injuries, which carries an estimated annual medical and work loss costs of \$16 billion. Some youth also come in contact with the juvenile justice system, costing states millions of dollars each year (Petteruti, Walsh, & Velázquez, 2009). Thus, preventing violent behaviors before they become less amenable to change may be an effective strategy to reduce the short- and long-term negative consequences of violent behaviors among young people (Catalano et al., 2012; Coie et al., 1993).

Understanding the etiology of youth violence, especially modifiable factors that predict the likelihood of violence, provides important information for how prevention and intervention programs should be

implemented and which relevant predictors they should target. Predictors that increase the likelihood of negative outcomes are called risk factors and, despite some disagreements in the definition, protective factors broadly refer to variables that decrease the likelihood of negative outcomes (Coie et al., 1993; Hall et al., 2012; Losel & Farrington, 2012). Extensive work has been done in identifying risk factors for violence. For example, early initiation of violence, family antisocial norms, antisocial peers, availability of drugs in the community, poverty, and family conflict increase the likelihood of violence (Hall et al., 2012; Hawkins et al., 1998, 2000; Herrenkohl et al., 2000; Lipsey & Derzon, 1998). Less is known about protective factors against violence (Hall et al., 2012). One of the first coordinated efforts to understand the role of protective factors in the development of violence came from a Center for Disease Control (CDC) initiative. An expert panel examined the direct protective and risk effects of factors that predicted the likelihood of violence (Losel & Farrington, 2012). Four longitudinal studies were included and sought to use the same set of predictors to understand whether these variables had a direct protective effect in reducing the likelihood of violence or a risk effect in increasing the likelihood of violence (Bernat, Oakes, Pettingell, & Resnick, 2012; Henry, Tolan, Gorman-Smith, & Schoeny, 2012; Herrenkohl, Lee, & Hawkins, 2012; Pardini, Loeber, Farrington, & Stouthamer-Loeber, 2012). Across the four studies – although limited by the small number of shared measures across studies – the only shared predictor that had a direct protective

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effect was strong school attachment, while they found many factors with risk effects.

This paper extends prior work by examining proximal and distal effects of a set of hypothesized protective factors on youth violence among high-risk youth and the interrelationship between risk and protective factors across ecological domains (e.g., school, community, family). Specifically, we address the following four research questions. First, to what extent do protective factors predict reduced violence among different groups? In a previous study from this sample, Herrenkohl et al. (2003) identified youth with high aggression level at age 10 as an at-risk group. The study found that aggressive youth at age 10 were less likely to have committed violence at age 18 when they reported religious attendance, good family management, and positive school bonding at age 15. The study also found that a cumulative index of all protective factors specified in the social development model measured at age 15 reduced the likelihood of violence among these youth at age 18. The current study uses measures of 1) high cumulative risk exposure and 2) low family socioeconomic status (SES) to identify two potential risk groups. The cumulative risk group includes youth with high levels of risk exposure across individual, family, school, and community domains. The low SES group includes youth from families with high levels of poverty and low parental education. In addition to identifying protective factors against violence in these two groups, we also examine whether specific protective factors are equally salient across these different groups.

The risk and protective factor measures in this study are guided by the Social Development Model (SDM, Catalano & Hawkins, 1996; Hawkins & Weis, 1985), a developmental theory of human behavior. The SDM hypothesizes both antisocial and prosocial pathways to explain the etiology of antisocial and prosocial behaviors. In these parallel socialization paths, the SDM asserts that *opportunities* for pro- or antisocial behavior, *involvement* with pro- or antisocial group, *skills* necessary for enhancing these involvements, and *rewards or recognition* for involvement would likely form *bonding* between individuals and the socializing group. If the bonding is strong, individuals are then more likely to adopt the beliefs and norms of the socializing group. Depending on the strengths of the pro- or antisocial beliefs that the socializing group holds, individuals will engage in pro- or antisocial behaviors. These pro- and antisocial processes also interact with each other to continue or discontinue pro- and antisocial behaviors. According to the social development model, opportunities for involvement with prosocial others, involvement with prosocial others, skills for prosocial involvement, recognition or rewards for prosocial involvement, bonding to prosocial others and prosocial beliefs or values are protective factors that inhibit behavioral problems such as violent behavior. In contrast, opportunities, involvement, and rewards from interactions with antisocial others as well as bonding to antisocial others and antisocial beliefs or values are viewed as risk factors for antisocial behaviors such as violence in the social development model.

Second, do the effects of protective factors on violence differ by developmental period? Influential factors in one developmental period may not be as salient in another developmental period. For example, one might expect that family factors might be more influential in early childhood, while peer factors might have a greater effect in adolescence (Albert, Chein, & Steinberg, 2013; Maxwell, 2002). Studies of risk factors for violence found that some risk factors are predictive in a single developmental period (Brewer, Hawkins, Catalano, & Neckerman, 1995; Hawkins et al., 1998; Lipsey & Derzon, 1998) while others remain predictive across developmental periods (Herrenkohl et al., 2000). In the current study, we test whether this holds true for protective factors. We examine protective factors in grades 5–6 and grades 7–8 predicting violence in two later periods (grades 7–8, and grades 9–12 respectively).

Third, what are the unique effects of risk and protective factors in predicting violence? In other words, when the level of protection is held constant, how much does risk increase the likelihood of violence; and conversely, when the level of risk is held constant, how much does protection decrease the likelihood of violence? Because individuals

are often exposed to multiple risk or protective factors (Evans, Li, & Whipple, 2013; Hawkins et al., 2000; Pollard, Hawkins, & Arthur, 1999), we examine the effects of cumulative exposure to risk factors and cumulative exposure to protective factors. When examining the relationship between cumulative risk and protection among high-risk youth, Stoddard et al. (2013) found that even after adjusting for risk, cumulative protection had a direct effect on decreasing the likelihood of violence. We examine these relationships with a total protective score and a total risk score to determine their direct effects on violent behavior.

Fourth, do the effects of protective factors on violent behavior differ by at-risk group? Researchers have suggested that protective factors moderate the exposure to risk and mitigate the negative effect of risk on youth outcomes (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Rutter, 1987) – in essence, truly functioning as a protection or buffer (Stoddard et al., 2013). Using the risk groups we have identified, we examine whether protective factors function differently for high-risk groups compared to lower risk groups in predicting violence. This information can potentially improve intervention targets and goals in selective prevention programming.

Methods

Data and sample description

Data come from the Seattle Social Development Project (SSDP), a longitudinal study that examines the development of positive and problem behaviors among adolescents and young adults. The current study began in 1985 with 18 elementary schools in the Seattle Public School District serving high-crime neighborhoods. Due to mandated bussing at the time, these schools and this sample included students from several parts of the city. Thus, the study oversampled children from high-risk neighborhoods, but is not limited to these children. At the time, all 5th grade students in participating schools were recruited for the longitudinal study and 808 students and their parents (76.7% of the eligible population) agreed to participate in the SSDP study. Of the 808 students, 388 (49%) were female; 47% European American, 26% African American, 22% Asian American, and 5% Native American. The participants and their parents were surveyed or interviewed annually from 5th grade through 10th grade. Then the participants only were interviewed in 12th grade.

Measures

Violence in middle and late adolescence

The dependent variable, violent behavior, was measured in 7th and 8th grades (ages 13–14 or middle adolescence), and again in 9th through 12th grades (ages 15–18 or late adolescence). The present study used a violence seriousness measure consistent with Herrenkohl et al. (2003). During each of the two time periods (middle and late adolescence), youth were coded with (0) if they did not report committing a violent act during that period; (1) if they reported committing at least one act that was considered low violence (example: throwing objects at people); (2) if they reported committing a least one act that was considered moderate violence (example: hitting a teacher); or (3) if they reported committing at least one act that was considered serious violence (example: using weapons or force to get money). The final variables represent the most serious offense reported during each time period. For example, a youth was coded with (2) in middle adolescence if the most serious offense he/she reported during that time period fell into the “moderate” violence category, and (3) in late adolescence if the most serious offense reported during that period fell into the “serious” violence category.

Protective factors against violence in early and middle adolescence

Only protective factor scales that were consistently assessed across early and middle adolescence were examined in this paper. Of the

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