



## Victimization, psychological distress and subsequent offending among youth

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### ABSTRACT

The current study examined the relationship between the victimization of youth, psychological distress and subsequent offending. It examined whether direct and vicarious victimization by exposure to violence in the family, among peers, and in the neighborhood, significantly predicted psychological distress among study participants and whether psychological distress significantly predicted subsequent offending over time. In addition, it examined the extent (if any) to which psychological distress mediated the relationship between victimization and subsequent offending. Method: study data are from wave 1 and wave 2 of the Buffalo Longitudinal Study of Young Men (BLSYM), a population based sample ( $n=625$ ) of young men, ages 16–19 years old in a metropolitan area of Buffalo, New York. A path analytic approach was used for the main analyses. Findings: personal, vicarious victimization by exposure to violence among peers, and perception of neighborhood safety were significant predictors of offending at wave 1. Personal and property victimization was significant predictors of psychological distress. Psychological distress did not have a significant relationship with offending at wave 1 yet, it did at wave 2. Vicarious victimization by exposure to violence among peers and offending at wave 1 were all significant predictors of offending at wave 2. The results highlight the need to respond to both direct and vicarious victimization among young males to reduce psychological distress and subsequent offending.

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### 1. Introduction

The relationship between victimization and offending has been well established in the literature; however, it is not a direct pathway. In order to develop effective prevention and intervention strategies targeting youth violence, a clearer understanding of the underlying factors that contribute to and perpetuate youth violence needs to be determined. In addition to examining long term consequences of youth violence, it is necessary to dissect how we conceptualize victimization and subsequent offending in order to identify a more salient road map towards prevention efforts.

The purpose of this study was to gain new insight into the relationship between victimization and offending among youth by exploring psychological distress as a potential mediating factor. Psychological distress is a term often used in the literature to describe the presence of a number of symptoms including depression, anxiety, anger, dissociation and symptoms of post traumatic stress (Boney-McCoy & Finkelhor,

1995; Duncan, 1999; Elklit, 2002; Fitzpatrick & Boldizar, 1993; Kopusov, Ruchkin, & Eisemann, 2003; Rosenthal, Wilson, & Futch, 2009). More specifically, this study examined whether different types of victimization are more likely to predict psychological distress and whether psychological distress contributes to offending among study participants over time. In an attempt to isolate the relationship between victimization, psychological distress and offending, the study controlled for a number of individual, family, peer and neighborhood level risk factors commonly linked to both victimization and offending including; (1) age (Lauritsen, 2003), (2) race (Flowers, Lanclos, & Kelly, 2002), (3) family structure (Lauritsen, 2003; Sampson & Groves, 1989), (4) parental monitoring and support (Barnes & Farrell, 1992; Dishion & Loeber, 1985), and (5) neighborhood crime rates and perceptions of neighborhood safety (Sampson, Morenoff, & Gannon-Rowley, 2002).

#### 1.1. The victimization of youth

Over the past few decades, the influence of victimization research has been copious. It has also primarily focused on connecting childhood victimization such as child abuse and maltreatment to maladaptive behavioral outcomes (Widom, 1989). Early studies failed to demonstrate a causal link because of numerous methodological limitations such as the use of cross sectional retrospective designs, small

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samples, no comparison groups and failure to control for confounding variables (Widom, 1989). According to Maschi (2006), research after 1988 provides stronger evidence of a causal relationship by using prospective longitudinal designs, comparison groups and control variables yet they continue to be confounded by other methodological concerns such as the failure to control for adverse experiences including victimization, witnessing violence or experiencing stressful life events particularly after the age of 12. Only recently have researchers begun to explore the victimization of youth indicating that being victimized in adolescence increases the likelihood of future criminal behavior (Chang, Chen, & Brownson, 2003; Shaffer & Ruback, 2002).

It is difficult to capture the true extent to which youth are victimized, yet we know it is happening and research suggests that it has far reaching consequences well into the future. As might be expected, the number of youth victimized each year is gravely underestimated. Since youth victimizations are usually reported by family members and other officials rather than the youths themselves (Finkelhor, Cross, & Cantor, 2005), official statistics do not accurately reflect the magnitude of this social issue. According to the National Crime Victimization Survey, close to 30% of violent crimes against youth ages 12–17 are never reported to the police (Finkelhor et al., 2005). This lack of information presents challenges in determining who is at greatest risk for victimization and why (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006).

#### 1.2. Direct and vicarious exposure to violence

In order to take a comprehensive look at how violence impacts youth and how they subsequently respond to violence, we need to consider both direct and indirect victimization. Youth can be indirectly affected by witnessing violent events or because such events have occurred to members of their immediate family, extended family or acquaintances (Lorion & Saltzman, 1993). Lorion and Saltzman (1993) contend that indirect victims should include those who have experienced the threat of violence because of its seeming frequency, ubiquity, and unpredictability.

#### 1.3. The link between victimization and offending

There is a well established body of literature supporting a relationship between past victimization and further perpetration of violence among youth (Baren, 2003; Coleman & Jenson, 2000; Loeber, Kalb, & Huizinga, 2001; Welte, Zhang, & Wiczorek, 2001). Studies that examined underlying risk factors for violent behavior among adolescents have demonstrated a consistent relationship between victimization and the perpetration of violence. For example, Loeber et al. (2001) examined data from the Denver Youth Study and the Pittsburgh Youth Study and found that 49% of males who were serious, violent offenders were violently victimized in the past compared to 12% of non-delinquent youth. The authors contend that violent victimization, in turn, is thought to increase the risk of delinquent acts. Loeber et al. (2001) contend that youth victimization and offending are often intertwined and mutually stimulate each other.

A growing body of literature around vicarious victimization through exposure or by witnessing violence continues to emerge (Abram et al., 2004; Brookmeyer, Henrich, & Schwab-Stone, 2005; Nofziger, 2005). A high degree of exposure to family and community violence has been found among adjudicated youth (Maschi, 2006). Additionally, witnessing violence was the most common trauma among a sample of juvenile detainees in a large Chicago detention center (Abram et al., 2004). Almost 60% reported being exposed to six or more traumatic events. Shaffer and Ruback (2002) further explored the relationship between violent victimization and violent offending across a two year period and found that juveniles who were victims of violence in year one were significantly more likely than non-victims to commit a violent offense in the second year.

#### 1.4. Chronic victimization

More recently, Maschi (2006) explored how differential versus cumulative effects of trauma related to victimization influence delinquency in adolescent boys to better understand whether the magnitude of specific or differential risk factors or the accumulation of risk factors increased the risk of delinquent behavior. To do this Maschi (2006) included key variables related to direct victimization, witnessing family and community violence and experiencing stressful life events in order to create a comprehensive measure of trauma. In addition, he controlled for common correlates of delinquent behavior including, age, race, ethnicity, social class, family structure, geographic location, delinquent peer exposure negative affect and social support (Maschi, 2006). Analysis suggested that cumulative effects of exposure to stressful life events significantly increased the odds of non-violent offending (specifically property crimes) and exposure to both violence and stressful life events predicted violent delinquency. Maschi (2006) reported that lower family income, fragmented family structure and minority status significantly influence violent offending under the cumulative model.

Some children experience violence as a chronic feature of life (Guterman & Cameron, 1997). A growing body of literature strongly underscores the destructive impact of trauma brought on by multiple exposures to violence within families and communities (Attar, Guerra, & Tolan, 1994). Garbarino, Kostelny, and Dubrow (1991) suggest that youth exposed to chronic violence adapt to it rather than be overwhelmed by it. They contend that children and youth living in these high crime areas become psychosocially desensitized from repeated exposure to violence which spares them the immediate emotional distress but unfortunately increases the propensity for violence. Adolescents attempting to cope with persistent fear of harm may attempt to alleviate anxiety by identifying with and joining aggressive individuals in the neighborhood (Schwab-Stone et al., 1995). Likewise, repeated adolescent victimization was found to be associated with delinquency recidivism (Chang et al., 2003).

#### 1.5. The link between victimization and psychological distress

Violent victimization and exposure to violence (i.e., in the home and neighborhood) are associated with a variety of short- and long-term mental health issues in children and adolescents including anxiety, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), aggression and confrontational coping styles often associated with psychological distress (Boney-McCoy & Finkelhor, 1995; Duncan, 1999; Elkitt, 2002; Fitzpatrick & Boldizar, 1993; Kuposov et al., 2003). For the most part, studies of community violence view it as a form of stress that psychologically overwhelms children and gives rise to depressive symptoms, anxiety and/or PTSD symptomatology (Ng-Mak, Salzinger, Feldman, & Stueve, 2002). What is less clear is whether the type of victimization, or the resulting psychological distress better predicts subsequent offending behavior among children and youth.

Wilson and Rosenthal (2003) conducted a meta-analysis to examine the relationship between exposure to community violence and psychological distress among adolescents. They sought to move beyond determining a linear relationship between exposure to community violence and psychological distress to assessing the “size” of that relationship. They reviewed relevant empirical studies that met specific criteria spanning 20 years and found support for a positive correlation between community violence exposure and psychological distress, although with a low to medium effect size ( $r = .25$ ). Wilson and Rosenthal (2003) found a number of limitations across studies (i.e. Guterman & Cameron, 1997; Mazza & Overstreet, 2000). It appeared as if studies consistently identified a relationship between exposure to violence and psychological distress, yet they did not differentiate between the types of violence exposure (i.e. child abuse, domestic violence, community violence) (Wilson & Rosenthal, 2003).

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