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The Impact of Self Control and Neighborhood Disorder on Bullying Victimization

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Whereas past research has examined the effect of individual-level and neighborhood-level predictors of bullying victimization separately, the current study examines their effects collectively.
Methods: Middle and high school students (n = 1972) in randomly selected classes within a Southeastern school district completed a battery of self-report measures. Levels of self-control (an individual-level factor) and neighborhood disorganization (a neighborhood-level factor) were regressed onto measures of the six-week prevalence of verbal, physical, and cyber bullying victimization.
Results: Low self-control and neighborhood disorder were found to be associated with each type of bullying victimization, though the impact of self-control was partially mediated by neighborhood disorder when included in the same model. The effect of self-control was mediated when subsequently controlling for poly-victimization experiences. Net of these controls, neighborhood disorder continued to be associated with a statistically significant increase in the odds of bullying victimization.
Conclusions: Economic and social decay within neighborhoods increased the likelihood of bullying victimizations. These effects hold true across verbal, physical and cyber victimizations, suggesting a need to consider both community characteristics when staging bullying intervention campaigns. Additionally, the findings suggest a need for further research considering the relationship between self-control and neighborhood conditions on the risk of victimization generally.

Introduction

Bullying has been identified as the persistent harassment (physical, verbal, emotional, or psychological) of one individual over another, accompanied by a power imbalance (Olweus, 1993). Research has documented that bullies use a variety of methods (i.e., physical, verbal, relational, and cyber) to victimize their peers (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008; Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009). National studies documenting the prevalence of bullying suggest that approximately 30 percent of the youth in the U.S. population have experienced a bullying incident (Nansel et al., 2001). Despite sustained decreases in the nation's violent crime rates (Truman, Langton, & Planty, 2013), bullying and bully victimization among children and adolescents continues to capture the attention of the public and scholars alike (Committee on Injury, Violence, & Poison Prevention, 2009). Recent national public opinion data indicate that 74% of Americans believe that bullying is a "very serious" or "somewhat serious" problem (Public Agenda, 2010).

Bullying and bully victimization have attracted the interest of researchers around the world (e.g., Arseneault et al., 2006; Bowes et al., 2009; Chui & Chan, 2013; Holt, Chee, Ng, & Bossler, 2013; Klomek, Marrocco, Kleinman, Schonfeld, & Gould, 2007; Klomek et al., 2008, 2009; Olweus, 1993; Sourander, Jensen, Ronning, Elonheimo, et al., 2007; Sourander, Jensen, Ronning, Niemela, et al., 2007; Wong, Chan, & Cheng, 2014) who generally find that offenders and victims are at an elevated risk of experiencing adverse academic, legal, and mental health consequences (Arseneault et al., 2006; Copeland, Wolke, Angold, & Costello, 2013; Farrington & Ttofi, 2011; Gini & Pozzoli, 2013; Kaltiala-Heino, Rimpela, Marttunen, Rimpela, & Rantanen, 1999; Klomek et al., 2007, 2008, 2009; Kumpulainen & Rasanen, 2000; Nansel, Overpeck, Haynie, Ruan, & Scheidt, 2003; Sourander, Helstela, Helenius, & Piha, 2000; Sourander, Jensen, Ronning, Elonheimo, et al., 2007; Sourander, Jensen, Ronning, Niemela, et al., 2007; van der Wal, de Wit, & Hirasing, 2003). Much of the literature targeting bully victimization has focused on individual-level risk factors of the victims, their peers, and educational institutions (Bowes et al., 2009; Cullen, Unnever, Hartman, Turner, & Agnew, 2008; Khoury-Kassabri, Benbenisty, Avi Astor, & Zeira, 2004; Shields & Cicchetti, 2001; Unnever & Cornell, 2003; Wolke, Woods, Stanford, & Schulz, 2001; Zimmerman, Glew, Christakis, & Caton, 2005). A limited

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body of research has examined neighborhood-level factors that may affect the risk of victimization. For instance, Bowes et al. (2009) have found that school, family, and neighborhood factors increase the odds of bullying and bully victimizations.

Scholars have, however, given little consideration to how both individual-level and neighborhood-level factors affect the risk of victimization within the same statistical models. As a result, there is an underlying question as to whether the nature of bullying victimization is being driven by individual, situational, or contextual factors. This is a particularly salient question due to the various forms of bullying that may occur, whether physical, verbal or more recently via cyberspace (Holt et al., 2013; Lows & Espelage, 2013; Turner, Exum, Brame, & Holt, 2013; Wang et al., 2009). As a result, there is a need to identify the factors that contribute to the experience of bully victimization across on and off-line environments and any differences in the relationships between micro and macro-level factors.

Criminological research has focused primarily on neighborhood level factors that increase the risk of victimization, particularly living in disorganized communities that increase proximity to motivated offenders, expose residents to larger opportunities to offend, and foster subcultures that support the use violence and intimidation (Anderson, 1999; Bowes et al., 2009; Fox, Lane, & Akers, 2010; Lauritsen & Laub, 2007; Lauritsen, Sampson, & Laub, 1991; Lowenkamp, Cullen, & Pratt, 2003; Sampson & Groves, 1989; Stewart, Schreck, & Simmons, 2006). Recently, however, Schreck (1999) developed an individual-level theory emphasizing the role that low self-control plays in increasing the risk of victimization. This theory combines routine activities and low self-control, and finds that youth with low self-control are more likely to engage in risky lifestyles and be exposed to criminal others thereby increasing the risk of victimization (Bossler & Holt, 2010; Piquero, MacDonald, Dobrin, Daigle, & Cullen, 2005; Schreck, 1999; Schreck, Stewart, & Fisher, 2006; Schreck, Wright, & Miller, 2002; Stewart, Elifson, & Sterk, 2004).

Given the utility of these theories to consider various forms of violence and personal injury, they should be examined in a single model to consider the influence of neighborhood conditions and individual-level predictors to affect the risk of bullying victimization (see Gibson, 2012). This study attempts to explore the relationship between individual and neighborhood level effects on physical, verbal, and cyberbullying victimization using a sample of 1,972 middle and high school youths in North Carolina. The implications of this study for both criminological theory and public policy will be considered in detail.

Individual and Macro-Level Correlates of Victimization

Recent criminological research on individual level risk factors for victimization has been advanced through the integration of two prominent theoretical frameworks: Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) General Theory of Crime and Cohen and Felson's (1979) Routine Activities Theory. Specifically, Schreck (1999) argued that elements of Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) general theory of crime could be used in tandem with routine activities theory to better account for victimization. Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) suggest that individuals with low self-control are impulsive, short sighted, insensitive, impatient, and risk taking, which increase their likelihood of participation in crime and risky behaviors. These factors increase individual vulnerability to victimization because persons with low self-control do not accurately consider and perceive the consequences of their actions (see Schreck, 1999). In addition, individuals with low self-control place themselves in risky situations and have increased associations with delinquent peers (Schreck et al., 2002). Thus, self-control can differentially increase the risk of victimization (Schreck et al., 2002).

Recent empirical research has supported Schreck's (1999) expansion of self-control theory to victimization by finding a direct effect between low levels of self-control and general victimization (Schreck, 1999; Schreck et al., 2006), violence (Piquero et al., 2005; Schreck, 1999; Schreck et al., 2002, 2006; Stewart et al., 2004), property crime victimization (Schreck, 1999; Schreck et al., 2006), and cybercrime victimization (Holt & Bossler, 2009). In addition, the direct effect of self-control on victimization remains even after controlling for respondent offending (Schreck, 1999; Schreck et al., 2006; Stewart et al., 2004), past victimization (Schreck et al., 2006), delinquent friends (Schreck et al., 2002, 2006), and risky lifestyles (Schreck et al., 2002; Stewart et al., 2004).

Research suggests that low self-control serves as a risk factor for bullying offending in the physical world (Chui & Chan, 2013; Unnever & Cornell, 2003), and with cyberbullying (Holt, Bossler, & May, 2012). Unnever and Cornell (2003) also found a relationship between low self-control as a risk factor for physical bullying victimization. There has been virtually no research on the relationship between low self-control and cyberbullying victimization, though Bossler and Holt (2009) found a relationship between on-line harassment and low self-control in a college sample. Specifically, those with low self-control are short sighted and seek immediate gratification, leading them to engage in risky behaviors, even in an on-line environment which increases their vulnerability to victimization (Bossler & Holt, 2010; Holt et al., 2012). Those with low self control may also spend more time on-line and share personal information thereby increasing their exposure to motivated offenders (Bossler & Holt, 2010; Holt et al., 2012). In addition, individuals with low self control are often physically-oriented and easily frustrated which can lead to misinterpretations in on-line environments making them prone to harassment and/or bullying experiences (Holt & Bossler, 2009).

There is a substantial body of research on the positive relationship between neighborhood conditions and criminal offending generally (Bursik & Grasmick, 1993; Sampson, 1985; Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997; Shaw & McKay, 1969). Shaw and McKay (1969) purported that rapid industrialization and urbanization led to a deterioration of community controls resulting in neighborhoods with elevated levels of delinquency and crime. Those neighborhoods with high levels of persistent poverty, residential mobility, and ethnic heterogeneity were identified as socially disorganized (Bursik & Grasmick, 1993). This model has been applied to multiple forms of both personal and property crime victimization (Fox et al., 2010; Lowenkamp et al., 2003; Sampson & Groves, 1989) and finds that neighborhood disorder is highly correlated with the risk of victimization. The lack of social networks that facilitate social control increase the risk of victimization as does the presence of subcultures supportive of violence and intimidation in order to gain respect (Anderson, 1999; Gibson, 2012; Stewart et al., 2006).

Recent research has also considered the impact of neighborhood disorganization on bullying victimization (Bowes et al., 2009; Bradshaw, Sawyer, & O'Brennan, 2009; Nansel et al., 2001). These studies suggest that bullying victimization transcends all types of neighborhoods, such that there appear to be no significant differences in the prevalence rates of bully victimization across urban, suburban, and rural neighborhoods (Nansel et al., 2001; Stockdale, Hangaduambo, Duys, Larson, & Sarvela, 2002). Turner et al. (2013), however, found that neighborhood disorder was correlated with the experience of suicidal ideation and depression related to bullying.

Research has given generally little consideration to the relationship between neighborhood disorder and different forms of bullying victimization that individuals may experience. Though physical bullying may be experienced regardless of whether a community is located in an urban or rural environment, there may be some variation in access to technology in poor or disorganized communities (Moule, Pyrooz, & Decker, 2013; Zickurh, 2011). Because of this, it is possible that the risk of cyberbullying victimization is lower in disorganized communities. The increasing access to technology in schools and libraries may, however, enable poor youth to engage in cyberbullying