



Original article

Predictors of Co-Occurring Risk Behavior Trajectories Among Economically Disadvantaged African-American Youth: Contextual and Individual Factors



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 A B S T R A C T

Purpose: African-American youth, particularly those from low-income backgrounds, evidence high rates of negative outcomes associated with three problem behaviors, conduct problems, risky sexual behavior, and substance use. This study used a contextually tailored version of problem behavior theory (PBT) to examine predictors of the simultaneous development of problem behaviors in this specific cultural group.

Methods: Sociocontextual and individual variables representing four PBT predictor categories, controls protection, support protection, models risk, and vulnerability risk, were examined as predictors of co-occurring problem behaviors among economically disadvantaged African-American adolescents ($n = 949$). Specifically, the likelihood of following three classes of multiple problem behavior trajectories spanning ages 12–18, labeled the “early experimenters,” “increasing high risk-takers,” and “adolescent-limited” classes, as opposed to a “normative” class, was examined.

Results: Among other findings, controls protection in the form of a more stringent household curfew at age 12 was related to a lower likelihood of being in the “early experimenters” and “increasing high risk-takers” classes. Conversely, vulnerability risk manifested as stronger attitudes of violence inevitability was associated with a higher likelihood of being in the “early experimenters” class. However, the PBT category of support protection was not associated with risk trajectory class. More distal neighborhood-level manifestations of PBT categories also did not predict co-occurring behavior problems.

Conclusion: Guided by an incorporation of contextually salient processes into PBT, prevention programs aiming to decrease co-occurring problem behaviors among low-income African-American adolescents would do well to target both proximal systems and psychological constructs related to perceived security throughout adolescence.

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 IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTION

Peer pressure, parental monitoring, self-worth, and belief in the inevitability of violence at age 12 were associated with co-occurring trajectories of substance use, sexual behavior, and conduct problems spanning adolescence among low-income African-American youth. Prevention efforts for decreasing multiple problem behaviors should target parenting, peers, and individual psychological factors.

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Adolescent problem behaviors, including conduct problems, substance use, and risky sexual behavior, often occur together [1,2]. The consequences of problem behaviors are disproportionately more severe for African-American youth, on average. African-Americans make up 39% of those incarcerated in the

United States, despite the fact they are only 13% of the U.S. population [3]. If current rates continue, about 1 in 3 African-American males and 1 in 18 African-American females are expected to be incarcerated during their lifetime [4]. In addition, African-Americans accounted for close to 44% of all new HIV infections among adolescents and adults in 2010 [5]. Moreover, African-Americans made up 18% of admissions to publicly funded substance abuse treatment centers from 2004 to 2007 [6]. Often these negative outcomes are particularly concentrated among low-income populations [7,8]. Thus, gaining a better understanding of predictors of precursors to these negative outcomes among low-income African-American adolescents is imperative.

Empirical work examining the development of individual risky behaviors during adolescence elucidates that they can follow different trajectories [9–11]. The first pattern is a relatively low engagement throughout adolescence, typically called the “normative” pathway. Another pattern is an increase in problem behavior, peaking during mid-adolescence, and then decreasing, called the “adolescent-limited” pathway. A third pattern is an early onset of problem behaviors, which then steadily increases, or an “increasing high risk-takers” pathway. Finally, a fourth pattern is engagement in higher levels of risk behaviors that then decrease, which can be called an “early experimenters” trajectory. In addition, problem behavior theory (PBT; [2,12]) conceptualizes co-occurring problem behaviors as a syndrome, with predictors of this syndrome existing in two systems, such as the perceived environment and personality systems. These systems exert influence through multiple mechanisms including controls protection (e.g., parental behavioral control and religiosity), support protection (e.g., parental support and neighborhood connectedness), models risk (e.g., deviant peers and neighborhood danger), and vulnerability risk (e.g., low self-worth, traumatic stress, hopelessness and acceptance of violence). Studies based on PBT have found these categories combined to predict engagement in the problem behavior syndrome among adolescents across the United States, Europe, and Asia [12,13].

Importantly, a recent refinement of PBT by Jessor [14] highlights that the influence of specific types of systems mechanisms (e.g., parental monitoring as a form of control protection) depends on the context (e.g., low-income neighborhoods). This nuanced perspective proffers the value of taking a more fine-grained approach to predicting clustered problem behaviors in specific sociocultural groups. Applied to low-income African-American youth, despite the broad support for a full PBT model that includes multiple systems, empirical findings suggest neighborhood factors may not exert a strong influence within samples of low-income or ethnic minority youth in the United States. Among these youth, when neighborhood variables are included in models alongside parenting behavior, most often parenting behavior either mediates the association or the neighborhood variables are not significant, for example [15,16]. In addition, empirical and theoretical work related to African-American families in low-income neighborhoods suggests that parental monitoring, a controls protection, may be more influential in conduct problems than warmth, a support protection [17,18]. Another possible attunement of PBT for this particular group relates to recent work, suggesting that in cultures where religious participation is considered normative, such as among African-Americans, religious beliefs do not always differentiate adolescents who engage in risk behaviors [19,20].

Taking together these findings, a contextually tailored PBT model for low-income African-American youth would suggest that controls protection demonstrated by parents, models risk demonstrated by peers, and vulnerability risk evidenced by adolescents themselves are associated with problem behavior syndrome trajectory class. In contrast, we predict that neighborhood-level manifestations of PBT mechanisms are not associated with multiple problem behaviors in this sample. Finally, consistent with equivocal findings in the literature, whether support protection exhibited by parents or controls protection in the form of adolescent religiosity is associated with problem behaviors is considered exploratory [16–19].

Methods

Sample selection and participants

This study entails secondary data analysis of data from the Mobile Youth Study (MYS), a community-based, multiple cohort longitudinal study seeking to explore the contexts leading to health disparities affecting economically disadvantaged, urban youth ages 10–18 [21]. Youth were recruited from the 13 neighborhoods in the Mobile, Alabama metropolitan statistical area with the lowest median household incomes, which were 95% African-American. In 1998, the MYS researchers actively recruited 50% of youth living in those neighborhoods and passively recruited additional participants through fliers and word of mouth, with around 60% of youth actively recruited being enrolled in the study. The initial sample consisted of 1,771 youth¹ [21]. Each subsequent year, the team recruited and enrolled new participants, and, in addition, as participants moved, the team followed them to their new neighborhoods.

An analysis of school records for MYS participants and non-participants showed that, demographically, the MYS participants had slightly lower incomes, but there were few if any functional differences (e.g., standardized test scores and disciplinary actions) [21]. Within the study sample, although studywise attrition (i.e., across multiple waves) was significant, sensitivity analyses indicated that dropouts between adjacent time points, that is, T and T-1, did not differ overall from nondropouts on MYS responses measured at time T-1 (e.g., neighborhood support and peer pressure) [21].

The present study is a follow-up to a previous one that identified the four problem behavior classes in the sample using growth mixture modeling (GMM) [11]. Differences between participants included in those analyses ($n = 1,406$) and those excluded because they did not provide sufficient data for the GMM analyses were estimated for conduct problems, risky sexual behavior, and substance use at ages 12–18 and were consistently very small ($d \leq .2$). For the current study, only the subsample of adolescents who also provided data on predictor variables at age 12 and were African-American were included, with the final sample consisting of 949 youth (51% female, 49% male; see sample selection design in Figure 1).

¹ The exact number of observations examined in the current study is slightly different from this number due to recent data correction (e.g., through cross-verification with school district data), which is on-going and has resulted in a change in approximately 1.25% of the cases (e.g., removing bogus cases, merging cases that were previously treated as separate) in the full sample since the analyses for the current article were run.

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