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## Research article

## Does childhood victimization predict specific adolescent offending? An analysis of generality versus specificity in the victim-offender overlap

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Keywords:

Victim-offender overlap

Abuse

Victimization

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE)

Crime prevention

## ABSTRACT

**Background:** A large body of research has examined the relationship between victimization and future offending, with results suggesting that crime victims are at higher risk of future criminal behavior—known as the victim-offender overlap. Prior studies have primarily examined the relationship between general victimization (e.g., violent victimization, sexual abuse, and more) and general offending (e.g., violence, sexual offending, and drug use), and focused on adult populations.

**Objective:** The goal of the present study is to expand on prior literature by examining if *specific* forms of childhood victimization increase the risk of *specific* and analogous forms of offending among delinquent youth.

**Method:** Based upon a population of 64,329 high-risk youth offenders in Florida, this study evaluates the specificity of the overlap among youth who were physically abused, sexually abused, or witnessed illegal substance use at home during childhood to determine if these forms of victimization increased the risk of violence, sexual offending, and drug use, respectively, when assessed in multivariate logistic regression models.

**Results:** Results provide considerable support for specificity in the victim-offender overlap, as hypothesized. Specifically, experiencing physical abuse (OR = 1.55,  $p < .001$ ), sexual abuse (OR = 3.58,  $p < .001$ ) and witnessing household substance abuse (OR = 1.66,  $p < .001$ ) in childhood each significantly and substantially increased the risk of analogous criminal behavior in adolescence, even when controlling for other risk factors and forms of victimization.

**Conclusion:** This study provided novel evidence for specificity in the victim-offender overlap, even after controlling for confounding variables. Practical implications for early intervention and crime prevention are discussed, as well as implications for future research. Highlighting the importance of specificity in the victimization and adverse childhood experience (ACE) paradigms.

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2019.104328>

Received 11 July 2019; Received in revised form 3 December 2019; Accepted 10 December 2019  
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## 1. Introduction

The relationship between victimization and offending is well established, with research consistently indicating that youth who are victimized are at higher risk of offending behavior during adolescence and adulthood (Broidy, Daday, Crandall, Klar, & Jost, 2006; Jennings, Higgins, Tewksbury, Gover, & Piquero, 2010; Klevens, Duque, & Ramírez, 2002; Lauritsen & Laub, 2007; Maldonado-Molina, Jennings, Tobler, Piquero, & Canino, 2010; Mustaine & Tewksbury, 2000; Schreck, Stewart, & Osgood, 2008; Schreck, Wright, & Miller, 2002). This empirical overlap between victims and offenders, known as the victim-offender overlap (henceforth VO overlap), is so consistent that it has been referred to as one of the few “facts” in criminology (Gottfredson, 1981; Jennings, Piquero, & Reingle, 2012; Maxfield, 1987; Reiss & Roth, 1994).

In his seminal work on victim-precipitated homicide, Wolfgang (1958) was among the first to empirically establish that victims and offenders are highly similar in terms of their characteristics and behaviors. Specifically, this study found that victims and offenders are both more likely to be males with a history of violent offending, and that victims and offenders are more likely to display aggressive behaviors compared to the general population. This literature has been expanded with contemporary research indicating that victims and offenders also share similar demographics (i.e. being younger and minorities), offending histories, engagement in risky behaviors, and reside in disorganized neighborhoods (Broidy et al., 2006; Cops & Pleysier, 2014; Daday, Broidy, Crandall, & Sklar, 2005; Dobrin, 2001; Lauritsen, Sampson, & Laub, 1991; Mustaine & Tewksbury, 2000). Researchers have studied the association between general offending and victimization (Hiday, Swanson, Swartz, Borum, & Wagner, 2001; Jenson & Brownfield, 1986; Lauritsen et al., 1991; Mawby, 1979; Meade, Jennings, Gover, & Richards, 2017; C.S. Widom, 1989, 1989b; Widom, Czaja, & DuMont, 2015), and more specialized relationships, including sexual abuse and sexual offending (Felson & Lane, 2009; Fox, 2017; Soothill, Francis, Sanderson, & Ackerley, 2000), violent victimization and violent offending (Cops & Pleysier, 2014; McGloin, Schreck, Stewart, & Ousey, 2011; Posick, 2013; Silver, Piquero, Jennings, Piquero, & Leiber, 2011), and property victimization and property offending (Posick, 2013). These studies provide support for the similarities between victims and offenders, and the strong correlations in their behaviors (Jennings et al., 2012).

An important gap in the literature is whether, and how strongly, a specific victimization experience is associated with a specialized type of offending, while controlling for other types of offending. Offending research examining the possibility of such specializations is limited, and has produced mixed findings. Such mixed findings validate the need for more research on the specificity in the VO overlap, particularly among juvenile offenders. Therefore, this study examines whether youth are more likely to commit the types of offenses that they experienced in their childhood, above and beyond all other types of offending behaviors.

## 2. Generality and specificity in the victim-offender overlap

Despite voluminous research examining this phenomenon generally, there is still a dearth of studies testing the generality versus specificity of the VO overlap. While prior research suggests that experiencing any form of victimization leads to an increased risk of any type of offending (i.e., generality in the VO overlap), the magnitude and significance of the association between specific types of victimization (e.g., sexual abuse) and specific types of criminal behavior (e.g., sexual offending) (i.e., specificity in the VO overlap) has not been thoroughly examined.

### 2.1. Generality of the VO overlap

Although specificity in the relationship between victimization and future offending has largely gone untested, existing literature has provided support for generality in the VO overlap. Prior research has found that childhood abuse significantly increases the risk of general juvenile offending (Loeber & Farrington, 2000), with up to 90 % of all juvenile offenders in the U.S. victimized by abuse or trauma in childhood (Dierkhising et al., 2013). This relationship between generalized abuse and/or victimization increasing the risk of general offending has been supported and explained by theoretical research. Specifically, Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) theory of self-control posits that children who are not properly socialized, due to poor parenting or victimization experiences, may not develop the self-control necessary to avoid thrill-seeking behaviors, which often leads to crime. Furthermore, this lack of self-control may also lead them to enter risky situations, which can simultaneously increase the risk of victimization. Consequently, self-control theory can be used to explain the increased risk of both offending and victimization for those with lower levels of self-control (Schreck, 1999).

Similarly, some studies have found that broad types of victimization may increase the risk of specific forms of offending, such as violence (Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1990; Fox, Perez, Cass, Baglivio, & Epps, 2015; Maxfield & Widom, 1996; Piquero, Farrington, & Blumstein, 2003; Smith & Thornberry, 1995; C. Widom, 1989) and sexual offending (Jennings & Meade, 2017; Jennings, Zgoba, Maschi, & Reingle, 2014). For instance, Maxfield and Widom (1996) found that childhood physical abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect increase the risk of violence during adolescence by more than 200 %.

Importantly, not all children who experience victimization will offend later in life: some research has found that these youth may develop resilience through their victimization experience. For example, while some sexually abused children will abuse others, not all children exposed to such experiences do this (Brownlie, 2001). As such, some youth may avoid offending despite adverse experiences (Gilligan, 2000). Furthermore, research has also indicated that the link between victimization and offending may vary based on intervening variables. These include neighborhood context (Berg, Stewart, Schreck, & Simons, 2012), victim-offender relationships (Zimmerman, Farrell, & Posick, 2017) and offender decision-making (Averdijk, Van Gelder, Eisner, & Ribeaud, 2016).

Furthermore, some research finds mixed support for the VO overlap. For instance, Broidy et al. (2006) found a significant overlap

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