



A latent profile analysis of exposure to community violence and peer delinquency in African American adolescents

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ABSTRACT

Aims: Person-based analyses have demonstrated wide variability among the levels of exposure to community violence (ECV) experienced by youth in disadvantaged communities. In addition, social network research has found that violence victimization tends to occur primarily among a small social group, demonstrating that levels of peer delinquency may be a factor that distinguishes among youth who experience high and low levels of ECV. **Methods:** The current study utilized latent class analysis to examine profiles of ECV and peer delinquency in a sample of 618 African American adolescents (54.7% female; mean age = 15.8, SD = 1.41), and the relationship these profiles have to adaptive and maladaptive outcomes. **Results:** Results demonstrated that levels of ECV and peer delinquency vary significantly among these youth, and profile membership predicts levels of delinquency, aggression, future orientation, and self-esteem. **Conclusion:** Research and clinical implications are discussed.

1. Introduction

African American adolescents living in economically disadvantaged urban communities are disproportionately exposed to community violence (ECV) (e.g., Zimmerman & Messner, 2013). However, recent person-centered analytic investigations of ECV indicate considerable variability in such exposure for this population (Copeland-Linder, Lambert, & Jalongo, 2010; Gaylord-Harden, Zakaryan, Bernard, & Pekoc, 2015). The identification of variability in ECV violence in youth is consistent with recent sociological research with adults demonstrating that violence in urban communities is concentrated in a small social network of individuals linked by delinquent activity (Papachristos, Wildeman, & Roberto, 2014). This suggests that the variability in peer networks may help to disambiguate the variability in ECV among adolescents. The examination of profiles may provide critical information on the peer networks of youth with low levels of exposure, as well as which adolescents may be particularly vulnerable for high levels of exposure based on the composition of their peer networks (Copeland-Linder et al., 2010). Thus, the purpose of the current study was to utilize latent profile analysis (LPA) with African American adolescents to identify profiles of ECV and delinquent peer affiliation. Understanding how the variability in ECV is associated with the variability in delinquent peer affiliation may help to identify profiles of youth who are vulnerable to high levels of ECV. In addition, the current

study sought to determine how profile membership predicts aggression and delinquency, as well as future orientation and self-esteem. By examining aggression and delinquency as outcomes of profile membership, the current study can identify critical levels of risk in ECV and delinquent peer affiliation and provide information about when to intervene. In addition, examining future orientation and self-esteem as outcomes of profile membership may yield information about malleable processes that can be targeted to maximize violence intervention efficacy/effectiveness.

1.1. Exposure to community violence in African American adolescents

Exposure to community violence has been defined in several ways. Violence taking place outside the home among persons who may know or not know each other (Krug, Mercy, Dahlberg, & Zwi, 2002). Deliberate acts intended to cause physical harm against a person or persons in the community (Cooley-Strickland et al., 2009). Frequent and continual exposure to random violence, involving guns and drugs in the community and includes witnessing, knowing victims of such acts and being victimized (Overstreet, 2000). Such violence is of an interpersonal nature, committed in public areas, and by individuals who are not intimately related to the individual (Kennedy & Ceballo, 2014). Adolescents may witness violence occurring in their communities and/or they may be a victim of violent acts in the community (Fowler,

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Tompsett, Braciszewski, Jacques-Tiura, & Baltes, 2009). African American adolescents in low-income, urban communities are exposed to disproportionately higher levels of ECV than youth from other ethnic and socioeconomic groups (Zimmerman & Messner, 2013). Between 45 and 96% of African American youth have witnessed violence in their community, ranging from assault to murder (Gaylord-Harden, Cunningham, & Zelencik, 2011; Self-Brown et al., 2006) and estimates ranging from 16% - 37% report violent victimization (Farrell & Bruce, 1997; Spano & Bolland, 2013). Exposure is often repeated and ongoing, with 75% of African American youth witnessing four or more violent events during adolescence (Miller, Wasserman, Neugebauer, Gorman-Smith, & Kamboukos, 1999).

1.2. Gender differences in exposures to community violence

Males and females report exposure to the same forms of community violence (Malik, Sorenson, & Aneshensel, 1997). However, with the exception of sexual assault, males experience higher levels of ECV, including both direct victimization and witnessing (Boyd, Cooley, Lambert, & Ialongo, 2003; Chen & Astor, 2009; Springer & Padgett, 2000; Voisin, Bird, Hardesty, & Shi Shiu, 2010). One in four African American males report victimization (e.g., beaten or shot at), often more than once during adolescence (Gaylord-Harden et al., 2011) and research demonstrates that the odds of witnessing violence are 51% higher for male youth than female youth (Zimmerman & Messner, 2013). Further, gender socialization theories suggest that boys are more likely than girls to externalize their problems (Nolen-Hoeksema & Gergus, 1994). Indeed, male adolescents report more self-protective (e.g., carrying a weapon) and aggressive behaviors in response to ECV, while females report more internalizing symptoms (Reese, Vera, Thompson, & Reyes, 2001; Self-Brown et al., 2006; Voisin et al., 2010).

1.3. Variability in exposures to community violence in African American youth

The research reviewed above utilizes variable-based analyses to understand rates of ECV during adolescence. However, a burgeoning body of research employs person-centered analysis with African American adolescents to provide insight into patterns of variability within data and identify distinct profiles of participants based on ECV. For example, a profile analysis of African American adolescents showed that the profile with the highest level of ECV was comprised of only 5% of the participants, while the low exposure profile comprised 77% of the sample (Copeland-Linder et al., 2010). A recent cluster analysis with African American male adolescents found that the cluster with the highest level of ECV and aggressive behavior only characterized 8% of the sample, whereas the cluster with low levels of ECV and aggressive behavior characterized 62% of the youth (Gaylord-Harden et al., 2015). Still, a latent profile analysis of ECV in African American adolescents in low-income, urban communities demonstrated that 27% of the participants were exposed to high levels of community violence (Gaylord-Harden, Dickson, & Pierre, 2016). While these findings provide valuable insight into the variability of ECV in African American youth, these findings also suggest that research is warranted to identify factors that may be associated with the variability in ECV to determine who is most likely to be exposed to high levels of violence and who should be targeted for intervention efforts.

1.4. Peer delinquency and variability in exposures to community violence

Recent sociological research demonstrates that the overwhelming majority of fatal and non-fatal shootings in large cities occur in a single and small social network (Papachristos et al., 2014; Papachristos, Braga, & Hureau, 2012). By linking arrest records of men, the researchers found that men exposed to high rates of gun violence are part of a small, concentrated network of individuals connected to one

another through their co-engagement in criminal activity. Thus, ECV was heavily linked to the distribution of delinquent behavior in an individual's peer network. While these studies were with adult men, the findings suggest that peer network composition may help to understand the variability in ECV during adolescence.

Decades of research suggest that peer relationships become more important during adolescence (Brown & Larson, 2009; Kuttler, La Greca & Prinstein, 1999), and peer network composition is an important area of research on adolescent peer relationships (e.g., De Kemp, Scholte, Overbeek, & Engels, 2006). Early research demonstrated a strong association between affiliation with delinquent peers and community violence exposure (Fagan, Piper, & Cheng, 1987; Jensen & Brownfield, 1986; Sampson & Lauritsen, 1990). However, more recent research is unclear, as some research shows that peer networks are not a risk factor for ECV (Halliday-Boykins & Graham, 2001), while other research demonstrates that delinquent peer affiliation predicts subsequent ECV (Lambert, Ialongo, Boyd, & Cooley, 2005; Salzinger, Ng-Mak, Feldman, Kam, & Rosario, 2006). However, this research is variable-centered, and given the heterogeneity in the peer networks of African American adolescents (McGill, Way, & Hughes, 2012; Way & Chen, 2000), the use of person-centered analyses may provide a stronger understanding of how delinquent peer affiliation relates to the variability in ECV. Consistent with the differential association theory (Sutherland, 1947), which states that adolescents' peer networks expose them to both delinquent and non-delinquent peers, research with a national dataset demonstrated considerable variability in the proportion of delinquent peers in adolescent networks (Haynie, 2002). What is unknown is how these findings generalize to youth who live in communities with disproportionately greater opportunities for exposure to community violence. Utilizing person-centered analysis to examine the profiles of ECV and delinquent peer affiliation will provide information on how variability in delinquent peer affiliation helps to understand the variability in ECV, as well as provide more clarity to the literature on the association between delinquent peer affiliation and ECV.

1.5. Psychosocial outcomes of exposures to community violence and peer delinquency

In addition to identifying profiles of ECV and delinquent peer affiliation, examining profile differences on various psychosocial outcomes can advance the literature in this area and inform intervention efforts. ECV is associated with numerous psychosocial outcomes during adolescence, but it is most consistently and strongly associated with aggressive and delinquent behaviors during this developmental period (Fowler et al., 2009). Adolescents who report higher levels of witnessing violence show significantly more delinquent and aggressive behaviors (Bingenheimer, Brennan, & Earls, 2005; Patchin, Huebner, McCluskey, Varano, & Bynum, 2006). Further, the relationship between ECV and delinquent and aggressive behaviors exists even when controlling for prior externalizing behaviors (Lynch, 2003). Externalizing behaviors may serve to perpetuate and exacerbate ECV. Specifically, youth who are engaging in more externalizing behaviors are at-risk for increased ECV, which subsequently could lead to the engagement in more delinquent or aggressive behaviors (Lynch, 2003).

Additionally, delinquent peer affiliation is associated with more aggressive behavior and delinquent behavior (Brook, Brook, Rubenstone, Zhang, & Saar, 2011; Farrell, Thompson, & Mehari, 2017; Reynolds & Crea, 2015). In fact, involvement with delinquent peers during adolescence predicts more aggressive behaviors over time, and youth who leave delinquent peer networks during adolescence show declines in aggressive behavior (Lacourse, Nagin, Tremblay, Vitaro, & Claes, 2003). According to differential association theory (Sutherland, 1947), youth learn to engage in delinquent behavior through their relationship with delinquent peers, especially when those peers provide positive reinforcement for delinquent behavior (Dishion & Tipsord, 2011).

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