



The impact of the social context on externalizing risks – Implications for the delivery of programs to vulnerable youth



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ABSTRACT

This paper draws on data from a longitudinal study of over 500 vulnerable adolescents to examine the extent to which levels of individual externalizing risk behaviors (risky or unsafe behaviors) changed over time, as well as which fixed and time-dynamic factors predicted changes in these risk levels over time. Over time absolute levels of risky behaviors decreased but remained above normative levels. Of all the predictors, being excluded from school and associating with an anti-social peer group were the strongest and most consistent predictors of these behaviors. Other factors predicted changes in one or more of the three risk measures used, suggesting that each risk factor may reflect challenges youth face in different domains of their lives. Implications of these findings for service delivery are discussed.

1. Introduction

Adolescence is an important developmental period characterized by complex social and neuro-biological changes the results of which have a critical impact on adulthood outcomes (Crone & Dahl, 2012). Adolescence is also a time when engagement in externalizing risk behaviors peaks (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1978; Auerbach, 2010; Steinberg, 2008). There is a significant body of work that defines the neuro-biological processes that predispose youth to engage in such risk-taking (Steinberg, 2008). However, these neuro-biological processes alone do not determine the nature and level of risky behaviors, rather the social and emotional environment influences the extent to which these predispositions are expressed (Steinberg, 2008). Accordingly, there is a growing literature exploring the ways in which factors in the social environment influence how this biologically-driven risk propensity translates into unsafe behaviors and the implications of this for the delivery of services to youth (Auerbach, 2010; Steinberg, 2008).

Some authors suggest that youth engagement in unsafe or risky behaviors can represent coping responses to challenging social circumstances (Logan-Greene et al., 2011; McAra & McVie, 2016; Schoon & Bynner, 2003). When understood in this way, engagement in risk-taking can be seen as an outcome for which there is a turbulent or traumatic contextual “backstory” that must be taken account of when attempting to address risk-taking through service delivery (Sanders, et al., 2017; Dishion, McCord, & Poulin, 1999; Dodge, Dishion, & Lansford, 2006; McAra & McVie, 2016; Moore, Vandivere, Kinukawa, &

Ling, 2009; Schoon & Bynner, 2003). Exposure to such stresses and turbulence over time across multiple life domains has a cumulative impact that is often manifested in heightened levels of engagement in risky behaviors during adolescence (Herrenkohl et al., 2001; Kim, Tajima, Herrenkohl, & Huang, 2009; Pungello et al., 2010). Furthermore, it cannot be assumed that, on their own, young people are able to mitigate the long-term negative impact of exposure to inhospitable social environments (Gerard & Buehler, 2004; Logan-Greene et al., 2011; McAra & McVie, 2016). There is growing interest, therefore, in understanding which factors in youth social ecologies contribute to their engagement in risky behaviors and which factors play a protective role. In terms of understanding where services should direct prevention and intervention effort, therefore, there is a need to identify which aspects of the social environment facilitate the expression of these underlying vulnerabilities and which factors may be protective for young people with the highest levels of externalizing risk behaviors.

In general terms, the literature around adolescent risk behaviors has tended to focus on one or a narrow range of risks (for example, violence, risky sexual activity) and to focus on specific subpopulations of vulnerable youth (for example, minority youth, males, youth in foster care) (see for example; Jennings et al., 2016; Jones, Salazar, & Crosby, 2015; Perry & Price, 2018; Voisin, Hong & King, 2012). The current study broadens the focus to consider three sets of externalizing risk behaviors and to consider the impact of a range of contextual stresses and resources on the way in which these risky behaviors change over time among a diverse group of vulnerable youth. In doing so it seeks to

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contribute to the growing interest in understanding where to focus intervention efforts with young people who present to social services with high levels of risky behaviors. The remainder of this section briefly considers what is already known about the impact of contextual factors upon adolescent risk-taking included in the current analysis.

1.1. Time-dynamic stresses and resources

1.1.1. The impact of relationships with family, peers and intimate partners on risky behaviors

As is the case during childhood, family plays a central role in the lives of adolescents (Moore et al., 2009; Schoon & Bynner, 2003). The nature and direction of these effects is a subject of debate. For instance, parental relationships have been found to play an important moderating role in the development of unsafe behaviors throughout adolescence (Berzin, 2010; Herrenkohl et al., 2001; Moore et al., 2009). Family instability and turbulence as well as exposure to neglect and abuse are thought to represent particularly acute challenges to adolescent development (Moore et al., 2009; Ryan, Williams, & Courtney, 2013). Further, troubled parent-child relationships have been found to predict problem behaviors in adolescence, to bring heightened risks of mental health problems and increase levels of adolescent violence (Logan-Greene et al., 2011; Stormshak et al., 2011). Troubled familial relationships are also connected with reduced opportunities for positive, pro-social development (Haibin, Martin, Armstrong, & Walker, 2011) and with elevated levels of substance abuse and heightened emotional distress (Hedges, 2012; Logan-Greene et al., 2011; Martin et al., 2015). On the other hand, it has been argued that gender and poverty exert a more significant role in engagement by adolescents in acts of violence than family factors suggesting a need to look beyond the individual young person and their family for explanations of youth risk-taking behavior (McAra & McVie, 2016).

In relation to peer influences, research has suggested that pro-social peers are protective for adolescent risk-taking while anti-social peers open pathways into substance use, violent behavior and other offending (Auerbach, 2010; Herrenkohl et al., 2001). An anti-social peer group has been found to play a role in the onset of adolescent conduct problems and deviant friends escalate risky behaviors during adolescence (Dishion et al., 1999; Wood et al., 2012). While anti-social peers increase risk exposure and pro-social peers reduce this, the same clarity has not been found in relation to intimate relationships. For instance, intimate relationships (with anti-social partners) have been found to increase the involvement of young females in violent offending (Kerig, 2014), while an intimate relationship with a female appears to have a protective effect for males during late adolescence, but not at younger ages (Cauffman, Farruggia, & Goldweber, 2008). The current study examines the combined impacts of these different types of relationships on changes in levels of risky behaviors. In doing so it seeks to clarify the respective roles of familial and peer relationships and to identify whether intimate relationships play a role in either exacerbating or moderating risk activity for males and females (see hypothesis 3).

1.1.2. The impact of living arrangements and neighborhoods on risky behaviors

The impact of living arrangements on levels of risky behaviors has also been explored. In this connection, overcrowding, residential instability and homelessness have been linked to increases in risky behaviors during adolescence, and stresses in the home environment are connected to a reduced likelihood of positive adjustment (Berzin, 2010; Moore et al., 2009; Schoon & Bynner, 2003). Stressed neighborhoods have been found to directly impact on the subsequent development of unsafe behaviors among youth (Herrenkohl et al., 2001; Jencks & Mayer, 1990; McAra & McVie, 2016). High rates of risky behaviors such as substance abuse tend to be concentrated in poor neighborhoods and there is growing evidence that living in deprived and socially disadvantaged or violent communities predicts an increased likelihood of

substance abuse, criminal activity including violence and other risk behaviors (Dodge et al., 2006; Leventhall & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; McAra & McVie, 2016; McCrystal, Percy, & Higgins, 2007). Youth who perceive their neighborhoods to be unsafe have also been found to have higher levels of conduct disorders (Herrenkohl et al., 2001). Linked to this, ongoing exposure to violence within neighborhoods is connected to increases in aggressive behaviors (O'Donnell, Schwab-Stone, & Muyeed, 2002). In the current study, the impact on levels of risky behaviors over time of the social environment around youth is considered alongside the relational factors outlined in the preceding section. This allows the analysis to consider the differential impacts over time of the neighborhood and relational ecologies surrounding vulnerable youth.

1.1.3. The role of pro-sociality as a protective factor

There is a growing interest in the link between pro-sociality (that is, positive social behaviors primarily directed at benefitting others) and the development of problem behaviors (Carlo & Crockett, 2007; Padilla-Walker, Carlo, & Nielson, 2015). While the evidence is still inconclusive, there are some indications that pro-sociality may have a buffering effect on the later development of problem behaviors such as delinquency and a range of health risk behaviors including substance use and high risk sexual activity and therefore pro-sociality constitutes an important facet of youth lives to explore in relation to the development of risky behaviors (Carlo & Crockett, 2007). Some suggest that because pro-sociality requires emotional regulation and social cognitive skills youth with higher levels of pro-sociality are less prone to conduct disorders (Padilla-Walker et al., 2015). While this recognition of the connections between pro-sociality and the development of risky behaviors is important, little is known about how pro-sociality interacts with other aspects of vulnerable young people's social ecologies and the current study provides an opportunity to explore these types of interactions.

1.1.4. The impact of educational factors on risky behaviors

Progressing with education at about normative levels has protective effects for youth and is linked to reduced likelihood of engaging in unsafe behaviors (Sanders, Munford & Liebenberg, 2016; Samel, Sondergeld, Fischer, & Patterson, 2011). On the other hand, exclusion from school has a well-recognized role in subsequent engagement in risky behaviors (McCrystal et al., 2007). For instance, it is a predictor of substance abuse by youth and disengagement from school is related to increased delinquency, substance use and criminal behavior (McCrystal et al., 2007; Wang & Fredricks, 2014). School-related risk factors, such as exclusion, increase the risks of offending independently of any pre-existing anti-social propensity (Savolainen et al., 2011). It has been suggested that exclusion from school is part of a larger process of marginalization which has a direct impact on a wide range of troubling behaviors (Young, 2002). In this connection, a school-to-prison pipeline has been proposed by which exclusion from school leads to criminal justice system involvement (Christle et al., 2005; Wald & Losen, 2003). This argument is still largely theoretical, requiring empirical evidence that demonstrates the processes by which this pipeline operates (Morris, 2012). Given this, the current study sought to provide empirical evidence regarding the way in which exclusion might exacerbate the levels of risky behaviors that are likely to lead to later criminal justice system involvement and also to establish whether other contextual factors are involved in these types of processes.

1.2. Fixed (time-invariant) factors

There are connections between demographic characteristics such as age, gender and ethnicity and adolescent engagement in unsafe behaviors (Andresen, 2012; McAra & McVie, 2016; Spencer et al., 2006). Engagement in high risk activity follows the general process of youth maturation; increasing to a peak during mid-adolescence and then declining as youth enter adulthood (Agnew, 2003; Piquero, 2008;

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