



Parents and peers as protective factors among adolescents exposed to neighborhood risk



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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the link between neighborhood risk and adolescent antisocial behavior and whether this association was moderated by parent and peer relationships and characteristics. We also explored whether the moderating effects varied by age. The sample consisted of 206 adolescents (ages 10–18 years) from predominantly low-income, ethnic minority families. Results indicated that high levels of neighborhood violence and neighborhood danger were significantly related to high levels of antisocial behavior. The findings also showed that high levels of peer (but not parent) prosocial behavior and emotion regulation attenuated the links between neighborhood violence and antisocial behavior. Moreover, parent-adolescent (but not peer-adolescent) relationship quality served as a protective factor in the face of neighborhood violence and danger. In addition, little evidence of age differences in the moderating effects of parents and peers was found. Implications regarding the role of interpersonal relationships in the context of risk are discussed.

1. Introduction

A growing body of research has shown that neighborhood risk is associated with a number of outcomes during adolescence. For example, studies have shown that high levels of neighborhood violence and danger were related to high levels of deviant and antisocial behavior (Aneshensel & Sucoff, 1996; Colder, Mott, Levy, & Flay, 2000; Farrell, Mehari, Kramer-Kuhn, & Gony, 2014). Although the link between neighborhood risk and adolescent outcomes has been established, there have been few investigations that have examined multiple indicators of neighborhood risk. Moreover, there have been few studies investigating the relative importance of parents and peers as protective factors and whether this varies by age. For instance, it is possible that among adolescents living in violent neighborhoods, having a warm and supportive relationship with parents is especially critical. Likewise, given the lack of positive role models in dangerous neighborhoods (Ingoldsby & Shaw, 2002), it may be important for youth to affiliate with prosocial friends. In the current investigation, we first investigated whether neighborhood violence and neighborhood danger were related to adolescent antisocial behavior. In addition, we analyzed whether parent and peer relationships and characteristics moderated the links between neighborhood risk and antisocial behavior when examined simultaneously. Finally, we explored whether the moderating effects of parent and peers varied by adolescent age.

Adolescence is characterized by a number of developmental transformations within the adolescent and within interpersonal relationships (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). In particular, as they age, adolescents are afforded greater levels of autonomy (Zimmer-Gembeck, Ducat, & Collins, 2011) and are supervised less by their parents (Laird, Pettit, Bates, & Dodge, 2003) as their relationships become more horizontal and less vertical (Laursen & Bukowski, 1997; Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Moreover, peer relationships become increasingly more important during this developmental period. Indeed, as youth age, they spend more time with friends, and they are more likely to identify loyalty, intimacy, and companionship as defining features of their peer relationships (Berndt, 2002; Buhrmester, 1998; Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006). Finally, adolescence is also characterized by improvements and advances in emotion regulation (Morris, Silk, Steinberg, Myers, & Robinson, 2007). Given these developmental changes, it is not surprising that adolescents' experiences in their surrounding neighborhoods also tend to increase with age, especially among youth from low-income families (Ingoldsby & Shaw, 2002). As such, neighborhoods may be increasingly salient contexts for deviance training during adolescence.

Indeed, a large body of research has investigated the influence of neighborhoods on adolescent development (Gorman-Smith & Tolan, 2003; Ingoldsby & Shaw, 2002; Lambert, Ialongo, Boyd, & Cooley, 2005). In general, this research has focused on two distinct (yet related)

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characteristics: perceptions of exposure to violence and neighborhood danger. *Neighborhood violence* reflects the extent to which individuals witness criminal and physical acts of violence in their neighborhood, such as robbery and shootings (Gorman-Smith & Tolan, 2003; Lambert et al., 2005). For instance, using a sample of youth ages 9–15 years, Cammack, Lambert, and Ialongo (2011) assessed the frequency of adolescent exposure to violent events, including witnessing someone being killed, mugged, robbed, stabbed, shot, or being beaten up. In contrast, *neighborhood danger* reflects the level of safety concerns such as abandoned houses, homelessness, graffiti, drugs, gangs, and noise (Bowen & Chapman, 1996; Sheidow, Gorman-Smith, Tolan, & Henry, 2001). For example, using a sample of inner-city African American and Latino American adolescents (ages 13–17 years), Sheidow et al. (2001) assessed neighborhood danger (called “neighborhood problems”) using items tapping crime, drugs, graffiti, noise, gangs, vandalism, abandoned buildings, homelessness, burglary, and homelessness violent crime.

Regardless of how it has been assessed, an extensive body of literature has demonstrated links between neighborhood risk and youth externalizing problems. For instance, Aneshensel and Sucoff (1996) found that high levels of ambient hazards (i.e., neighborhood danger and violence) were related to high levels of conduct problems in a sample of adolescents ages 12–17. These findings are similar to Colder et al. (2000) who reported that neighborhood danger was positively and significantly related to adolescent (ages 10–11 years) aggression. According to Social Disorganization Theory (Sampson & Groves, 1989), neighborhood risk and disadvantage tends to diminish social control and the ability of families to effectively modulate potentially inappropriate behavior in the community (Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). Moreover, these disruptions in neighborhood organization may limit the development of shared values and positive social connections among its community members (Deng et al., 2006). As such, there may be a lack of positive and prosocial role models given that aggressive and delinquent behaviors are more common in these contexts (Ingoldsby & Shaw, 2002; Schonberg & Shaw, 2007; Tolan, Gorman-Smith, & Henry, 2003). The community disorganization also can influence youth adjustment through its impact on family factors, such as parenting. In particular, neighborhood risk can lead to elevated parent stress and depression, which can increase negative/harsh discipline or a disengagement from parenting (Cui, Conger, Bryant, & Elder, 2002). In sum, neighborhood risk may be positively associated with antisocial behavior due to the disruptions in social control and effective parental discipline and the relative lack of positive role models. In other words, neighborhood risk may lead to fewer positive socialization experiences inside and outside of the home (Chung & Steinberg, 2006; McLoyd, 1990).

It should be emphasized that not all individuals exposed to violence and aggression in the neighborhood context develop adjustment difficulties. Indeed, there have been efforts in the literature to explore potential protective factors among youth exposed to neighborhood risk (e.g., Ozer & Weinstein, 2004; Schofield et al., 2012). *Protective factors* are variables or resources that offset or lessen the impact of negative experiences and events that an individual encounters in everyday life (Luthar, 2006). Specifically, high levels of a protective factor are thought to reduce or alleviate the impact of a risk factor or exposure to an adverse event or experience on a particular outcome. Scholars who have investigated individual and family resilience have identified interpersonal relationships as important buffers and protective factors (e.g., Henry, Morris, & Harrist, 2015; Luthar, 2006; Masten & Monn, 2015). Namely, positive and supportive characteristics of the relationships and of the partners themselves are thought to afford important ameliorative benefits. In the current investigation, we focused on three parent and peer protective factors: relationship quality, prosocial behavior, and emotion regulation.

Given that neighborhood risk may disrupt interpersonal relationships (Deng et al., 2006), the extent to which that adolescents have supportive and warm relationships with parents and friends may be

critical in alleviating the deleterious impact of neighborhood violence and danger. It is possible that high levels of positive relations with parents and friends may reduce adolescents' uncertainty about their neighborhood and increase feelings of control and self-efficacy (Rosenfeld, Richman, Bowen, & Wynns, 2006). Related, having a secure parent-teen attachment provides a secure base that may be especially important in risky environments as adolescents explore the surrounding neighborhood and the overall community (Allen et al., 2003). In addition, positive and supportive relationships may enhance the quality of socialization experiences, which may be lacking in dangerous and violent contexts (Criss, Pettit, Bates, Dodge, & Lapp, 2002). Indeed, some researchers have argued that having positive relationships with friends (especially with low antisocial behavior peers) may serve as contexts for remedial socialization for at-risk youth by providing learning opportunities for critical social and emotion regulation skills that may have been missed elsewhere (Criss et al., 2002; Price, 1996).

The role of positive relationships with parents and peers as protective factors has been supported by evidence in the literature. For example, using a sample of Mexican American and African American fifth graders, Schofield et al. (2012) reported that the link between neighborhood disorder and adolescent antisocial behavior was attenuated under high levels of family (i.e., parent) support. Moreover, Ozer and Weinstein (2004) found that the relation between community violence and depressive symptoms was not significant under high levels of “mother helpfulness” (i.e., social support) using a sample of seventh graders. These two studies are consistent with the findings from Scarpa and Haden (2006) who reported that the link between neighborhood community victimization and emerging adult aggressive behavior was not significant under high levels of friend support.

In addition to relationship quality, having positive role models, such as prosocial behavior and emotion regulation, may serve as protective factors for youth exposed to neighborhood risk. Prosocial behavior reflects the extent to which an individual voluntarily engages in helpful, positive, and empathetic behaviors especially for the benefits of others (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998; Eisenberg, VanSchyndel, & Spinrad, 2016). Emotion regulation has been defined as the process of controlling the intensity, form, occurrence, and duration of emotion-related physiological processes and internal feeling states to reach one's goals (Eisenberg & Morris, 2002). Having parents and friends who are highly prosocial and adept at modulating their negative emotions may be especially beneficial for youth living in violent and dangerous neighborhoods. A number of studies have shown prosocial behavior and emotion regulation to be linked to low levels of externalizing behaviors (e.g., Criss et al., 2016; Hardy, Bean, & Olsen, 2015). Moreover, violent and dangerous neighborhoods and communities are often characterized by positive attitudes towards violence and aggression (Hyde, Shaw, & Moilanen, 2010; Levanthal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000) and poor emotion regulatory skills (Brown & Ackerman, 2011; Kelly, Schwartz, Gorman, & Nakamoto, 2008) among its residents. As such, having positive role models adept at both skills may be especially valuable in promoting resilience among at-risk youth.

Although there have been no published studies (to our knowledge) that have examined parent and peer prosocial behavior or emotion regulation as protective factors, there is some evidence with respect to antisocial/deviant behavior. For instance, Lambert et al. (2005) found that the link between exposure to community violence and adolescent aggressive behavior (assessed in the 6th grade) was attenuated under low levels of deviant peer affiliation. In addition, Nebbitt and Lombe (2007) reported that low levels of peer delinquency reduced the association between neighborhood ambient risks (i.e., neighborhood violence and danger) and adolescent depression. Moreover, Fitzgerald, McKelvey, Schiffman, and Montañez (2006) reported significantly lower emotion regulation among young children exposed to a combination of high levels of neighborhood violence and father antisocial behavior compared to others.

While the preliminary evidence has indicated that supportive

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