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Does offending intensify as exposure to violence aggregates? Reconsidering the effects of repeat victimization, types of exposure to violence, and poly-victimization on property crime, violent offending, and substance use

Chelsea Farrell, Gregory M. Zimmerman*

Northeastern University, School of Criminology and Criminal Justice, 409 Churchill Hall, 360 Huntington Avenue, Boston, MA 02115, United States

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The relationship between exposure to violence and adverse behavioral outcomes is well-documented. But, heterogeneity in this relationship across different operational strategies for exposure to violence is less well understood. This study examines the effects of repeat victimization, exposure to different types of violence, and poly-victimization on property crime, violent offending, and substance use.

Methods: We analyze two waves of data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health ($N = 12,603$). We operationalize exposure to violence as: a dichotomous indicator of overall occurrence; exposure to multiple incidents of violence (repeat exposure); types of exposure to violence (witnessed, threatened, and experienced violence); and poly-victimization (i.e., repeat exposure to violence and exposure to multiple types of violence).

Results: Exposure to violence – regardless of how it is measured – increases offending risk. The strongest effects are observed for poly-victimization, followed by repeat exposure to violence and exposure to a single episode of violence. There is little variation in effect sizes across types of exposure to violence.

Conclusions: The results speak to the utility of preventing the onset of exposure to violence and addressing ongoing exposure to violence in order to interrupt the link between exposure to violence and offending.

1. Introduction

Exposure to violence is a particularly consequential aspect of youths' reality. Recent estimates indicate that over 60% of children and adolescents under the age of 17 in the United States are exposed to violence each year (Finkelhor, Turner, Ormrod, & Hamby, 2009; Resnick et al., 1997). These youths are at higher risk for subsequent mental health issues (Borowsky, Ireland, & Resnick, 2001; Brown, Cohen, Johnson, & Smailes, 1999; Buka, Stichick, Birdthistle, & Earls, 2001), negative biological responses (Perkins & Graham-Bermann, 2012), and adverse behavioral outcomes (Brezina, Agnew, Cullen, & Wright, 2004; Cleary, 2000; Zimmerman, Farrell, & Posick, 2017). Yet, there is heterogeneity in the extent and consequences of exposure to violence across studies, in part because researchers have employed different conceptual and operational definitions of exposure to violence. Some studies focus on direct exposure to violence, including personal victimization and threats of violence (Jennings, Higgins, Tewksbury, Gover, & Piquero, 2010), whereas others note the importance of indirect experiences with violence, such as witnessing or hearing about violence (Buka et al., 2001; Fagan, Wright, & Pinchevsky, 2014;

Richters & Martinez, 1993) to the extent that it substantiates knowledge of the act itself (Zimmerman & Posick, 2016) and leads to a lack of safe haven (Fagan, 2003). There is further variation in the definition of "violence," which can be inclusive of the Uniform Crime Report's index crimes (i.e., murder, rape, robbery, assault), as well as less serious, but more prevalent, forms of violence (e.g., fighting) among youth. This study considers both direct (i.e., inter-personal victimization and violent threats) and indirect (i.e., witnessing violence) exposure to violence. Our definition of violence spans fighting and violence with a weapon: respondents answered questions about witnessing a shooting, being threatened with a weapon, and personal victimization. We also consider exposure to multiple incidents of a single type of violence (repeat exposure to violence) and exposure to multiple incidents of multiple types of violence (poly-victimization).

By considering different measures of exposure to violence, this study seeks to shed additional light on the relationship between exposure to violence and offending behaviors. Much of the prior research on this topic has focused on the widely documented relationship between victimization and offending, a phenomenon commonly referred to as the victim-offender overlap (Jennings, Piquero, & Reingle, 2012). But,

* Corresponding author at: Northeastern University, School of Criminology and Criminal Justice, 417 Churchill Hall, 360 Huntington Avenue, Boston, MA 02115, United States.
E-mail addresses: farrell.che@husky.neu.edu (C. Farrell), g.zimmerman@neu.edu (G.M. Zimmerman).

given that youths are two to four times more likely to witness violence than to be personally victimized (Richters & Martinez, 1993), an emerging area of inquiry has focused on the relationship between witnessing violence and offending, substantiating indirect exposure to violence as a key determinant of offending outcomes (Buka et al., 2001; Eitle & Turner, 2002; Fagan et al., 2014). Both victimization (Jennings et al., 2010) and indirect exposure to violence (Agnew, 2002; Gorman-Smith & Tolan, 1998) are documented correlates of a wide variety of offending behaviors, including violent offending (Jennings et al., 2012; McCabe, Hough, Yeh, Lucchini, & Hazen, 2005; Shaffer & Ruback, 2002), property crime (Daday, Broidy, Crandall, & Sklar, 2005; Tyler & Melander, 2015), and substance use (Browning & Erickson, 2009; Fagan et al., 2014; Kilpatrick et al., 2000). However, many studies have focused on one type of exposure to violence (e.g., *either* victimization *or* witnessing violence) (Fagan, 2003; Fantuzzo & Mohr, 1999; Farrell, 2017; Fergusson & Horwood, 1998; Kendall-Tackett, Williams, & Finkelhor, 1993) or have aggregated multiple forms of exposure to violence into a composite measure (Aceves & Cookston, 2007; Averdijk, Van Gelder, Eisner, & Ribeaud, 2016; Jennings et al., 2010). Few studies have simultaneously examined different types of exposure to violence and taken into account the frequency of exposure to violence.

Our study contributes to the literature by examining heterogeneity in the effects of exposure to violence on offending behaviors across four measures of exposure to violence: a binary indicator of overall occurrence; repeat exposure to violence (exposure to multiple incidents of a single type of violence); exposure to different types of violence (witnessed, threatened, and experienced violence); and poly-victimization (i.e., the intersection of repeat exposure to violence and exposure to multiple types of violence). We test our hypotheses (enumerated below) with two waves of data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health). We begin by reviewing literature on the victim-offender overlap before grounding our hypotheses in existing theory and research.

2. Conceptual framework

2.1. The victim-offender overlap

The relationship between victimization and offending is one of the most consistently documented empirical facts in criminology (Jennings et al., 2012). Studies have demonstrated that victims and offenders share similar demographic characteristics (Hindelang, 1976; Lauritsen, Sampson, & Laub, 1991); that victims frequently report prior contact with the criminal justice system; and that offenders often report prior victimization experiences (Widom, 1989; Wolfgang, 1957). In a review of 37 studies that examine the victim-offender overlap, Jennings et al. (2012) found that 84% demonstrated a significant association between victimization and offending.

Yet, theory and empirical research as to the causal relationship between victimization and offending are equivocal. Routine activities theory argues that offending increases one's vulnerability to victimization via increased exposure to deviant individuals as part of a deviant lifestyle (Lauritsen & Laub, 2007). On the other hand, stress-response theories such as general strain theory (Agnew, 2001) suggest that offending is a maladaptive coping strategy to a serious or traumatic strain in one's life, often manifested as victimization (Agnew, 1992). Yet other scholars have argued that victimization and offending are co-occurring phenomena rather than causally related (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Hindelang, 1976; Piquero, MacDonald, Dobrin, Daigle, & Cullen, 2005). In this case, similar variables (e.g., low self-control, demographic characteristics) explain both victimization and offending independently. In this study, we examine victimization, and exposure to violence more generally, as a cause of subsequent offending, grounded in Agnew's (2001) general strain theory. We consider how witnessing violence, being threatened with violence, and being personally

victimized increase the odds of property crime, violent offending, and substance use. The discussion that ensues follows suit.

2.2. General strain theory

A key tenet of Merton's (1938) traditional strain theory is that delinquency is one way to cope with the inability to achieve socially approved goals. Agnew's (1992) general strain theory moves beyond the failure to achieve desired goals and considers the loss of a positive stimulus and the presence of a negative stimulus as key sources of strain. These stressors lead to negative affective states, such as anger or frustration, which create pressure for corrective action in the form of: escape-avoidance (e.g., substance use); compensation (e.g., property crime); or retaliation (e.g., violent offending) (Agnew, 1992). The stressors that are most likely to elicit deviant responses are: (1) unjust; (2) high in magnitude; (3) associated with low social control; and (4) create pressure for negative coping (Agnew, 2001).

Since its original formulation, general strain theory has undergone numerous revisions and empirical tests, and has been used to explain an array of crimes and delinquent acts (Piquero et al., 2005). But, the theory has been consistent in its treatment of exposure to violence as a strenuous event that is likely to result in deviant responses (Agnew, 2001). Exposure to violence is oft perceived as unjust and high in magnitude (Agnew, 2001) and may incentivize crime as a negative coping technique via social learning (Agnew, 2001, 2002; Anderson, 1999). The choice of response to exposure to violence, however, is not random; there are several factors that make one particularly vulnerable to deviant coping strategies. For example, repeat exposure to violence (Agnew, 2001) and poly-victimization may increase the likelihood of offending as a coping response to exposure to violence. In addition, experienced strain (e.g., personal victimization), anticipated strain (e.g., being threatened), and vicarious strain (e.g., witnessing violence) may differentially impact offending behavior (Agnew, 2002). Below, we discuss the frequency and type of exposure to violence as important considerations in the calculus linking exposure to violence to offending.

2.3. Reconsidering the link between exposure to violence and offending as a function of repeat exposure to violence, type of exposure to violence, and poly-victimization

Based on knowledge that the frequency and type of exposure to violence play a role in the responses to exposure to violence (Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Turner, 2007; Turner, Finkelhor, & Ormrod, 2010), we argue below that it is critical to distinguish: (1) youths exposed to a single episode of violence from those exposed to multiple episodes of violence; (2) individuals who witness violence from those who are threatened and personally victimized; and (3) youths who are exposed to one type of violence repeatedly from "poly-victims" (Finkelhor, Ormrod, Turner, & Hamby, 2005; Wright, Fagan, & Pinchevsky, 2013). Consistent with prior definitions, we consider poly-victimization "the experience of multiple victimizations of *different* kinds...not just multiple episodes of the same kind of victimization" (Turner, Shattuck, Finkelhor, & Hamby, 2017: 756).

Estimates indicate that roughly 22% of youths experience four or more different kinds of violent exposures in a given year (Finkelhor et al., 2007), and 30% of youths are exposed to five or more types of violence in their lifetime (Turner et al., 2010). Additionally, youths are often exposed to the same types of violence repeatedly (Finkelhor et al., 2005). Thus, it is no longer sufficient to consider *whether or not* someone has been exposed to violence. Instead, the effects of exposure to violence are *cumulative* as one is exposed to multiple incidents of violence and to different types of violence.

Several theories argue that the effects of repeat victimization and poly-victimization are particularly damaging. Traumatic stress theory, for example, suggests that youth victimization is often not a single event, but rather a "condition" such as parental neglect or peer bullying

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