



Exposure to violence, substance use, and neighborhood context



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ABSTRACT

Adolescent exposure to violence and substance use are both public health problems, but how neighborhood context contributes to these outcomes is unclear. This study uses prospective data from 1416 adolescents to examine the direct and interacting influences of victimization and neighborhood factors on adolescent substance use. Based on hierarchical Bernoulli regression models that controlled for prior substance use and multiple individual-level factors, exposure to violence significantly increased the likelihood of marijuana use but not alcohol use or binge drinking. There was little evidence that community norms regarding adolescent substance use influenced rates of substance use or moderated the impact of victimization. Community disadvantage did not directly impact substance use, but the relationship between victimization and marijuana use was stronger for those in neighborhoods with greater disadvantage. The results suggest that victimization is particularly likely to affect adolescents' marijuana use, and that this relationship may be contingent upon neighborhood economic conditions.

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1. Introduction

The Department of Justice considers exposure to violence among children and adolescents to be a “national crisis” which must be better understood and more effectively addressed (The United States Department of Justice, 2012). This concern stems from research indicating that a large proportion of youth witness violence perpetrated against others or are themselves victims of aggressive attacks at some point during their lives (Finkelhor et al., 2009; Truman, 2011). Among 14–17 year olds, an age group particularly likely to be exposed to violence, the 2007 National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence indicated that 48% had witnessed violence in the year prior to the survey, 47% had been personally assaulted, and 19% had been injured during an assault (Finkelhor et al., 2009). Research has also shown that exposure to violence can have negative and often severe consequences, impairing social relationships, academic performance, and mental health, and can lead to aggressive and violent behaviors as well (Begle et al., 2011; Buka et al., 2001; Finkelhor et al., 2011; Gorman-Smith and Tolan, 1998; Lynch, 2003; Macmillan, 2001; Schwab-Stone et al., 1995).

The effects of violent victimization on tobacco, alcohol, and substance use during adolescence have also been evidenced (Kilpatrick et al., 2000; Sullivan et al., 2004; Zinzow et al., 2009), but this body of research is relatively under-developed compared to studies examining other types of behaviors stemming from exposure to violence. Furthermore, few studies have sought to identify factors which may moderate the relationship between exposure to violence and substance use

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(for exceptions, see: Hay and Evans, 2006; Lin et al., 2011; O'Donnell et al., 2002; Sullivan et al., 2004), which limits our ability to identify the individuals most at risk for drinking and drug use following victimization.

This study seeks to increase our understanding of the relationship between exposure to violence and substance use. We examine the effect of experiencing and witnessing violence on subsequent alcohol and marijuana use, the most frequently used substances among adolescents (Johnston et al., 2011), as well as on binge drinking, using prospective data from youth and adolescents living in Chicago. In addition, we investigate the degree to which two neighborhood characteristics – economic disadvantage and community norms regarding adolescent substance use – moderate the impact of victimization on substance use. To date, there has been minimal attention paid to the potential for neighborhood context to affect the relationship between exposure to violence in the community and substance use by adolescents (with the exception of Browning and Erickson, 2009), despite research indicating that economically and socially disadvantaged neighborhoods have higher rates of violence (Anderson, 1999; De Coster et al., 2006; Shaw and McKay, 1942) and victimization (Browning and Erickson, 2009; Gibson et al., 2009; Sampson and Lauritsen, 1994) compared to more advantaged areas. The current study will explore whether or not residence in such areas affects alcohol use, binge drinking, and marijuana use among adolescents, and the degree to which neighborhood factors ameliorate or exacerbate the likelihood that victims will engage in substance use.

2. Review of the literature

2.1. Neighborhood influences on adolescent substance use

Both theoretical and empirical work suggest that neighborhood context influences adolescent delinquency and drug use (Anderson, 1999; Elliott et al., 1996; Sampson et al., 1997; Shaw and McKay, 1942; Wilson, 1987). Nonetheless, some research has failed to document significant direct effects of contextual factors on delinquency (Bernburg and Thorlindsson, 2007; Beyers et al., 2003; De Coster et al., 2006; Elliott et al., 1996; Maimon and Browning, 2010; Sampson et al., 2005). Such results have led to an acknowledgment that neighborhood influences are complex, and that they may be more likely to interact with other (more proximal) influences on delinquency than to have direct effects on these outcomes (Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn, 2000).

This study examines the degree to which two neighborhood factors – economic disadvantage and cultural norms – have direct effects on adolescent alcohol use, binge drinking, and marijuana use and potentially moderate the impact of victimization on adolescents' use of these substances. We focus on these two contextual factors because we suspect they influence drinking and drug use via similar and related mechanisms. Beginning with neighborhood economic disadvantage, we posit that children living in impoverished areas could be at increased risk for alcohol and other drug use as a coping mechanism intended to provide relief from the stressors of daily life in these environments. There is much evidence that economically disadvantaged communities have higher levels of various social and public health problems, including unemployment; physical disorder such as abandoned buildings and graffiti; public displays of intoxication and drug use; visible street crimes such as prostitution, robbery, and gang fights; and frequent displays of aggression and violence (Anderson, 1999; Sampson and Raudenbush, 1999; Shaw and McKay, 1942; Wilson and Kelling, 1982). The repetitive stressors of living in these high-risk environments, where there may be little hope for future success, may lead youth to engage in alcohol and drug use as a way of alleviating or escaping from these adverse conditions (Lambert et al., 2004).

Youth living in disadvantaged neighborhoods may also be more likely to encounter alcohol- and drug-using adults and a culture that is more tolerant of such behaviors (Galea et al., 2005; Kulis et al., 2007; Sampson and Bartusch, 1998). Like youth, parents and other adults in the community may engage in substance use as a way of alleviating the stressors faced in these environments. Increased exposure to adult users may increase the likelihood youth will perceive drinking and drug use as normative, acceptable, and unlikely to result in negative consequences, all of which could increase their own substance use (Agostinelli and Grube, 2005; Akers, 1985; Hawkins et al., 1992).

It is also possible that in disadvantaged neighborhoods, residents will be more tolerant of illegal substance use by adolescents. Research suggests that in such areas, there may be a variety of value systems regarding crime, violence, and deviance (Berg et al., 2012), and this heterogeneity and/or ambiguity in attitudes can weaken residents' total opposition to deviance (Kornhauser, 1978; Sampson and Bartusch, 1998; Shaw and McKay, 1942). As Sampson and Wilson (1995) note, when economic hardships are prevalent in neighborhoods, "a system of values emerges in which crime, disorder, and drug use are less than fervently condemned and hence expected as part of everyday life." While this does not mean that residents of disadvantaged neighborhoods will necessarily condone illegal behavior, their attitudes regarding crime and deviance may be more "flexible" compared to those living in more advantaged areas. That is, while most residents of impoverished communities do not actively endorse illegal behaviors, they may place less emphasis on strict conformity and/or be more willing in certain circumstances to set aside normative beliefs such as the need to (always) obey the law (Kirk and Papachristos, 2011). In fact, Sampson and Bartusch (1998) found that disadvantaged communities had, on average, greater tolerance for youth fighting and alcohol, compared to less disadvantaged areas. However, they also note that, at an individual level, residents of all neighborhoods were relatively intolerant of youth deviance (Sampson and Bartusch, 1998).

Consistent with broader sociological and contextual theories of adolescent development (Kirk and Papachristos, 2011; Kornhauser, 1978; Warner, 2003; Warner et al., 2011) which emphasize the role of community norms and cultural values

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