



# Understanding youth violence: The mediating effects of gender, poverty and vulnerability



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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** This article aims to improve our understanding of youth violence in the early teenage years by exploring the mediating effects of gender and poverty in the presence of various risk and protective factors.

**Methods:** The article draws on data from the Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime, a prospective longitudinal study of 4300 young people. We regress a binary measure of violence at age 13 (the peak age of violence) on a variety of risk and protection factors, while controlling for gender and two measures of poverty.

**Results:** Our findings show that violence is strongly associated with gender and poverty at the household and neighborhood levels. These relationships remain even when controlling for indicators of risk and protection linked to victimization, and relationships between children, their care-givers, and school.

**Conclusions:** The findings support our theory of 'negotiated order', which posits that formal and informal regulatory orders play a key role in the development and sustaining of offender identities (McAra & McVie, 2012). We conclude that violence reduction is best effected by: support for victims, enhancing parenting skills, transforming school-curricula, and tackling poverty. Above all, young people involved in violence should be conceptualized as vulnerable children rather than offenders.

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## Introduction

This article aims to improve our understanding of youth violence in the early teenage years, by exploring the mediating effects of gender and poverty in the presence of various risk and protective measures. It draws on a prospective longitudinal program of research, the Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime, which tracks the lives of around 4300 young people. In the article we present evidence which shows that violence is strongly associated with gender and poverty, measured both at both the household and neighborhood levels, but not with family structure. These relationships remain even when controlling for indicators of risk and protection linked to victimization, and relationships between children, their care-givers, and school. We argue that these findings provide further support for our theory of 'negotiated order', which posits that formal and informal regulatory orders play a key role in the development, and sustaining of offender identities (McAra & McVie, 2012). Violence becomes a resource for disempowered young people to negotiate such pathways, gaining status and a sense of self-worth through violent encounters. We conclude that violence reduction is best effected by: support for victims, enhancing

parenting skills, transforming school-curricula, and tackling poverty. Above all, young people involved in violence should be conceptualized as vulnerable children rather than offenders in need of punishment; a holistic approach to troubled and troublesome young people.

As our point of departure we present the wider research and policy contexts for the paper (including the Scottish context). We then introduce the Edinburgh Study, before describing in more detail the measures used and analytical approach (which involved modeling predictors of violence, using a range of risk and protective indicators). This is followed by the key findings from the modeling. The paper concludes with a review of the implications of the findings for theory and policy development.

## Research context

The World Health Organization (WHO) has asserted that violence amongst young people is a major concern in most countries and that such violence has a serious, often lifelong, impact on a person's psychological and social functioning (Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwo, & Lozano, 2002). It is welcome news, therefore, that since the early 1990s many countries across the world have seen a significant downward trend in serious violent crime (see Farrell, Tseloni, Mailley, & Tilley, 2011).

An extensive body of research has increased our understanding of the indicators that increase an individual's risk of onset, frequency, persistence and duration of youth violence, derived primarily as a result of

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longitudinal and life-course studies. Risk factors are those that increase the likelihood that a young person will become violent, although they are not necessarily the direct cause of youth violence (Mercy, Butchart, Farrington, & Cerdá, 2002). Risk factors are typically divided into categories such as individual, family, peer, school, neighborhood and situational factors, and a large number of risk factors associated with perpetration of youth violence have been found within these domains. These include: personality traits such as impulsivity and self-esteem (Farrington, 1989; Ostrowsky, 2010); poor parental supervision and family conflict (Burrington, 2014; Loeber & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1986); poor school attachment and truancy (Dornbusch & Erickson, 2001; Hawkins et al., 2000; Laufer & Harel, 2003); alcohol and drug use (Felson, Savolainen, Bjarnason, Anderson, & Zohra, 2011; Kuntsche & Gmel, 2004; Smith-Khuri et al., 2004); and early violence and victimization (Resnick, Ireland, & Borowsky, 2004).

While the literature on risk factors is large and enduring, recent research has started to focus more attention on protective factors that are linked to positive outcomes and which can either have a direct effect on reducing the risk of violent offending or a mediating effect on lowering the probability of violence in the presence of other risk factors (Losel & Farrington, 2012). Risk and protective factors are not necessarily different variables — trichotomizing variables in order to use the extreme ends of the same underlying concept (such as impulsivity) allows for testing of both risk and direct protective effects of a variable (Pardini, Loeber, Farrington, & Stouthamer-Loeber, 2012). Resnick et al. (2004), for example, found that there were substantial reductions in the prevalence of violence amongst both girls and boys in the presence of direct protective factors, even with significant risk factors present. Therefore, it is imperative to test whether such trichotomous relationships exist, as this may have important implications for approaches to both prevention and intervention.

There are two further indicators that are found to be consistently and strongly associated with youth violence: gender and poverty. Young males are more likely to participate in violence, and to do so more often and at a higher level of seriousness, than young females (Esbensen, Peterson, & Taylor, 2011; Moffitt, Caspi, Rutter, & Silva, 2001). Some researchers have suggested that gender is a risk marker rather than a risk factor, as gender may exert no causal influence on its own (Hawkins, Laub, & Lauritsen, 1998); nevertheless, most studies that include gender as an indicator of risk of violence tend to find a residual effect even when other dimensions of risk have been taken into account. It is notable from the international Health Behavior in School-Aged Children (HBSC) surveys that not only does prevalence of youth violence for boys always far exceed that for girls within countries, but those countries with higher rates of violence amongst boys tend also to have higher rates amongst girls compared to others (Craig & Harel, 2004).

Poverty at both at the familial and the neighborhood level has been found to be associated with youth violence. Low socioeconomic status, generally measured according to parental education and occupation, tends to be associated with a greater propensity to violence (Farrington, 1989). Neighborhood level poverty adds another dimension of risk since communities characterized by high rates of concentrated poverty, unemployment and economic deprivation tend to have higher rates of youth violence (Morenoff, Sampson, & Raudenbush, 2001; Sampson & Lauritsen, 1994). Of course, the extent to which the relationship is causal is not without contention. Kramer (2000), for example, has argued that these underlying structural factors foster violence indirectly by reducing the ability of families and communities to provide the social support and informal social controls needed to prevent youth violence.

While both gender and poverty have been identified as key indicators of youth violence, the extent to which gender mediates or exacerbates the effect of poverty on youth violence, especially in the presence of other risk or protective factors, has not been extensively tested in the literature.

## The Scottish context

There has been limited research on youth violence in Scotland, which is surprising given the poor reputation that Scotland has with regards to violence. Homicide rates in Scotland have historically been found to be higher than many other countries in Europe (Scottish Government, 2013). Indeed, the average yearly homicide rate for Scotland was twice as high as that for England & Wales over the period from 1985–94, representing a very real difference that could not be explained by statistical recording practices (Soothill, Francis, Ackerley, & Collett, 1999). In 2005, Scotland was branded as “the most violent country in the developed world” in terms of prevalence of assault by a United Nations report (BBC News, 2005). And the 2001/02 HBSC found that while Scotland ranked low in the international context for bullying, it ranked high in relation to fighting, particularly for girls. Scottish girls ranked 6th out of 35 for fighting at least once in the past year (Craig & Harel, 2004). Such findings have underpinned a tradition of qualitative research in Scotland which has indicated the need for gendered discourses around violence (Batchelor et al., 2001).

A recent review of research on youth violence in Scotland estimated the prevalence of street fighting amongst secondary school aged children in Scotland at between 40–50%, with boys being more likely to participate than girls (Fraser, Burman, Batchelor, & McVie, 2010). Most of the violence committed was considered to be of relatively low-level and classed as a normal, routine form of behavior amongst young people. Indeed, Anderson et al. noted that ‘It is by no means an exaggeration to say that violence is an accepted part of life, for girls as well as boys’ (1994:94). There is positive evidence, however, that prevalence of youth violence has declined in recent years. Findings from the HBSC surveys suggest that between 2001/02 and 2009/10 the prevalence of engaging in 3 or more fights in the last year declined considerably for both boys and girls at ages 11, 13 and 15 (Craig & Harel, 2004; Currie et al., 2008; Currie et al., 2012). And conviction rates for young people, and especially young men, have declined dramatically in recent years (Matthews, 2014).

Of particular concern in Scotland has been the use of knives and other weapons during violent encounters. Thirty percent of young people in Anderson, Kinsey, Loader, and Smith's (1994) study reported carrying a knife or other weapon on at least one occasion during the preceding nine months; while previously published findings from the Edinburgh Study showed that 30% of young people had carried a knife and a further 10% had carried some other kind of weapon at some point between age 12–17 (McVie, 2010). Strong concern from policy makers and practitioners about violence in Scotland has resulted in a raft of policies and initiatives. In 2005, the Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) was established by Strathclyde Police to target all forms of violent behavior, focusing particularly on knife crime and weapon carrying amongst young men in and around Glasgow, although this was extended nationwide in 2006. In 2008 the Medics Against Violence initiative was launched with the aim of influencing attitudes to violence amongst Scottish youth, particularly in relation to knife crime and gang membership, through a program of hard hitting talks in secondary schools. And in 2009, the No Knives Better Lives Campaign was launched to raise awareness of the consequences of carrying a knife and provide information on local activities and opportunities for young people.

Importantly, the landscape of juvenile justice in Scotland has been heavily influenced by research that shows the very high level of vulnerability and victimization experienced by those young people who engage in violence (McAra & McVie, 2010). In 2005, the Scottish Government announced a new framework called Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) which had a primary focus on child well-being and promoting positive outcomes for all young people. This formed the underpinning structure for a new Whole Systems Approach (WSA) to dealing with young people who engaged in offending, which was rolled out nationwide in 2011. The WSA is strongly focused on Early and Effective Intervention (EEI) and the diversion of young

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