

Investigation of Pathways to Delinquency: Exploring Associations between Familial Background, Traumatic Victimization and Violent Behavior among Urban Female Adolescents

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Abstract

This paper discusses parental background and traumatic victimization as risk factors for violent delinquency among a sample of 208 urban adolescent females. Focus group and in-depth interviews conducted on a sub-sample of 20 participants are also presented, and emphasis is placed on the factors that place these female juveniles at a greater risk of engaging in delinquent behavior. Suggestions for future research are also addressed.

Keywords: Familial Background, Traumatic Victimization, Violent Behavior, Female Delinquency

Introduction

Research has indicated that a disproportionate number of African-American youth have a greater proclivity to engage in delinquent behavior compared to their white counterparts (Coleman et al., 2009). While much of the investigation compares the crime rates of African-American adolescents to those of other racial groups, less is known about the patterns of criminal behavior specific to African-American females, particularly those regarding risk factors that increase the likelihood of delinquency. These youth are more likely to experience many environmental conditions specific to urban communities that may have a significant impact on future criminal activity (Coleman et al., 2009; Welch-Brewer et al., 2011; Welch-Brewer et al., 2009). Area gangs, gun violence, teenage pregnancy, and poor schooling, for example, are all contributing factors to ethnic differences in female adolescents, while studies have repeatedly shown the connection between sexual activity, negative peer groups, adverse familial relations and problem behavior among African American girls in particular (Tzoumakis et al., 2010; Foy et al., 2012). While many investigations have addressed comparative rates of female delinquency across dimensions of race, fewer have examined the factors that are more prevalent among African-American female youth that significantly impact early onset juvenile delinquency. The impact of single-parent households, maternal influence and violence within the school and community in the lives of young girls present a unique set of problems for this population, although less is known about within group comparisons as studies focus more on race and social class differences regarding delinquency.

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Using data drawn from self-administered questionnaires and in-depth interviews completed by 208 African-American females between the ages of 14-16 in the state of Virginia, the current study addresses the following research questions: What is the relationship between adjustment outcomes (violent behavior), familial background and exposure to violence and victimization among female adolescents in low-income neighborhoods?

-To what extent does maternal parenting affect functioning among minority female youth?

-To what extent does exposure to community and school victimization impact minority female adolescent negative behavior?

Background

Familial Background and Minority Female Delinquency

Minority youth from single-parent homes, particularly those residing in disadvantaged communities, possess a higher risk of adjustment problems (Shook et al., 2010). Familial influences remain pertinent when considering adolescent development, and research has shown that children and adolescents with limited monitoring engage in more delinquent behavior (Shook et al., 2010). Here data suggest that there are higher delinquency rates among youth residing in single-parent homes stemming from less parental involvement (Rankin and Quane, 2002). Knowing children's whereabouts, friends and hobbies have shown to be related to higher rates of adolescent self-esteem, higher GPAs, and greater academic success. In contrast, less parental monitoring has also contributed to an increase in depression and violent behavior (Aufseeser et al., 2006). Economic stressors within low income, African American households prevent high levels of parental monitoring, however, and it has been reported that Caucasian youth are more likely than African American youth to indicate that their parents know their whereabouts at all times (90 percent versus 83 percent). Regarding maternal parenting specifically, Tzoumakis et al. (2010), in a study of the relationship between mothers' criminality and children's involvement in delinquency, for example, found that mothers reporting a history of juvenile delinquency, substance abuse during pregnancy and social adversity, were more likely to have children who were physically aggressive and at a greater risk of offending in adulthood. With regard to minority females' delinquency, Coleman et al. (2009) reported from a longitudinal sample of 309 African American girls greater patterns of adult arrests directly linked to family disruption and child maltreatment during adolescence. Similarly, Miller et al. (2009) found from a sample of 588 urban female adolescents reports of higher rates of disruptive behavior a history of harsh parenting and low parental warmth within their homes. Finally, Patton (2012) found that negative family connections, history of abuse and adverse school connections increased the likelihood of violent delinquency among minority female adolescents. Thus, such interactions in this swiftly growing group warrant additional scholarship, especially given the important trauma histories of these youth.

Exposure to Violence and Minority Female Delinquency

The literature also suggests that environmental conditions can negatively affect the development of young people, minority girls in particular (Reese et al., 2001). These youth are more likely to exhibit fear of violence and victimization, and symptomatology in the form of depression and anxiety, both of which are seen as internalizing signs that may lead to increased rates of delinquency as issues of fatalism and desensitization arise. Research further shows that those exposed to violence have higher levels of emotional distress as witnessing increased violence or being the victim of a violent event at school or in the community can affect the urban female adolescent's growth and development (McGee and Foriest, 2009). Carrying weapons in school has also become increasingly popular among juvenile females in response to the overall fear of being victimized, which can in turn lead to poor adjustment and antisocial behavior (McGee, 2014). The prevalence of guns, drugs, and other illegal activities, heightens their fear and the knowledge that there is no protection from parents, the police, or others in their community. A study by McGee and Foriest (2009) also showed a direct correlation between negative peer association and delinquency among African-American female adolescents, and those reporting delinquency were more likely to have female peers that had been arrested or suspended. These relationships with other delinquent girls had a greater influence on their attitudes concerning delinquency and eventually led to increased antisocial behavior. Moreover, they reported specifically seeking out delinquent female peers for protection. However, in some instances, the protection involved safeguarding a drug deal or avenging a fight, further suggesting a direct correlation between victimization and offending among this group (McGee and Foriest, 2009).

Also, many of these female youth report an earlier onset of violent behavior relative to populations where repeated trauma is not present, perhaps explained, in part, by their often chaotic and abusive upbringings.

Theoretical Framework

Travis Hirschi (1969) posits control theory to explain the prevention mechanism (i.e., bond) that restrains adolescents from committing crimes. In his description, he asserts that an individual's adherence, or bond, to traditional norms insulates that person from criminal activity (Kierkus & Baer, 2002). This bond includes four main elements: attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief. Hirschi (1969) states that attachment and commitment are positively associated with law abiding behavior. Researchers focusing on family structure in particular argue that youth who are attached to their parents spend more time with them. Here Shoemaker (2010) hypothesizes that increased time spent under the supervision of the parent decreases the likelihood of the child or adolescent engaging in delinquent acts. The second element, known as commitment, reflects the youths' value systems consisting of the amount of time invested in pro-social activities. If the adolescents recognize that an activity can help them access something they want, the time spent and effort involved in that activity becomes more valued. To that end, the youth begins to care about the manner of behavior and is more likely to conform to the norms of the society. Hence, he or she will accumulate a certain amount of value for traditional norms such as time, money, effort, or status, and measure these norms against costs or loss of investments in association with misbehavior (Shoemaker, 2010). The third element is involvement, and reflects how adolescents use their time. Those engaged in positive activities that impact their lives and others within the community are thought to increase their self-worth while decreasing the likelihood of engaging in criminal activities. Moyer (2001) suggests that the more time youths are involved in legitimate activities, the less time they will have to engage in delinquency. Thus agencies attempting to decrease delinquency often engage adolescents through initiatives such as after-school programs, sports, and church activities that occupy much of the youths' time.

The fourth element is belief, and it focuses upon perceptions of authoritative figures such as police, teachers, parents or peers. Adolescents who trust in the rules and regulations established by these authorities abide by the laws. Hence, it has been suggested that delinquent and non-delinquent youths function from different value systems (Moyer, 2001). The common assumption is that there is a level of variation in which they abide by laws and above all, the less an adolescent believes in abiding by the rules, the greater the probability that delinquency will occur. Overall, social control theory examines an individual's bond to society. Previous empirical studies have utilized Hirschi's theory as a framework for examining youth delinquency. Perrone et al. (2004) examined parental attachment bonds and delinquency among youth and hypothesized that the increased presence of the parent decreased the likelihood and frequency of criminal activities. Similarly, it was demonstrated that commitment bonds among youth, regardless of gender, explained the level and severity of delinquency (Vazsonyi and Crosswhite, 2004). More recent studies that have examined the elements collectively have found significant gender differences relative to delinquency. Ozbay and Ozcan (2007) found that the type of criminal activities differed among youth according to their gender. Here they found more support for the role of social control among females in their sample, who were less likely than males to engage in assault when each of the four elements to the bond were present. Thus, Hirschi's (1969) theory is advanced because it explains how youth are prevented from committing deviant activities while others generally focus on why youth commit crimes (Kierkus & Baer, 2002).

Methodology

Sample

The reported analyses are based on the responses to self-administered questionnaires completed by 208 African American female youth between the ages of 14-16 years old in the state of Virginia. Here we extend previous survey analyses (see McGee and Foriest, 2009 for example) to include additional measures of familial background, traumatic victimization and violent behavior, and to take account of interview and focus group data derived from the aforementioned constructs. Census tract data were used in order to obtain a stratified sample from youth involved in church and community organizations in the Hampton Roads area of Virginia. Each organization serviced inner-city youth involved in after-school programs. The surveys were distributed to 20-30 youth at a time during group sessions and were introduced to the students as a study of youth violence in the state of Virginia. Written permission to participate was obtained from the participants and their parents, and each youth received \$10 for participation.

Measurement

Measures of familial background included survey items whereby respondents reported regular supervision by a parent or guardian, parental deviance, and child maltreatment. When measuring traumatic victimization, respondents reported, within the last six months, having been attacked or beaten, having been threatened with a gun, having been sexually assaulted or raped, having seen someone killed or hurt badly, and having been upset after seeing a dead body. Measures of violent behavior included items whereby respondents reported, within the last six months, getting even when angry, using a gun, and initiating a physical fight. In order to measure the relationships between familial background, traumatic victimization and violent behavior three scales were created as indicated in Table 1. A familial background scale was created with 3 items and had an Alpha level of .710, a traumatic victimization scale was created with 5 items with an Alpha level of .902, and a violent behavior scale was created with 3 items with an Alpha level of .933. All scales suggest reliability and the higher the scores, the more likely the female youth has reported adverse family connections, traumatic victimization, and violent behavior respectively.

Table 1: Reliability Analysis: Family Background, Traumatic Victimization and Violent Behavior

Variable	Number of Items	Alpha Level
Family Background	3	.710
Traumatic Victimization	5	.902
Violent Behavior	3	.933

Data for the qualitative portion of the research were derived from a series of interviews and focus groups drawn from 20 participants from the overall sample. Each focus group and interview was conducted in a small group setting with 5-6 youth participating at one time.

Questions relating to their violent experiences as part of interview protocol included:

1. Why do you think violence exists?
2. Do you feel safe at your school?
3. Have you ever seen someone being attacked? What did you do?
4. How do you keep yourself from participating in "bad" behaviors?
5. Do you think that drugs have an effect on violence? How?
6. How important are your parents to you?
7. Who do you talk to when you are scared?

The aforementioned questions were asked to older adolescents, who could understand and conceptualize their meanings. Additional questions were modified to gain a better understanding of violence from younger adolescents who may have had difficulty with the terminology. These included:

1. How are you doing?
2. Age, gender, grade?
3. Who do you live with?
4. Do you get angry or feel sad sometimes?
5. What makes you mad or sad?
6. Do you have brothers or sisters?
7. Do you get into fights?
8. Do kids fight in school?
9. Have you ever been in a fight at school?
10. What makes people mad, sad, or angry?

Questions pertaining to specific forms of victimization, violence, bullying and experiences with fear of crime were also used in portions of the interviews and focus groups, including:

1. Do you think children who are abused have a greater chance of becoming violent? Why or why not?
2. Do you think that young people who are poor are more likely to be violent? Why or why not?
3. Do you think violence/ killings can be caused by peer pressure? Explain.
4. Who is your favorite hero and what do you admire about him or her?

5. Do you think drug use has any influence on the killings that young people commit? Explain.
6. Have you ever seen someone shot? How did it make you feel?
7. Have you ever seen someone killed? How did it make you feel?
8. Have you ever seen the dead body of someone after he/she had been murdered? How did it make you feel?
9. Do any of the people you hang around carry a gun? Why do they carry guns?

Questions for the interviews and focus groups were developed from the literature based on previous research on patterns of violence among juveniles (McGee and Baker, 2002; McGee, 2003).

Analysis and Findings

As previously noted, the sample consisted of 208 participants, all of whom were African-American females between the ages of 14 and 16. The majority of the respondents were age 16 (62%), while 25% were 15 years old and 13 % were 14. Half of the respondents lived in single family homes (50%), 24% lived in two-parent homes, and 26% lived with a parent and a step-parent. When measuring traumatic victimization, 14% had been attacked or beaten, 15% had been threatened with a gun, 12% had been sexually assaulted or raped, 38% had seen someone killed or hurt badly, and 62% reported being upset after seeing a dead body. Regarding familial background, 13% of the respondents reported regular supervision by a parent or guardian, 42% reported parental deviance, and 39% reported child maltreatment. Measures of violent behavior indicated that half (50%) of the respondents reported getting even when angry, 15% had shot a gun, and 13% had been in a physical fight within the last year. Correlational analyses in Table 2 show a strong, positive association between traumatic victimization and violent behavior, and the association between family background and violent behavior is moderate and positive ($r=.623$ and $r=.422$, respectively). Hence, increased family adversity in the form of parental deviance and child maltreatment, for example, escalates the likelihood of violent behavior among the female juveniles in the sample. Further, increased exposure to violence and victimization increases the likelihood of violent behavior.

Table 2: Zero Order Correlations of Family Background, Traumatic Victimization and Violent Behavior

	Family Background	Traumatic Victimization	Violent Behavior
Family Background		.322**	.422**
Traumatic Victimization			.623**
Violent Behavior			

** $p < .01$

A multiple regression analysis in Table 3 was conducted to evaluate how well family background and traumatic victimization predicted violent behavior. Approximately 19.2% of the variation in violent behavior is due to the respondent's family background and traumatic victimization. When examined together, both family background and traumatic victimization have an effect on violent behavior ($F = 17.560$, $Sig = .000$). Traumatic victimization is the best predictor of violent behavior controlling for family background ($Beta = .348$). Family background is also a significant predictor of violent behavior while controlling for traumatic victimization ($Beta = .478$). Therefore, these two predictors further increase the likelihood that the juvenile female will engage in violent behavior as seen in previous literature (McGee and Baker, 2002; McGee, 2003).

Table 3: Multiple Linear Regression: Family Background and Traumatic Victimization as Predictors of Violent Behavior

Independent Variable	Beta	Sig.
Family Background	.348	.010
Traumatic Victimization	.478	.002

$F = 17.560$, $Sig = .000$, $R^2 = .192$

Responses to the focus group and in-depth interview questions of this research revealed a series of patterns, themes and trends. For example, according to the words of the participants, family structure does affect functioning among minority female youth. Similar to previous literature, we also found that family life is important in the socialization process of youth and that maternal parenting is an important aspect of adolescent development (Patton, 2012). Moreover, community and school violence do impact negative behavior among female adolescents. The following excerpts are responses that the female juveniles shared about their families and violence exposure. Fourteen year old Tiara responded to each theme of the research by saying, I live with my mom, brother, two sisters, and two nephews. My brother kisses me.

I talk to my mom, brother and sister when I'm scared. People taking money and whippings make me mad. I'm sad when my mom doesn't get me gifts for Christmas. My mom lets me do what I want. I hear gunshots. I like school. I tell the principal when there are fights. I fought a boy and a girl. In Tiara's response, she mentions that her mother lets her do whatever she wants, which can be detrimental to her development. Previous research suggests that discipline and monitoring are important aspects of parenting (Tzoumikas et al., 2010). She also explains how she hears gunshots in her neighborhood, an act of violence that may be unthinkable, but for many young girls in this situation, it has become commonplace. Additionally, fifteen year old Ashley, who lives with her mother and has three sisters and two brothers said. The last time I saw my dad was last summer. My uncle is in prison. Sometimes I get along with my siblings, sometimes I don't. I get along with my mother. My mom keeps us inside most of the time. I stay inside or with neighbors. I hear cursing and see fights, but no guns. In her response, it can be assumed that Ashley and her siblings are living in a stable environment in which her mother has an open relationship with her children. She also keeps them inside to protect them from community violence, which as studies have shown can serve as a buffer to the effects of violence and subsequent offending (Cauffman et al., 2008). The following responses address both community and school violence as some of the girls had similar responses. Jasmine, 14, when asked questions said, I don't feel safe at school because of bullying by 11th and 12th graders. Fighting happens on the bus. There is violence in the community. I hear gunshots at home. There is violence from my dad. Sixteen year old Kayla lives with her brothers and mother, who has many boyfriends. When asked about school violence she said, I like school, but I do not feel safe at school. I see fights and I like to break the fights up. People try to fight me in school. I call boys tattle tales and continue to do my work. One boy liked me and it made me mad. One boy had a knife in his pocket.

Fifteen year old Tanya lives with her mother, siblings and her mother's boyfriend. She said,

I don't like school because I want to sleep. I talk too much in school. Fights are funny. There's lots of fighting. I fought a boy. I hit a person, the other person started it. I get mad when people yell for no reason. There's no safety. There are bomb threats. I see bad things. When I'm scared I don't know who to talk to. In all three responses, Jasmine, Kayla and Tanya said they do not feel safe at school. They are exposed to fights, guns, and knives in the community and in school. They have also been involved in fights themselves, providing further evidence of the linkage between victimization and offending (McGee, 2014; McGee and Foriest, 2009). Jasmine said there is violence from her dad, Kayla said her mother has many boyfriends and Tanya lives with her mother and her mother's boyfriend. The common theme amongst these three respondents is the men in their lives, which plays a part in their development, and as studies have shown relates to high levels of family disruption for young girls in these situations (Coleman et al., 2009). Additionally, two sisters responded to the questions about family structure and violence in similar fashion. The oldest sister Lea, who is 15, stated she lives with her mother and siblings whereas Taylor, 14, said she lives with her siblings, her mother and her mother's friend. One acknowledged their mother's male friend, while the other sister did not. In discussing school Lea said, I don't like learning. I don't want to better myself. I don't believe in education. School is boring and I want to go to a different school. People talk about me behind my back and that makes me mad. I see bullying in school. I haven't been in a fight at school. Taylor said,

Violence is in school. I saw violence in middle school and now in high school. The boys punch girls, pulling hair and playing around. I talk back to my teacher. It makes me mad when I have to wake up and go to school. The teachers get students focused. I haven't been in a fight at school. Although neither of these girls says they have not been in fights themselves, they have been exposed to violence. Fighting and bullying seems to be a regular part of their daily school experience to the point where they exhibited signs of desensitization and fatalism. Overall, these findings suggest that there is a relationship between family background, traumatic victimization and violent behavior among urban female adolescents, and provide further evidence that adaptation to traumatic experiences and maladaptive family behavior may intensify violent behavioral inclinations and beliefs among young urban females.

Summary and Conclusion

The results of this investigation validate the strong association between family background, traumatic victimization and violent behavior and how these influences add to adjustment outcomes among African-American females. As a result, additional examination is needed to advance protective strategies for African-American female adolescents.

A review of the literature suggests that improving community assets and creating more chances for disadvantaged youth results in less unsupervised time, and can lessen the possible threats for juvenile delinquency (Mellien et al., 2010; Lanctot, 2004; Lanctot and Corneau, 2004)). By developing more after-school programs that specifically target African-American female adolescents, there will be more alternatives to delinquent behavior and fewer disproportionate crime rates. Currently, there is less exploration that concentrates exclusively on African-American female adolescents and the underlying dynamics that have a significant influence on violent criminal behavior. Many of these situations only exist within the urban community, do not affect society as a whole, and therefore are not viewed with urgency when strategies for prevention and intervention are introduced. Disadvantaged minority youth often suffer from harsh living conditions and may reply to their setting with anger and violence. Therefore, when leading research on delinquency, scholars should adapt a relational method in order to provide a precise depiction of African-American participants, and also provide gender specific studies to carefully observe variations in African American female youth criminality.

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