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THE VICTIM-OFFENDER OVERLAP: EXAMINING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN VICTIMIZATION AND OFFENDING

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Abstract: The relationship between victimization and offending, also referred to as the victim-offender overlap, is widely documented. While crime victims do not always become offenders, most offenders have been victims. The victimization experience can produce negative physical, mental, and behavioral outcomes in individuals and some may go on to commit their own crimes. This report outlines leading theoretical explanations for the victim-offender overlap, factors that influence victimization and offending, and recommendations for practitioners to address violent victimization and prevent subsequent offending.

Introduction

The relationship between victimization and offending, also referred to as the victim-offender overlap, is widely documented.[1] Most victims of crime do not become offenders, but most offenders have been victims.[2] Although the exact number of victim-offenders (offenders that have experienced victimization) is unknown, victimization is highly prevalent within the general population. The 2016 National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) revealed U.S. residents experienced 5.4 million violent victimizations.[3] Children are at higher risk for victimization; 61 percent of U.S. youth under age 17 were exposed to violence in the past year, and 39 percent of children and their caregivers reported multiple direct victimizations.[4] A 2017 ICJIA study found 55 percent of individuals in Illinois had been victimized in their lifetimes.[5]

ONE OF THE STRONGEST EMPIRICAL ASSOCIATIONS IN CRIMINOLOGICAL LITERATURE IS BETWEEN OFFENDING AND VICTIMIZATION.

Source for text box, see endnote [6]

Although victims of crime can experience non-violent events, such as a burglary or theft, this article mainly focuses on exposure to violence. Exposure to violence can include direct interpersonal victimization, threatened physical harm, or the witnessing or hearing about violence.[7] The victimization experience can produce negative physical, mental, and behavioral outcomes in individuals and some may go on to commit crime.[8] This article focuses on victimization that precedes offending; however, it is recognized that conversely, offending may lead to victimization.[9] By examining the phenomenon of victim-offender overlap, practitioners can learn ways to address prior victimization to reduce offending and recidivism. This report outlines leading theoretical explanations for the victim-offender overlap, factors that influence victimization and offending, and recommendations for practitioners to address violent victimization and prevent subsequent offending.

Why Do Some Victims Become Offenders?

Scholars do not agree on why some victims are at risk for becoming offenders. The issue is complex and varies by individual demographics, victimization types, and crimes committed.

Theoretical Framework

Several theories attempt to explain the relationship between victimization and later offending. All theories feature the themes that offending is learned through victimization experiences and victimization along with offending is experienced by the same groups and individuals. Theories include:

- **The intergenerational transmission of violence theory**. Also referred to as the social learning theory of aggression, the intergenerational transmission of violence theory posits that violent behavior is passed down through generations via social learning or a cycle of violence. Violence is observed to be an effective problem-solving technique employed when other options have not been positively reinforced.[10]

- **Routine activities/lifestyle perspective theory**. The routine activities/lifestyle perspective theory proposes that a lack of supervision combined with relationships with deviant peers allows or supports individuals to commit violence. The same variables put the individuals at high risk for victimization.[11] The **social disorganization theory** similarly suggests the environment and peer group membership lead to victimization which influences offending.
- **Strain theory.** Strain theory suggests offending is a coping response to exposure to violence or "strain."[12] Similar theories include **social control theory**, which posits that people learn offending behavior from their own victimization experiences,[13] and **self-control theory**, which proposes individuals ignore the potential negative consequences of their actions leading to criminality and victimization.[14]

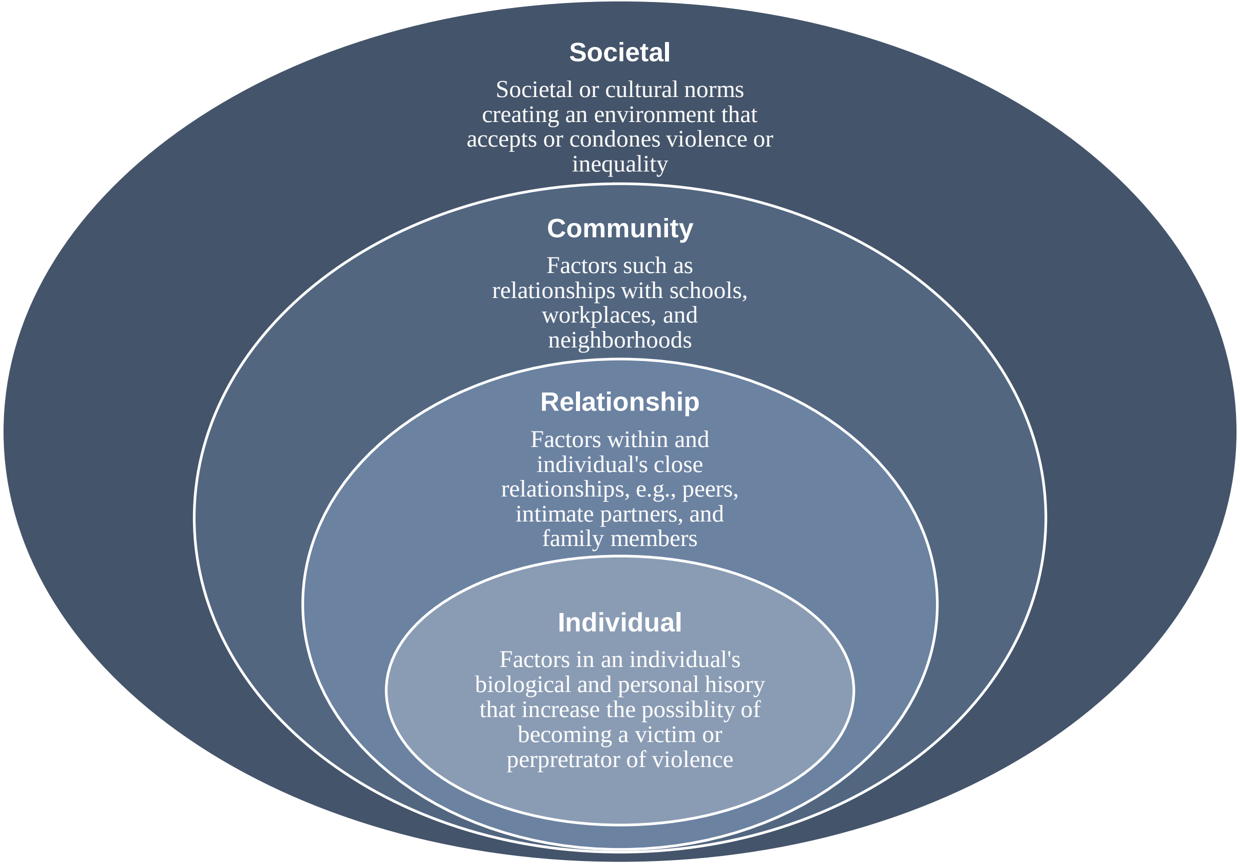
Research has tested some victim-offender overlap theories and confirmed risk factors for victim-offenders:

- **Impaired decision-making**. In a study of youth, prior victimization influenced decision-making in situations that resulted in violent offending.[15]
- **Common characteristics and behaviors**. College students who were victims of assault and their offenders had similarities—were more likely to be male with similar lifestyle behaviors, such as arrest in last six months and buying or selling illegal drugs.[16]
- **Learned from experiences**. A meta-analysis by Stith and colleagues revealed a relationship between growing up in an abusive family and later involvement in a violent marriage. Victims learned violence from their victimization experiences which influenced their perpetration of violence.[17]

Factors that Influence Victimization and the Perpetration of Violence

The social-ecological model is a theoretical framework that examines the complex relationship between societal, community, relationships, and individual factors that put people at risk for victimization and/or perpetration of violence.[18] Each factor encompasses unique experiences with violence while acknowledging their effect on one another (*Figure 1*).[19] It is theorized that by addressing these factors, victimization can be reduced and, therefore, subsequent offending by victims can be averted or reduced.

Figure 1
The Social-Ecological Model


Societal
Societal or cultural norms creating an environment that accepts or condones violence or inequality
Community
Factors such as relationships with schools, workplaces, and neighborhoods
Relationship
Factors within and individual's close relationships, e.g., peers, intimate partners, and family members
Individual
Factors in an individual's biological and personal hisory that increase the possiblity of becoming a victim or perpetrator of violence

Source: The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Individual-Level Factors

Individual-level factors that contribute to violence include age, education level, income, and mental health indicators.[20] Violent behavior stems from individuals' psychosocial development, biology (i.e., neurology, hormones, genetics), and social processes.[21] Most youth follow a predictable pattern of risk-taking with new environmental milestones (such as progression through school), as they are introduced to new stimuli. Mental health indicators, including substance use disorders, also are related to offending and effective treatment of these conditions have been linked to reduced recidivism.[22] Childhood maltreatment has been linked to an overactive stress response and long-term changes in brain structures that are involved in emotion regulation and aggression.[23]

Trauma and posttraumatic stress. Although more research is needed, trauma appears to contribute to offending and violence.[24] Trauma can be caused by victimization, as well as other life events, such as unexpected loss of a loved one and natural disasters. Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a mental health diagnosis based on traumatic events resulting in symptoms that are persistent and intrusive and causing psychological distress and changes in cognitions, mood, arousal, and reactivity.[25] PTSD and trauma history have been found to be strongly associated with criminal justice involvement and high rates of psychiatric illness have been found among criminal justice populations.[26] In three Illinois-based ICJIA studies, 61 percent of women in prison, 24 percent of men in prison, and 21 percent of men jail detainees met criteria for PTSD.[27] Extant research indicates trauma creates a risk of violent victimization through direct ways, such as social learning, and/or indirect ways, such as substance misuse and mental health issues.[28] Individuals may react differently to the same traumatic experience, expressing varying levels of fear, anger, guilt, shame, and sadness. Effective intervention strategies should reflect this understanding.[29]

Relationship-Level Factors

Negative relationships with peers and family, as well as direct victimization or observation of violent behavior, can influence violent behavior.[30] Children's behavior is shaped largely by caregivers and siblings, but in school-age years, peers gain influence. Victimization through bullying at school is a strong risk factor for later offending.[31] There is some research support that school-age children who experience victimization want to protect themselves by appearing strong and choose violent behaviors.[32]

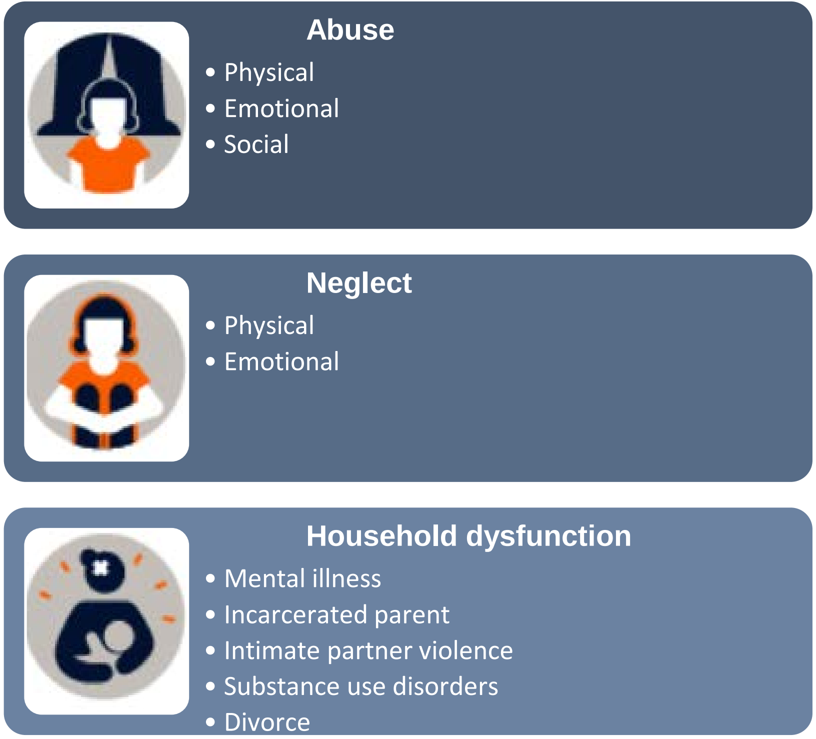
Adverse childhood experiences. Victimization in adolescence is a stronger predictor of offending than in other life stages.[33] Youth are vulnerable to different types of victimization at different ages. For example, experiencing sibling violence *decreases* with age, but experiencing weapon offenses *increase* with age. For some children who experience many victimizations, there are spikes in violent victimization prior to age seven and age 15 which roughly are periods of school transition—entry into elementary and high school.[34]

> *THE VICTIM-OFFENDER OVERLAP IS, AT LEAST PARTIALLY, DEVELOPMENTAL IN NATURE AND PREDICTABLE FROM PERSONAL CHILDHOOD CHARACTERISTICS AND AN ACCUMULATION OF MANY ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES.*

Source for text box, see endnote [35]

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are stressful or traumatic events (*Figure 2*).[36] A 2014 study indicated an estimated 32 percent of Illinois youth had experienced one or two ACEs and 9 percent had experienced three or more.[37] ACEs are associated with juvenile delinquency,[38] with juvenile offenders reporting higher adversity and trauma than youth in the general population.[39] Among juvenile offenders, more ACEs are associated with earlier and higher likelihood of arrest.[40] Research also shows a relationship between the number of ACEs involving violence and the risk of future intimate partner violence.[41]

Figure 2
Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)[42]



Abuse
- Physical
- Emotional
- Social

Neglect
- Physical
- Emotional

Household dysfunction
- Mental illness
- Incarcerated parent
- Intimate partner violence
- Substance use disorders
- Divorce

Community-Level Factors

Community-level factors can encourage or limit violence and can include neighborhood characteristics, such as unemployment rates, population density, and ease of transportation.[43] Residents may feel disconnected from the justice system and prioritize other groups that make them feel secure, such as gangs.[44] Experiencing or witnessing violence in the community, such as hearing gunshots or reports of danger nearby, can affect one's sense of safety and motivate violent behavior.[45] Some youth in disadvantaged neighborhoods begin offending behavior early and persist over time, in part related to supervisory neglect and limited economic opportunities.[46]

Societal-Level Factors

Societal-level factors that have a relationship with violence include the rules that govern the society, enforcement structures/organizations, and the society's broad cultural norms. For example, cultural norms surrounding gender and conflict resolution may lead to males believing their and their families' safety are directly related to their ability to physically dominate others and fiercely retaliate against slights to honor or pride.

Conclusion and Implications for Policy and Practice

Victimization is, unfortunately, all too common in our society creating harm to individuals who, for complex and varied reasons, may then go on to commit criminal and even violent offenses. However, most individuals who experience violent or traumatic events do not commit acts of violence in the future.[47] Although a link between the two phenomena—victimization and offending has been established, the specifics of the link is still not clear. Violence prevention strategies can be enhanced with research on victim-offender overlap not just in individuals, but in larger societal groups and longitudinally.[48] In addition, the criminal justice system should consider strategies to address issues related to justice-involved individuals' past trauma and victimization.

Prevention Strategies to Reduce Victimization and Future Offending

Individual-level violence prevention strategies include therapy, education, and skills training. Cognitive-behavioral therapy shows individuals the connection between their experiences, attitudes, and behaviors, and anger management and aids in development of healthy coping skills and effective self-expression.[49] Relationship-level strategies to offset negative influences of peers and family include parenting classes and family therapy, in which caregivers learn about positive/negative reinforcement, conflict resolution, and modeling, and mentoring programs, which offer victims examples of healthy relationships. In addition, effective anti-bullying programs in schools prevent future offending and such programs feature a good cost-benefit ratio.[50]

Community-level activities require significant investment, but also offer the opportunity to more dramatically affect crime and injury rates. Improved school resources, increased opportunities for employment, and safe spaces for recreation are some of the pillars of collective efficacy needed for communities to self-regulate.[51] Societal-level strategies that improve large-scale systems, such as education and economics, are challenging to tackle. However, criminal justice policies and practices can affect violence at a societal level. Individuals' trauma and the traumatic effects of victimization can be acknowledged at each "sequential intercept" of the criminal justice system. They system can also employ trauma-informed care and use evidence-based programs.[52] While removal from a negative community environment may be a practical response to reduce threats of violence, justice-involved individuals often return to their communities with the same criminogenic issues. By employing evidence-based programs and practices and offering trauma-informed care to victim-offenders, the criminal justice system can both end individual cycles of violence and contribute to community violence prevention.

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Note: NCVS aggregates by region (i.e., Midwest), so Illinois cannot be analyzed independently.

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