

# Chapter 17

## Examining the Victim– Offender Overlap: Do Bully Victimization and Unsafe Schools Contribute to Violent Offending?

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Because of the negative consequences associated with adolescent behavioral problems, such as violence, more research is needed that focuses on the interconnectedness between unsafe schools, bully victimization, and subsequent violence. Additional research may also help identify the processes through which victimized individuals become offenders. Drawing from Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory and Coleman’s social capital theory, this researcher argues that the bonds between youths and their families and youths and their schools are important for understanding violent offending. Additionally, this chapter merges insights from sociological and criminological research to explore how unsafe schools and victimization occurring in multiple contexts contributes to youths becoming violent offenders. This chapter also provides policy implications, stressing the importance of an approach that considers how we can best invest in youth’s future by bridging families and schools to promote safer schools for all students.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Violence during adolescence remains a topic of concern for parents, educators, and even youths themselves. Empirical research finds that both individual (Monahan et al., 2001; Swanson et al., 2006) and family characteristics (Fontaine et al., 2016; Piquero et al., 2009) influence youths’ likelihood of engaging in violence. For example, child maltreatment (Mersky & Reynolds, 2007), family disadvantage (De Coster, Heimer, & Wittrock, 2006), and low family socioeconomic status (Dubow et al., 2016) are associated with violent delinquency. Delinquent peer networks (Weiss, 2011) and disadvantaged neighborhoods (Stewart & Simons, 2010; Vogel & Ham, 2017) are also strong predictors of youth violence. Additionally,

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it is well-established in criminological research that victimized individuals are more likely to become offenders themselves (e.g., Daday et al., 2005; Gottfredson, 1981; 1984; Lansford et al., 2007; Maxfield, 1987; Mulford et al., 2018; Widom, 1989; Simpson, Yahner, & Dugan, 2008). Scholars often refer to the relationship between victimization and offending as the *victim-offender overlap* (Chang, Chen & Brownson, 2003; Lauritsen, Sampson, & Laub, 1991).

One form of victimization that is problematic for many youths is bullying (Berger, 2007; Delprato, Akyeampong, & Dunne, 2017; Dinkes et al., 2009; Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017). Bullying often occurs within schools, which suggests that schools' safety is an additional concern across American schools (Crowe, 1991; Dinkes et al., 2009; Felson et al., 1994; Khoury-Kassabri, Astor, & Benbenishty, 2007; Lacoë, 2016; Sheley & Wright, 1993; Wilcox, Augustine, & Clayton, 2006). From a survey of over 15,000 American students, Nansel et al. (2001) found that almost 30 percent of their sample aged 12 to 16 report experiences with bullying and most indicate that they were the *victims* of bullying rather than the perpetrators. More recently, findings suggest that about 21 percent of U.S. students ages 12-18 were the victims of bullying and more female students (23%) were bullied compared to their male peers (19%) (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017). Additionally, 34% of sexual-minority youths—that is, youths who self-identified as gay, lesbian or bisexual—reported being bullied at school compared to 19% of heterosexual students (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017). The continued prevalence of bullying is alarming because being the victim of bullying is associated with a host of long-term negative consequences (e.g., Arseneault, 2017), including subsequent behavioral problems (Jiang, Walsh, & Augimeri, 2011).

## **CONTRIBUTIONS OF THIS CHAPTER**

Because of the negative consequences associated with adolescent behavioral problems, including violence, more research is needed that focuses on the interconnectedness between bully victimization and subsequent violence, identifying the processes through which victimized individuals become offenders. Drawing from Bronfenbrenner's (1974) *ecological systems theory* and Coleman's (1990) *social capital theory*, this researcher argues that the bonds between youths and their families and youths and their schools are important for understanding violent offending. Additionally, this chapter merges insights from sociological and criminological research to explore how unsafe schools and victimization occurring in multiple contexts contribute to youths becoming violent offenders. This chapter also provides policy implications, stressing the importance of an approach that considers how we can best invest in youth's future by bridging families and schools to promote safer schools for all students.

## **DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS AND VIOLENT OFFENDING**

Many studies suggest a patterned relationship between violent crimes and several demographic characteristics. For example, Elliott (1994) found that African-American men tend to have higher rates of violent offending compared to their female and non-Hispanic white counterparts. Similarly, Haynie, and Payne (2006) found that after controlling for individual and family characteristics, African-American and Hispanic youths tend to engage in significantly more violence than their white counterparts (see also McNulty & Bellair, 2003). Other studies find that residing in a single-parent family increases the likelihood of engaging in violence (Black & Ricardo, 1994). Blum et al. (2000) found that both middle

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