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School and Peers: Examining the Influence of Protective Factors on Delinquency and Age of Onset

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses data on 10th graders from 2014 Caring Communities Youth Survey to examine the effect of protective factors on delinquency/age of onset (never, 13 or younger, 14 or older) of two antisocial behaviors (carrying a handgun to school and attacking someone with the intent of seriously hurting them). Two domains of protective factors are used: school and peers. The most significant protective factor for both antisocial behaviors was religiosity which is within the peer domain. Cramer's V was used because of the nominal level variables, 2 by 3 tables, and large sample. The literature on age of onset and protective factors is discussed.

ARTICLE HISTORY

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Introduction

The authors examine the influence of two domains of protective factors, school, and peers, on delinquency/age of onset: never, 13 or younger, 14 or older, of two antisocial behaviors: carrying a handgun to school and attacking someone with the intent of seriously hurting them. The literature on the importance of age of onset is discussed, as well as the concept of protective factors under the domains of school and peers.

Onset of criminal behavior

The term onset captures an individual's transition from nonoffender to offender as a result of committing an antisocial act (Moffitt et al. 2002). The timing of onset holds a crucial role in explaining one's subsequent pattern of offending over the life-course (Farrington 1989, 1990, 2005; Loeber et al. 1998; Mazerolle et al. 2000; Nagin and Paternoster 2000; Sampson and Laub 1993). Committing a first offense prior to the age of 14 is commonly referred to as early onset/life-course persistent offenders, whereas a first offense at or after 14 is late onset/adolescence-limited (DeLisi 2006; Piquero and Chung 2001; Tibbetts and Piquero 1999). Adolescent-limited offenders are portrayed as non-serious delinquents. Studies of criminal careers have generally shown that a substantial group of delinquents limit their delinquency to the teen years (Moffitt 1993; Patterson and Yoerger 1997). These youth start later: 14 years old or older and most quit in the late teens. Life-course persistent offenders, start delinquency at 13 years of age or younger, referred to as chronic juvenile delinquents, are responsible for the overwhelming majority of serious delinquency. These youth have lengthy delinquent careers, commit crimes at a high rate, and are deeply committed to antisocial behavior. These youth may drift through successive systems aimed at curbing their deviance: schools, juvenile justice programs, psychiatric treatment centers, and prisons. Their behavior may change with changing opportunities, but the underlying disposition persists

throughout the life course (Moffitt 1993). This fundamental idea and the research which has supported it (Piquero and Brezina 2001) descend primarily from the research of Moffitt (1993) and Sampson and Laub (1993).

The largest group of juveniles approximately 80–85% never commit any antisocial acts including getting suspended from school. Forsyth et al. (2014) found three categories of students: nearly 80% of students had no school infractions and no felony offenses; a second group of approximately 16% of students had a number of felonies and 1–3 school suspensions. The third group of approximately 4% of students had 4 or more school suspensions and had a similar but disproportionate number of felonies, being only 25% the size of the second group of students. These researchers did not engage the use of age of onset.

Various researchers have contributed to this cache of research, having different percentages, more categories of youth, and data suggesting which onset group(s) are more likely to continue into adult criminality. For the most part, research supports the notion that the earlier onset of antisocial behavior increased severity of future offending into adulthood (Blumstein et al. 1986; Farrington 1990; Glueck and Glueck 1950; LeBlanc and Loeber 1998; Loeber 1982; Moffitt 1993; Piquero and Chung 2001; Piquero, Farrington, and Blumstein 2003; Sampson and Laub 1993; Tolan 1987). Although some researchers ascribe importance to onset age, others (Nagin and Farrington 1992b) question the relationship between onset timing and one's trajectory, whether it is directly influenced by age or if it represents underlying tendencies. A growing body of literature has found that late onset, occurring in either late adolescence or early adulthood, relates to subsequent offending in contiguous adult periods (Bacon, Paternoster, and Brame 2009; Gomez-Smith and Piquero 2005; McGee and Farrington 2010; Nagin and Farrington 1992a, 1992b; Zara and Farrington 2009, 2010).

Protective factors

The risk and protective factor model of delinquency prevention is an empirical based method for reducing antisocial behaviors among youth. This model is based on the simple premise that to prevent a problem from happening, we need to identify the factors that increase the risk of that problem developing and then find ways to reduce the risks. Protective factors are situations, events, settings, or characteristics that decrease the likelihood that juveniles will become delinquent. Protective factors shield youth from contexts that contribute to delinquency or provide the resiliency to avoid crime (Hawkins, Catalano, and Miller 1992).

This research uses protection factors under two domains: school and peer/individual. Each student's response questions determining protective factors were rated high or low protection. The protective level was determined by responses to the factors shown in Tables 1 and 2. The protective factor scales measure specific aspects of a youth's life experience that are predictive of whether he/she is equipped with shields against engaging in problem behaviors: two antisocial behaviors in this paper. Each factor represents an individual's cumulative responses to a series of questions. This research examined the effect of being low or high on protective factors on three categories (never, or 14 years old or older, 13 years old or younger) of committing each specific antisocial act.

Schools and peers

The protective factors of school and peers are very interrelated. The notion that individuals would be influenced by the attitudes and behaviors of peers and school has been well established. In developing his classic differential association theory, Sutherland (1939) emphasized the importance of group influence on an individual's deviance through exposure to alternative norms and behaviors. Associations with delinquent and deviant values can create a mutually reinforcing loop that increases the likelihood of escalating deviance such that weak ties to family and to school lead to delinquent involvements, which are then likely to further weaken these ties to family, school, community, and prosocial peers. In the final connection, one's own values and norms are increasingly deviant,

Table 1. 2014 grade 10 protective level and delinquency, carried a handgun to school.

		Protective level	Never (%)	14 and older (%)	13 and younger (%)	N	Cramer V
School domain							
Opportunities for prosocial involvement	Low		89	4	7	7,965	0.07
	High		93	3	4	13,367	
Rewards for prosocial involvement	Low		89	4	7	8,741	0.07
	High		93	3	4	12,615	
Peer and individual domain							
Belief in moral order	Low		91	4	5	8,470	0.04
	High		93	2	5	11,703	
Religiosity	Low		88	5	7	8,734	0.15*
	High		96	2	3	11,631	
Interaction with prosocial peers	Low		89	4	6	9,069	0.07
	High		94	2	4	12,062	
Prosocial involvement	Low		91	4	5	9,912	0.03
	High		92	3	5	11,268	
Rewards for prosocial involvement	Low		91	3	6	7,884	0.04
	High		93	3	5	13,215	

*Weak relationship.

All Chi-squares significant at $p < 0.001$.**Table 2.** 2014 grade 10 protective level and delinquency, attacked someone with the intent of seriously hurting them.

		Protective level	Never (%)	14 and older (%)	13 and younger (%)	N	Cramer V
School domain							
Opportunities for prosocial involvement	Low		73	9	18	7,959	0.10
	High		81	7	12	13,368	
Rewards for prosocial involvement	Low		73	9	18	8,730	0.11
	High		82	6	12	12,617	
Peer and individual domain							
Belief in moral order	Low		76	9	16	8,455	0.06
	High		81	6	13	11,703	
Religiosity	Low		66	11	23	8,718	0.27*
	High		88	4	7	11,635	
Interaction with prosocial peers	Low		73	9	18	9,054	0.11
	High		82	6	12	12,072	
Prosocial involvement	Low		76	9	15	9,889	0.06
	High		80	6	14	11,282	
Rewards for prosocial involvement	Low		77	7	15	7,884	0.02
	High		79	7	14	13,207	

*Moderate relationship.

All Chi-squares significant at $p < 0.001$.

thereby concentrating one's social influences to delinquents (Payne and Welch 2016; Thornberry 1987).

One of the earliest institutions that may intervene in a life of deviant behavior is the school. Although family is an early influence on behavior, schools and peers become more influential during adolescence (Laub and Sampson 1993; Thornberry 1987). Indeed, Sampson and Laub (1993) found that a higher grade point average and a more positive student attitude decreased delinquent behavior. Students who are committed to their education and perform well in school are less likely to engage in later delinquency and drug use, suggesting that schools may be able to provide resiliency or protection for those most in need (Gottfredson, Gottfredson, and Payne 2005). Weak school attachment and poor school performance may increase the probability of an offending trajectory throughout the life course, whereas strong school attachment and success in school may decrease it. Thornberry (1987) sees an individual's weak bond to society as the basic root of deviant behavior. This bond is formed by strong attachments to family, commitment to school, and belief in conventional goals. Research on interactional theory supports the importance of commitment to and

success in school. Commitment to school is generally defined as time and energy invested by students in the pursuit of educational goals/aspirations. Students who spend substantial effort in school are more likely to be concerned about losing their stake in conformity, whereas students who invest little will have less of a stake to lose and are more likely to be delinquent (Bankston, Floyd, and Forsyth 1981). If this bond weakens, an individual is more likely to become involved in deviant groups, thus increasing the chances of deviance and delinquency. The causal influences on antisocial behavior vary depending on the developmental stage. Importantly, these developmental stages are interrelated; if an individual is able to form strong ties to the family in early childhood, he or she is more likely to succeed in forming strong ties with peers and teachers in school.

Along the prosocial path, youth who are given opportunities to be actively involved in the classroom are able to learn and practice social and academic skills. As these students improve their skills, they are recognized and rewarded for their involvement. This positive reinforcement leads to strong attachment to prosocial teachers and peers and commitment to education and other prosocial activities, resulting in normative beliefs that prevent antisocial behavior. Conversely, the antisocial path demonstrates how these same factors may work in the opposite directions. Interactions with deviant others lead to stronger antisocial skills, which are then rewarded and reinforced by deviant peers. This strengthens the attachment to these peers, commitment to deviant activities, and belief in antisocial norms. As an individual's norms and behavior in one developmental stage influence future stages in the life course by limiting that individual's skills and opportunities, deviant youth are essentially stuck in the cycle of antisocial opportunities, peers, beliefs, and behaviors (Jenkins 1997; Patterson, DeBaryshe, and Ramsey 1989). Academic performance, or school success/failure, is one student-level risk factor for various forms of deviant and antisocial behavior that is strongly demonstrated in research. In general, consistent evidence supports an association between poor school performance and adolescent problem behaviors (Dufur et al. 2015; Gottfredson 2001; McGee and Farrington 2010).

Methods

This paper uses data from the 2014 Louisiana Communities that Care Youth Survey to examine grade 10 students. This biennial survey is administered on even years to sixth, eighth, tenth, and twelfth grade private and public school students. A report is completed by late March of the following year. The survey is designed to assess students' involvement in a specific set of indicators, as well as their exposure to a scientifically valid risk and protective factors identified in the risk and protective factor model of adolescent problem behaviors. Each student completes the survey via pencil during a designated class period/time. The survey is administered on paper, in scantron format. Students are given approximately 60 min to complete 131 questions. Passive consent was used to secure parental permission for participation. Teachers were provided with a short script to read to students just prior to administration. The script served as informed assent and included references to the voluntary nature of the survey and privacy. No identifiable data are collected from the survey. The data were analyzed using optical mark recognition imaging scanners and populated into reports. All school level reports are password protected and require consent to access.

Self-report studies

A self-report study is a type of survey, questionnaire, or poll in which respondents read the question and select a response by themselves without researcher interference. Self-report surveys enable researchers to explore the attitudes, beliefs, motivations, and personality characteristics of offender's self-report measures which have been considered valid data sources for general demographic data and domains of behavior (Arnold and Brungardt 1983; Burfeind and Bartusch 2006; Hindelang, Hirschi, and Weis 1979; Hirschi 1969). Hirschi's (1969) support for self-report as an ideal methodology is that official records are a weaker measure of the commission of delinquent acts than honest

self-reports. His rationale is basically that every delinquent act is witnessed and motivated by that young person; only he can explain it, not the police.

Findings

Tables 1 and 2 show the results of this research with each factor in each domain as either high or low risk, as the independent variable and three categories of the two antisocial behaviors as the dependent variable: never, 14 years old or older, and 13 years old or younger. Although a Chi-square is the primary statistic used in determining the relationship between protective factors and delinquency, by itself, it is not useful. Chi-square is sensitive to large data sets through finding relationships that may not be important. Of all the relationships tested in this study, all were found to be significant by Chi-square. Cramer's V is the measure of strength of association among nominal level variables. Although there are differing opinions on the interpretation of Cramer's V , in this study, a Cramer's V of 0.15 indicates a weak association and 0.20 a medium strength association with two degrees of freedom (Cramer 1946; Zaiontz 2015, 2017). Moderate relationships between behaviors and risk factors are believed to be important findings given the complexities of behaviors in a natural setting. Weak relationships are worth considering for later study. Thus, rather than judging the existence of an association through Chi-square, this analysis concentrates on the strength of association between the specific behaviors and risk levels.

As can be seen in Tables 1 and 2, all the protective factors were significant for both antisocial behaviors: carried a handgun to school and attacked someone with the intent of seriously hurting them. *Religiosity* was the one protective factor with a demonstrated relationship with the antisocial behavior. For "carried a handgun to school" behavior, this protective factor had a weak relationship ($V = 0.15$) and for "attacked someone with the intent of seriously hurting them" religiosity demonstrated a moderate relationship ($V = 0.27$).

As also can be seen in both Tables 1 and 2, in each factor, a high protective level had a greater percentage of individuals who **never** committed the act than those with a low protective level. It should be noted that not only are these relationships important but they appear to support the anticipated relationship between religiosity and the antisocial behaviors. Students having high religiosity were 8% more likely to never carry a gun to school and 12% more likely not to have engaged in a violent physical attack. These findings indicate the worth of protective factors in preventing delinquency. Religiosity, interaction with prosocial peers, and rewards in school for prosocial involvements stand out among these protective factors, respectively.

Discussion

Having prosocial peers, interaction or goals have long been accepted as protective factors. Prosocial youth who are given opportunities to be actively involved in the classroom are able to learn and practice social and academic skills. These students improve their skills and are recognized and rewarded for their involvement. This positive reinforcement leads to strong attachment to prosocial teachers and peers and commitment to education and other prosocial activities, resulting in normative beliefs that prevent criminal/delinquent behavior. Family must enforce these interactions and goals and restrict peers for the protective factor to be most affective (Piquero, Farrington, and Blumstein 2003).

But there is a long debate regarding the impact of religiosity on criminal and delinquent behavior. The discussion has subsided and arose within the context of social control theory. On one side of the debate, some researchers have contended that there is little support for the suggested inverse relationship between religiosity and criminal behavior. They suggest that findings are spurious, strongly influenced by intervening variables such as peer groups and types of crime (Benda 1997; Schur 1969). Other side of the debate is that the absence of religion in the lives of delinquents contributes, at least in part, to their antisocial behavior (Ulmer et al. 2012). This position that

religion is a crucial integrative mechanism for maintaining social control and fostering common values and beliefs descends from Durkheim (1913). Research has linked religiosity to informal social control that helps reduce or prevent delinquency. It has long been seen as the psychological mechanism preventing delinquency when psychologically present when parents or other caretakers are physically absent. The focus of this research is to unravel this complex web of variables that alter or prevent bad behavior, school failure, and ultimately societal failure and criminality for many youth. Religiosity helps fosters beliefs in a prosocial normative system.

In a sense, criminologists know what makes good kids; but bad kids who become bad adults are not just the flip side. This research adds to the literature on delinquency and also abstainers. Abstainers although receiving little focus from criminologist in the past have reversed that trend. It is likely that abstainers will receive increased attention in the future. Criminologists who are looking for protective factors that guard against delinquency should be interested.

Plotting official rates of crime against age reveals that most lawbreakers offend during their teenage years, then by their early 20s, steadily desist from criminal activity (Blumstein et al. 1986). This robust relationship between age and antisocial behavior has been termed the age-crime curve. Although the results are inconsistent, it emphasizes the importance of early onset age as a strong correlate of future, especially adult offending Farrington (1990). Developmental/Life course theory is a theoretical perspective, which focuses on fostering knowledge and suggests that the age of onset/crime relationship is more complicated than what has been typically theorized.

The study is limited to 1 year of students in a single state's public schools and those schools that allowed the survey. The large sample constitutes a census of the specific population but there is no reason to believe that the 1 year is significantly different from other years. Researchers may need to take the next step of create parametric statistics for these data for multidimensional modeling. Age of behavior onset and relationships between specific risk factors and antisocial behaviors show particular promise for later studies.

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