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FINAL REPORT

Project Title: “Situational Factors and the Victim-Offender Overlap”

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FINAL REPORT

One of the strongest empirical associations in the criminological literature is between offending and victimization. Yet not much is known about the mechanisms that produce the victim-offender overlap. Largely absent from this literature is research on the situational context of disputes. Much can be learned about the etiology of the overlap by examining why offenders are more likely to be victimized in disputes. The purpose of our project was to examine explanations of the victim-offender overlap using data obtained from male prison inmates and a community sample. No other data exists, to our knowledge, that allows for the analyses of 1) disputatiousness and its relationship to the overlap, 2) and the situational characteristics of interpersonal disputes that contribute to the overlap. The data gathered for this project allow for both analyses.

Project Design and Methods

Our sample includes male inmates from the Pennsylvania state prison system and men they knew from the community who had never been arrested. The Survey Research Center (SRC) of Penn State University began collecting the data in September 2013. Prior to collection, we conducted a pilot test of the survey and a focus group session with a small group of inmates, after which certain portions of the survey were revised. We used the same survey for both samples.

Inmates who were at least 18 years old and incarcerated for six months or less were included in the study. We assumed that recently admitted inmates would be better able to recall experiences before entering prison than inmates confined for longer periods. We drew most of the inmate sample (n=426) from a large state prison that is used as an intake facility in

Pennsylvania. To reach the target sample size, we also surveyed 77 inmates from five other state facilities yielding a total sample of 503 inmates.

Recruitment flyers were posted throughout the facility approximately two weeks prior to data collection, and prison staff also shared information about the project with inmates to bolster recruitment efforts. The survey was administered by the SRC staff in classroom settings to small groups of inmates. Inmates completed the survey alone on laptops using a computer-assisted personal interviewing program (CAPI). When inmates arrived, an SRC staff member read them a script that described the purpose of the study, and discussed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, and the study's approval by university institutional review boards. We guaranteed anonymity by not using any identifying information on the survey and by giving the inmates privacy, in most cases by seating them at desks separated by partitions. No prison guards were in the room, but were adjacent to it either in the hallway or in a nearby room. The respondents were given a copy of the consent form that included the contact information of the project investigators and institutional review boards.

To generate the community sample (N=220), inmates were asked to provide on the recruitment flyer the names, age, and contact information for up to three male friends or family members in the community who have not been arrested who might be willing to complete the same survey for a \$45 payment. One week after the notification letters were mailed, the SRC began calling community contacts. The SRC made up to twenty attempts to call the contacts. Once contacts agreed to participate, the SRC informed them that they could complete the survey via the telephone or internet; 66% chose the telephone.

Respondents were asked about the frequency of their verbal conflicts and their violent victimizations. They were also asked questions measuring their self-control, alcohol use, and honor-based attitudes. These measures were used for our individual-level analyses.

Our incident analyses were based on questions in which respondents were asked about two types of disputes that occurred before they were incarcerated. One was a dispute involving verbal aggression and the other a dispute involving violence. Respondents were asked whether, during these disputes, they or their antagonists engaged in insults, threats, remedial actions (e.g., apologies) and whether they were intoxicated. We also asked about the content of the dispute including whether it was related to their involvement in illegal business activity. We also asked whether there were third parties were present and whether they engaged in mediation and instigation during the incident. Finally, we asked whether the antagonist had a criminal record and whether the antagonist had a reputation for violence.

Our project has resulted in five papers so far, two of them published. We describe them below.

“An Appraisal of Research on the Victim-Offender Overlap”

Our theoretical approach is described in our first published paper from the project (Berg and Felson 2016). We offered a situational explanation of the overlap based on a social interactionist perspective on aggression (Tedeschi and Felson 1994). A social interactionist approach suggests that, since most homicides and assaults stem from verbal disputes, it is important to examine the social interaction between adversaries and third parties during those disputes that lead to escalation. We argued that the characteristics of the verbal disputes involving offenders and non-offenders are likely to be different. Specifically, we hypothesized that offenders are more likely to be verbally aggressive and less likely to engage in remedial

actions. Offenders are also more likely to be intoxicated and their aggression is more likely to have the support of third parties, given the social contexts they tend to inhabit. These tendencies may explain why disputes involving offenders are more likely to escalate to violence, and why offenders are more likely to become victims.

“Disputatiousness and the Offender-Victim Overlap”

This paper was published in the *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*. Additionally, we presented results from this paper at the 2016 Annual Conference for the American Society of Criminology. The paper focuses on an individual difference analysis, not an incident analysis. We examine whether offenders are at greater risk of violent victimization because of their disputatiousness, i.e., their tendency to become involved in verbal conflicts. We also examine whether offenders are more disputatious because of their low self-control, alcohol use, and honor-based attitudes and whether disputatiousness can explain the effect of these individual differences on violent victimization. The results suggest that: (1) disputatiousness accounts for a substantial portion of the relationship between offending and victimization; (2) offenders tend to be disputatious because of their low self-control, heavy alcohol use, and honor-related attitudes; and (3) the primary reason men with low self-control and alcohol problems are more likely to become victims is their disputatiousness.

“A Social Interactionist Approach to the Victim-Offender Overlap”

We plan to submit this paper to the *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* in the next few weeks. In the paper, we used incident data to test hypotheses about the victim-offender overlap suggested by the social interactionist perspective. Specifically, we examined whether the tendency for offenders to become involved in violent disputes and to be victims of violence reflected their provocative behavior, their alcohol use, and their failure to engage in remedial

actions during the disputes they reported. We also examined whether offenders were more likely to be victimized because third parties who were present during their disputes were more likely to support escalation and less likely to act as mediators.

The design involved an examination of whether the characteristics of disputes mediated the relationship between whether the antagonist was an offender and violent outcomes. The violent outcomes (our dependent variables) were whether the respondent physically attacked the antagonist and whether the dispute involved violence or not. Here is a depiction of the design:

Antagonist has a criminal record → Antagonist's behavior during the dispute →
Antagonist is assaulted by respondent (or the dispute included violence).

The evidence suggested that verbal disputes with antagonists who are violent offenders are more likely to become violent because offenders are: (1) more likely to make threats; (2) less likely to engage in remedial actions; (3) more likely to be intoxicated; and (4) more likely to receive encouragement to be aggressive by third parties. The results suggest that approximately half of the victim-offender overlap is due to the way offenders and third parties behave during verbal disputes.

“Effects of Gender and the Relationship between Adversaries on the Involvement of Third Parties in Disputes”

In this unpublished paper, we use the incident data to examine when third parties are present during the disputes and how they behave if they are present. We argue that third parties can play an important role in determining whether disputes escalate to violence. Third parties may mediate the dispute or they may act as instigator or allies. Even if they do nothing, they may serve as an audience and increase the adversaries' concerns for self-image.

This paper focuses on the effects of gender and the relationship between adversaries (relational distance) on the presence and behavior of third parties. We hypothesize that a privacy

norm inhibits intervention in disputes involving couples or families or perhaps any close relationship. We compare these relationships to relationships between acquaintances and strangers. Third parties may be less likely to be present when relational distance is close and, when they are present, they may not become involved. The privacy norm may be particularly important in disputes involving intimate partners. On the other hand, the effects of privacy may be offset by a norm inhibiting aggression against women. “Chivalry” may produce the “behind closed door effect” where violence against women is hidden. When third parties are present, they may attempt to protect women. They may engage in more mediation, less instigation, and more partisanship on behalf of women.

In general, our evidence suggests that third parties are most likely to be present during men’s disputes with relationally distant men (strangers and acquaintances) and least likely to be present during their disputes with women. When present, third parties were most likely to encourage aggression and least likely to mediate disputes between relationally distant men. Third parties were more likely to take the women’s side in inter-gender disputes. Disputes involving distant males were more likely include partisans on both sides.

“Bones of Contention: Precipitants of Disputes among Offenders and Non-offenders”

We examined differences in the precipitants of disputes involving violent and non-violent offenders and non-offenders. This involves a comparison of disputes involving inmates with self-reported violence, other inmates, men from the community sample with self-reported violence, and other men from the community. We analyzed both verbal disputes and violent disputes. We presented this paper at the 2017 Annual Conference for the American Society of Criminology and are currently revising the paper for publication.

We made four hypotheses about the precipitants of these disputes. First, we hypothesized that the disputes of offenders are more likely than the disputes of non-offenders to stem from their tendency to provoke grievances. Offenders are more likely to get into disputes because they violate norms and provoke social control responses from others. For example, offenders tend to have unstable work histories, financial problems, conflicts with their families, and substance-abuse issues. Their poor role performance and misbehavior can lead others to attempt to control them. These attempts at informal social control can lead to disputes involving verbal aggression or violence. Thus we expected their disputes to be more likely to begin when offenders violate norms, when someone criticizes them or gives them a command, or when they do not comply with requests. An alternative perspective is that offenders get into disputes when they try to control others. Their violence reflects an attempt to dominate an adversary. In that case, one would expect their disputes to be precipitated by their control behavior and their adversaries' violations.

Our second hypothesis was based on the literature on the role of identity conflicts and honor in violent encounters. We hypothesize that the disputes of offenders are more likely than the disputes of non-offenders to stem from verbal attacks from adversaries. Evidence suggests that offenders are more likely to have a hostility bias: they interpret the behavior of others as having aggressive intent when it does not (Dodge 1980). In addition, offenders are more likely to retaliate when they are verbally attacked. They are more concerned with honor and with showing strength to prevent future attack (e.g., Anderson 1999). Finally, offenders are more likely to get into disputes because they actually experience more frequent verbal attacks. The opportunity for verbal attack may be greater because they are more likely to associate with people who are aggressive or because their routine activities expose them to aggressive people. In sum, offenders

are more likely to experience verbal attack, interpret comments as attacks, and respond to verbal attacks with aggression.

Third, we hypothesized that the disputes of offenders are more likely to stem from their participation in illegal business activity. Illegal business activity is conducive to violence because participants lack legal recourse when they have grievances (Black 1976). As a result, offenders turn to self-help strategies, which often involve violence. In addition, it is reasonable to assume that the type of people involved in illegal businesses are less likely to be honest in their dealings and more likely to use aggression.

Finally, we examined whether offenders are more or less likely to intervene on behalf of third parties. One image of offenders is that they are particularly selfish and narcissistic. They cheat, lie, and steal when it is in their interest. Thus psychopaths are described as callous and lacking of empathy. This characterization implies that their disputes are less likely to involve their intervention on behalf of others. When they get involved in disputes they are acting on their own behalf. Paul Bloom's recent discussion of empathy and violence implies the opposite. He argues that the tendency to feel someone else's pain can lead to violence against people who produce that suffering. People are particularly likely to empathize with members of their group and this emotion leads them to aggressive behavior against an out group.

Incident level analyses of precipitants of verbal and violent disputes generally support these hypotheses. We also find that offenders' participation in disputes is more likely to involve their intervention on behalf of third parties. This evidence is consistent with recent claims that empathy sometimes leads to violence on behalf of an in-group.

Future Plans

Our future plans include the following papers:

Are men who are violent toward their intimate partners different from other male offenders? We will examine whether the correlates of men's violence toward their intimate partners are similar to the correlates of other types of violence. We will also look at the ratio of violence to total aggression (verbal + physical) against different targets. This ratio allows one to compare rates while controlling for the level of conflict in different relationships. Previous research suggests that men are more inhibited about using violence against their female partners.

We will also examine whether inmates behave differently during their verbal and violent disputes. Inmates may have a higher risk of victimization if they tend to insult and threaten others, and if they fail to engage in remedial actions. It may also be that inmates provoke others because of their heavy drinking (compared to the community sample). We will examine whether they are more likely to be drinking during their disputes, controlling for their frequency of drinking.

Finally, we will examine the role of physical size and weapons in violent disputes. We will compare incidents involving offenders and nonoffenders. We hypothesize that the adversary who has more coercive power will be more aggressive during disputes. However, offenders (inmates) may take more risks than non-offenders. Offenders may be more likely to become involved in disputes with antagonists who are bigger and stronger than them. They may be more likely to initiate conflicts with larger antagonists. In other words, the tendency for those with more coercive power to assault those with less coercive power may be attenuated for violent offenders.

Conclusion

In sum, the funding by NIJ has allowed us to collect a rich and fairly unique data set involving the violent and non-violent disputes of male inmates (N=503) and men they knew

from the community who had never been arrested (N=220). The detailed questions on the nature of disputes has enabled us to examine why disputes escalate, particularly when offenders are involved. Our first paper described our situational explanation of the victim-offender overlap. In our second paper we conducted an initial test of this situational explanation using the frequency design of our project. In our additional papers, we are focusing on the incident design of our project in order to 1) further test the hypotheses about the victim-offender overlap suggested by the social interactionist perspective, 2) examine the determinants of third party processes in conflicts, and 3) understand the differences in precipitants of disputes among offenders and non-offenders. These analyses support a novel approach to why offenders have high victimization rates. To date no other research exists on the situational determinants of the victim offender overlap. In this way, the project data and project products make unique contributions to the literature. We think that those who study the offender-victim overlap are already taking our work into account.

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