



The author(s) shown below used Federal funding provided by the U.S. Department of Justice to prepare the following resource:

Document Title: Youth Violence and Victimization:
Predicting Responses to Peer Aggression

Author(s): Kelly Lynn Mulvey, Ph.D., Matthew J. Irvin,
Ph.D.

Document Number: 255961

Date Received: January 2021

Award Number: 2016-R2-CX-0056

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2016-R2-CX-0056

PIs:

Dr. Kelly Lynn Mulvey
Assistant Professor of Psychology, North Carolina State University
Dr. Matthew J. Irvin
Associate Professor of Psychology, University of South Carolina

Contact Information:

Kelly Lynn Mulvey
North Carolina State University
Campus Box 7650
628C Poe Hall
Raleigh, NC 27695
919-515-4975
klmulvey1@ncsu.edu

Award Recipient Organization:

University of South Carolina
Columbia, SC 29208

Project Period: 01/01/2017 – 12/31/2018 (extended to 03/31/2020)

Award Amount: \$150,000

Youth Violence and Victimization: Predicting Responses to Peer Aggression

Project Report

Statement of the Problem

Youth violence is a troubling phenomenon, with often serious outcomes. Youth violence is violence or aggression perpetuated by or targeted against youth and includes many forms such as violent crime, physical violence (e.g., fighting, use of firearms), and the numerous manifestations of bullying (e.g., overt, social/relational, and cyber bullying). While rates of youth in the United States charged with criminal offenses, including violent crime, have decreased since the 2000s (Furdella & Puzanchera, 2015), nearly 60% of children under the age of 18 were exposed to violence in the past year (Finkelhor, Turner, Shattuck, Hamby, & Kracke, 2015) and 1 in every 8 students were in a physical fight in 2011 (Sickmund & Puzanchera, 2014). Given that youth under 18 spend the majority of their waking hours in school, violence extending to the school context is a reality that many youth deal with on a daily basis. Since 2001, the rate of violent victimization at school is greater than that away from school (Robers, Zhang, Morgan, & Musu-Gillette, 2015). Research also suggests as many as 50% of students are bullied and 30% bully others (Bradshaw, Sawyer, & O'Brennan, 2007). Furthermore, victims of bullying experience serious negative outcomes including anxiety, depression, self-inflicted harm, school truancy, and academic failure. The relation of bullying victimization to problematic outcomes extends well into adulthood and is, for example, evident in lower wage earnings, mental health problems, and criminality (Brown, 2008; Lereya, Copeland, Costello, & Wolke, 2015; Sourander et al., 2007). Despite the apparent increasing concern about youth violence by the media, policymakers, and our society, there is much that we do not know about the correlates and causes of youth violence.

This research focuses on enhancing our understanding of youth violence. The most applicable model for clarifying our understanding of the perpetration of aggression and the

prevention of youth violence is the social-ecological framework, which posits that multiple factors within individuals and their environmental contexts interact via complex processes (Espelage, 2014; Espelage, Holt, & Poteat, 2010). However, the use of this framework to improve our understanding of violence has been rare –or, when employed, has often considered a single context such as the school or home context (Espelage, 2014). Thus, the interaction of multiple factors and contexts has not been considered, and efforts to reduce violence based on such findings may be ineffective. Accordingly, our approach to understanding of youth violence is to comprehensively apply the social-ecological framework and focus on several key factors within individuals and multiple contexts. Moreover, we focus on factors and contexts that may robustly predict the perpetration and amelioration of violence among youth but have received scant attention in previous research, especially in concert with each other. Specifically, the factors within individuals we examine include cognition (e.g., attitudes towards retaliation and bystander intervention) and social-emotional adjustment (e.g., rejection sensitivity, affect, aggressive behavior and victimization) while the multiple contexts will include peer (e.g., characteristics and status of peer group, sociometric and perceived popularity), school (e.g., school connectedness, student-teacher relationship), and family contexts (e.g., attachment, family management). Further, we will employ variable-oriented analyses along with complementary person-oriented analyses that may provide additional insight into youth violence (Bergman & Trost, 2006; Sterba & Bauer, 2010).

The overarching objective of this work is to understand adolescents’ attitudes and judgments surrounding youth violence, with attention both to attitudes surrounding bystander intervention to stop aggression and retaliation when exposed to such aggression. **Our goal is to examine factors related to supporting *victim retaliation* in response to different types of peer**

aggression, and *bystander intervention on behalf of peers who are victimized*. In essence, this research provides a clear picture of the risk factors associated with engaging in youth violence, and the promoting factors related to standing up to peer aggression through bystander intervention. Our focus on attitudes about retaliation and bystander intervention may be critical because interpersonal violence and aggression among youth often occurs where teachers and other adults are not present (e.g., 46% of bullying occurs in hallway or stairwell and another 23% on school grounds; Robers et al., 2015), bystander intervention effectively and quickly stops bullying, and in more than 75% of acts of extreme youth violence another peer knew of the aggressor's plans (Hawkins et al., 2001; Salmivalli et al., 2011; Vossekuil et al., 2004). Finally, this research extends current knowledge and theory surrounding youth violence by measuring a wide range of different contextual factors in concert, by testing evaluations and reasoning about responses to a number of types of aggression and by relating these characteristics and evaluations to actual behavioral reports of aggression and bystander intervention. In sum, this work will clarify the characteristics of youth who are both likely to respond in violent ways as well as stand up to protect others who are victimized.

Specific Aims. The research is guided by the following complementary aims:

- 1) To examine individual differences by school context, ethnicity, age group and gender in judgments and reasoning about group-based as well as dyadic aggression.
- 2) To examine relations between responses to aggression and social-emotional, peer, school and family factors.
- 3) To identify profiles of adolescents likely to, on the one hand, support retaliatory youth violence, or, on the other hand, to engage in bystander intervention in instances of such

aggression and to predict attitudes and evaluations for adolescents with different profiles of contextual factors and attitudes.

Project Design, Implementation and Outcomes

Methods

The project is a longitudinal study with 6th graders (ages 11 – 12 years) and 9th graders (ages 14 – 15 years) with data collected in the Fall of 2017 (October and November) and the Spring of 2018 (May).

Participants. Participants ($N = 867$ time one, 573 time two) 6th graders and 9th graders recruited from 3 middle schools and 2 high schools in rural middle-to-low income Southeastern United States school districts. The sample included approximately equal numbers of male and female participants (53.5% female time one, 57.8% female time two). Ethnicity was reflective of the school community (Time One: 65.1% European-American, 22.5% African-American, 12.4% Other; Time Two: 63.9% European-American, 22.8% African-American, 13.3% Other).

Data collection procedure. We collected measures (see Tables 1-3) in the Fall of 6th grade and 9th grade and again in the Spring of 6th and 9th grade. Survey data was collected in classrooms at participants' schools during non-instructional time. At time two, measures expected to be stable between times 1 and 2 were not collected again (temperament, empathy). All 6th and 9th graders at participating schools were given opt-out parental notification letters one week prior to data collection. All participants who assented to participation and whose parents did not opt-out were allowed to participate. All data was collected electronically in group settings using Qualtrics and school provided devices.

Measures for Retaliatory and Bystander Intervention Attitudes

Dependent Measure: The Responses to Peer Aggression Task. This task, which was designed for this study, is based on prior research on adolescents' evaluations of and responses to peer group aggression (Mulvey & Killen, 2016; Mulvey, Palmer, & Abrams, in press). The task involves 6 brief scenarios, 4 focused on group-based aggression and 2 focused on aggression in dyadic situations. Participants evaluated targets who match the participant's gender. See Table 1 for scenarios. For each scenario, participants completed the measures outlined in Table 2.

Expected Measures for Latent Variables

Social-emotional adjustment. Social-emotional adjustment was measured by examining temperament and empathy, see Table 3.

Temperament. We measured temperament using the Early Adolescent Temperament Questionnaire- Revised (Capaldi & Rothbart, 1992). This measure has been used with participants between the ages of 9 to 15 years and has good reliability. We computed the following scales: effortful control (attention, inhibitory control, activation control), surgency (high intensity pleasure, fear (reverse scored), shyness (reverse scored), negative affect (frustration, depressive mood, aggression) and affiliativeness (affiliation, perceptual sensitivity, pleasure sensitivity).

Empathy. We used the Adolescent Measure of Empathy and Sympathy (AMES). This measure has good reliability, has been used with adolescents aged 10 - 15 years of age and includes subscales for cognitive empathy, affective empathy and sympathy (Vossen, Piotrowski, & Valkenburg, 2015).

Prior history of aggression and victimization. Self-report data will be gleaned from the Early Adolescent Temperament Questionnaire (describe above) (Capaldi & Rothbart, 1992). Finally, peer nominations (see description below) can also be used to triangulate information.

Rejection Sensitivity. Rejection sensitivity, including both angry and anxious rejection sensitivity was measured using the Childhood Rejection Sensitivity questionnaire (Downey, Lebolt, Rincón, & Freitas, 1998). This questionnaire has been used with children and adolescents and has demonstrated good reliability.

Justice sensitivity. We used the Justice Sensitivity Inventory including scales for victim, the perpetrator and observer justice sensitivity (Bondü & Elsner, 2015). This measure has been used with children aged 9 to 17 years and has good reliability.

Family Support. Parental Management. Parental supervision was measured using the Family Management Questionnaire from the Seattle Social Development Project (Herrenkohl, Hill, Hawkins, Chung, & Nagin, 2006). The measure has been used with adolescents and has good reliability.

Attachment. Parent-child attachment was measured with items from the Rochester Youth Development Study (1991), which were tested with adolescents and demonstrated reliability.

School Connectedness. School connections was measured by assessing school climate, including student-teacher relationships, and perceptions of discrimination, see Table 3.

Perceptions of discrimination. Youths' discrimination experiences were assessed using a self-report measure developed by the Maryland Adolescent Development in Context Study (MADICS) (see Eccles, Wong, & Peck, 2006; Wong, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2003). The scale includes two subscales, a peer/social discrimination subscale as well as a teacher/classroom discrimination subscale. The Teacher/Classroom discrimination scale includes five items

evaluating students' experiences of race-based discrimination in class settings by teachers in the past year (e.g., being disciplined more harshly, graded harder because of race). The Peer Discrimination subscale includes three items that assess perceptions of negative peer treatment due to race (e.g., getting into fights, being picked on, not being picked for teams or activities). The measure has been used with adolescents with good reliability.

School climate. The School Climate Measure (Zullig et al., 2015) assesses student-teacher relationships and school connectedness. It has been used with adolescents with good reliability.

Positive Peer Relations. Peer relations were measured using peer nominations, see Table 3.

Peer nominations. Peer nominations assess classmates' perceptions of peers with items and procedures similar to previous (Rodkin & Ahn, 2009). Students will nominate up to three peers who best fit descriptors such as liked most, liked least, gets in trouble, is a leader, is cool, bullies others, and gossips. Peer nomination items are reliable and have been used with adolescent samples.

Outcomes

School and family factors. Our first set of findings documents how school and family factors that predict bystander intervention in response to both aggression and victim retaliation (Mulvey et al., 2019). This study explores school and family factors related to standing up to aggression and intervening before possible retaliation occurs. Participants evaluated how likely they would be to intervene if they observed a multitude of types of aggression and if they heard the victim was planning to retaliate. Findings documented that family and school factors are important predictors of bystander intervention, with higher family management, and more positive school climate associated with greater likelihood of intervention and higher feelings of social exclusion and teacher and peer discrimination associated with inactive responses to

aggression and retaliation. Further, results reveal that girls and younger participants are more likely to reject aggression and retaliation and to expect to engage in active forms of bystander intervention than are boys and older participants. Thus, a complex constellation of factors relate to the likelihood of intervening if someone is being victimized or considering retaliation in response to victimization. The results provide guidance and new directions for possible school- and family-based interventions to encourage bystander intervention in instances of aggression.

Social-emotional factors. Our findings also document the important role of social-emotional skills in explaining differences in bystander intervention and evaluations of bullying and retaliation (Gönültaş et al., 2019). We explored social-emotional predictors of bystander judgments and responses. We found that participants with high effortful control and transgressor justice sensitivity were more likely to evaluate bystander intervention as more acceptable. Moreover, youth with higher affective sympathy, empathy, and observer justice sensitivity were more likely to report intentions to actively intervene if they observed aggression, whereas youth with higher negative affect and rejection sensitivity were more likely to report that they would choose not to intervene if they saw aggression occurring.

Additional Analyses. Additional papers are still in preparation or under peer review. For these papers, we are exploring the following questions: 1) does empathy mediate the relationship between family support and different types of help-seeking bystander intervention; 2) are there different profiles of youth and do these profiles predict judgments and reasoning; and 3) what role do teachers play in shaping inclusive classroom spaces and promoting bystander intervention? Finally, we will soon undertake longitudinal analyses to understand change from fall to spring.

Limitations

While this research has provided a rich opportunity to explore youth cognition around aggression and bullying, it is not without limitations. First, participants primarily responded to hypothetical scenarios. Thus, we primarily measured their intentions to intervene. Future research should use observational data collection approaches or multiple reporters in order to better understand if these expectations are related to actual intervention behavior. Further, our longitudinal analyses are limited by only having 2 time points. Future research should aim to track youth across middle and high school, not just within one year.

Conclusions and Implications

This study documents important insight into youth aggression, highlighting the many ways in which think about and evaluate peer aggression. In general, youth rejected aggression and hoped to intervene to protect victims. However, there were also important predictors of challenging behavior, with empathy, family support and school climate all contributing to ensure that youth feel empowered to speak up when their peers engage in aggression. These findings indicate that interventions aimed at reducing youth violence should be multi-faceted in nature, targeting school, family and individual social-emotional factors. The findings reinforce the powerful role that youth can play in interrupting cycles of violence, as bystanders who intervene, and note that those who condone retaliation may be a group that needs particular focus amongst criminal justice professionals and school providers.

Table 1: Scenarios for the Responses to Peer Aggression Task

Aggression Type	Scenario	Context
Social Aggression	Let's say X is teased and picked on all the time by some of X's classmates during school. X does not know what to do about it.	Group
Physical Aggression	Let's say X is pushed and hit all the time by some of X's classmates during school. X does not know what to do about it.	Group
Cyber Aggression	Let's say that some of X's classmates always tell jokes and spread rumors about X online. X does not know what to do about it.	Group
Exclusion	Let's say that X is ignored and left out all the time by some of X's classmates. No one talks to X and they act like X doesn't even exist. X does not know what to do about	Group
Intimate Partner Aggression	Let's say that X's boyfriend (girlfriend) always says mean things to X and sometimes yells at or pushes X. X does not know what to do about it.	Dyadic
Social Aggression	Let's say that X's best friend always puts him down and tells X what to do. X does not know what to do about it.	Dyadic

Table 2: Measures for the Response to Peer Aggression Task

Measure	Question	Responses
Moral Judgment of the Act	How okay or not okay is it that his (her) classmates (friend) act(s) that way?	1 = Really Not Okay to 6 = Really Okay
Likelihood of Bystander Interventions	Let's say you thought what X was doing was not okay. How likely do you think it is that you would: a) say something to them, b) tell an adult, c) tell a friend, d) do nothing and stay there, e) walk away, f) talk to the victim later?	1 = Really Not Okay to 6 = Really Okay
Bystander Intervention Moral Judgment	Let's say you saw someone tell X it was not okay to treat X like that. How okay or not okay would this be?	1 = Really Not Okay to 6 = Really Okay
Acceptability of Retribution	What if X decided to do something to hurt his (her) classmates? How okay or not okay would that be?	1 = Really Not Okay to 6 = Really Okay
Retribution Prediction	What do you think X might do if she did want to hurt his (her) classmates?	Open-ended response
Retribution Intervention	Let's say you knew X might do something like this in response. How likely do you think it is that you would: a) say something to them, b) tell an adult, c) tell a friend, d) do nothing and stay there, e) walk away, f) talk to the victim later?	1 = Really Not Okay to 6 = Really Okay

Table 3: Constructs and Measures Table

Latent Variables	Construct	Name of Measure	Reliability	Sample Item
Social-emotional adjustment	Empathy	Adolescent Measure of Empathy and Sympathy (Vossen et al., 2015)	$\alpha = .76 - .82$	I can often understand how people are feeling even before they tell me (1 = Never to 5 = Always).
	Temperament	Early Adolescent Temperament Questionnaire- Revised (Capaldi & Rothbart, 1992)	$\alpha = 0.65 - .89$	I get sad when a lot of things are going wrong. (1 = Almost Always Untrue to 5 = Almost Always True)
	Justice Sensitivity	Justice Sensitivity Inventory (Bondü & Krahé, 2015)	$\alpha = 0.74 - 0.87$	It makes me angry when I am treated worse than others. (0 = totally disagree to 5 = totally agree).
	Rejection Sensitivity	Childhood Rejection Sensitivity questionnaire (Downey et al., 1998)	$\alpha = 0.74 - .82$	Anxious: How nervous would you feel right then about X? (1 = Not nervous to 6 = Very, very Nervous)
Family Support	Parental Supervision	Family Management Questionnaire	$\alpha = .79$	When I am not at home, one of my parents know where I am and who I am with (1 = NO! to 4 = YES!)
	Attachment	Parent-Child Attachment (Rochester Youth Development et al., 1991)	$\alpha = 0.81$	How often would you say that you feel that you can really trust your parent? (1 = Never to 4 = Often)
School Connectedness	Perceptions of Discrimination	Perceptions of Discrimination (Eccles et al., 2006; Wong et al., 2003)	$\alpha = 0.86 - .88$	How often do your teachers discipline you more harshly because of race? (1 = Never to 5 = Everyday)
	School Climate	School Climate Measure (Zullig et al., 2015)	$\alpha = 0.79 - .92$	Teachers understand my problems (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree)

Positive Peer Relations	Peer Nominations	Peer Nominations (Rodkin & Ahn, 2009)	$\alpha = .72$ to $.93$	List three peers who are bullies; list who hangs out together.
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Table 4. Descriptive Statistics for Measures

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Time 1	Attachment	856	3.2037	0.53071
	Affective Empathy	867	2.8215	0.96896
	Sympathy	867	4.2344	0.81381
	Cognitive Empathy	867	3.6589	0.76424
	Justice Sensitivity Victim	860	2.8993	1.18671
	Justice Sensitivity Observer	860	3.0758	1.29702
	Justice Sensitivity Perpetrator	860	3.2244	1.35258
	Anxious Rejection Sensitivity	867	21.6373	332.54501
	Angry Rejection Sensitivity	867	19.6880	332.60366
	School Climate-Positive Student Teacher Relationship	850	3.5847	0.93665
	School Climate-- Fair Disciplinary Practices	849	3.7664	0.90960
	School Climate--Opportunities for Student Engagement	850	3.7843	0.92421
	School Climate-- Physical Environment	850	3.5979	1.07070
	School Climate-- Academic Support	849	3.9761	0.89265
	School Climate-- Parental Involvement	849	3.2226	1.07796
	School Climate School Connectedness	850	3.3126	1.03351
	School Climate-- Perceived Exclusion	850	2.8341	1.07063
	School Climate -- Social Environment	850	3.6118	1.08496
	School Climate- Academic Satisfaction	850	3.1259	1.21438
	Perceived Peer Discrimination	850	1.4455	0.86444
	Perceived Teacher/Classroom Discrimination	850	1.4094	0.81667
	Activation Control	816	3.2507	0.72557
	Affiliation	815	3.5813	0.89927
	Aggression	814	2.5633	1.01242
	Attention	817	3.2436	0.56757
	Depressive Mood	815	2.8538	0.82141
	Fear	818	3.1777	0.94839
	Frustration	819	3.3194	0.89601

	Inhibitory Control	819	3.4452	0.66440
	High Pleasure	818	3.0585	0.64874
	Perceptual Sensitivity	819	3.5873	0.94880
	Pleasure Sensitivity	818	3.2389	0.97283
	Shyness	819	2.9072	0.94457
	Effortful Control	814	3.3140	0.51882
	Affiliativeness	813	3.4672	0.80094
	Negative Affect	811	2.9108	0.74528
	Surgency	817	2.9791	0.56310
	Acceptability of the Initial Act (Composite Across Stories)	844	1.5814	0.75163
	Active Forms of Bystander Intervention (Composite Across Stories)	867	4.5937	1.00889
	Inactive Forms of Bystander Intervention (Composite Across Stories)	843	2.4819	1.20130
	Acceptability of Bystander Intervention (Composite Across Stories)	843	4.9330	1.21692
	Acceptability of Victim Retribution (Composite Across Stories)	843	2.0793	1.07093
	Active Forms of Bystander Intervention in Response to Possible Retribution (Composite Across Stories)	867	4.4728	1.06218
	Inactive Forms of Bystander Intervention in Response to Possible Retribution (Composite Across Stories)	844	2.5436	1.23499
Time 2	Time 2 Justice Sensitivity Victim	571	2.9187	1.14462
	Time 2 Justice Sensitivity Observer	571	2.9741	1.26348
	Time 2 Justice Sensitivity Perpetrator	571	3.0753	1.35735
	Time 2 Rejection Sensitivity Anxious	573	10.3360	5.24924
	Time 2 Rejection Sensitivity Angry	573	8.6975	4.70153
	Time 2 School Climate-- Positive Student Teacher Relationships	551	3.4387	0.98586
	Time 2 School Climate -- Discipline	551	3.5027	0.98023
	Time 2 School Climate -- Opportunities for Student Engagement	551	3.5641	1.01580
	Time 2 School Climate--School Physical Environment	551	3.3730	1.13065
	Time 2 School Climate-- Academic Support	551	3.7119	1.01965
	Time 2 School Climate-- Parental Involvement	551	3.1579	1.10694

Time 2 School Climate-- School Connectedness	551	3.1810	1.05959
Time 2 School Climate -- Perceived Exclusion	551	2.9776	1.10906
Time 2 School Climate -- School Social Environment	551	3.3339	1.13342
Time 2 School Climate-- Academic Satisfaction	551	3.1044	1.19981
Time 2 Peer Discrimination	551	1.6346	1.02631
Time 2 Teacher/Classroom Discrimination	551	1.5909	0.93715
Time 2 Acceptability of the Initial Aggressive Act (Composite Across Stories)	533	1.8249	0.88834
Time 2 Likelihood of Active Bystander Intervention (Composite Across Stories)	573	4.3726	1.08515
Time 2 Likelihood of Inactive Bystander Intervention (Composite Across Stories)	533	2.6621	1.24768
Time 2 Acceptability of Bystander Intervention (Composite Across Stories)	533	4.6144	1.29372
Time 2 Acceptability of Victim Retribution (Composite Across Stories)	533	2.2977	1.14008
Time 2 Likelihood of Active Bystander Intervention in Response to Possible Retribution (Composite Across Stories)	573	4.1131	0.99814

Artifacts

- Gönültaş, S., Mulvey, K. L., Irdam, G., Irvin, M. J., Carlson, R. G., & DiStefano, C. (2019). The role of social-emotional factors in bystanders' judgments and responses to initial peer aggression and retaliation in adolescence. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*. doi: 1063426619870492.
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