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Adolescent violent victimization and offending: Assessing the extent of the link⁽¹⁾

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Introduction

A key issue in understanding both criminal offending and victimization concerns victim-offender relationships. Research on crime, particularly violent offenses, requires examining the interpersonal relationships which exist among victims and offenders. Emphasis on this aspect has been most evident in analyses of homicide (Silverman and Kennedy 1987; 1993; Williams and Flewelling 1988; Wolfgang 1958). Nevertheless, those studies which disaggregate crime rates by victim-offender relationships have essentially confined their analyses to adults. This coincides with a more general trend in criminological research on adolescents to confine analyses to offending behaviour. Consequently, there is a dearth of research on adolescent and youth victims, particularly with respect to the individuals most likely to offend against them.

Within the last decade researchers have made a concerted effort to offset this previous neglect of adolescent victimization. The findings from these studies point to the need for research in this area to be able to account for the existence of a *victim-offender overlap*. That is, that those adolescents who are at greatest risk of being victimized are individuals who engage in delinquent activities themselves, and, consequently, that adolescent victims and offenders cannot be classified solely in terms of membership

in one group or the other (Lauritsen, Laub, and Sampson 1992). While these findings may represent a significant development in the literature on victimization and adolescents, the extent to which they are applicable across places and types of offenses remains questionable. The goal of this paper is to explore the possible limitations of such findings as applied to Canadian youth homicide victims. This avenue of investigation appears to be absent from the current research.⁽³⁾

Although their specific explanations vary, a number of criminological theories may be interpreted as predicting an overlap in victim-offender populations, including routine activities and the subculture of violence theory. For example, the 'principle of homogamy', derived from routine activities and lifestyle theories, claims that an individual's likelihood of victimization is related to the frequency with which he/she associate with, or come into contact with, members of demographic groups that include a disproportionate share of offenders (Sampson and Lauritsen 1990). Younger individuals experience a greater risk of violent victimization than older persons due to their greater likelihood of affiliating with other adolescents, who themselves are disproportionately involved in violence (Kennedy and Baron 1993; Sampson and Lauritsen 1990).

In so far as the subculture of violence thesis purports to demonstrate the existence of individuals who are normatively geared toward violence (Wolfgang and Ferracuti 1967), this theory can be further extended to the likelihood of victimization. This angle has been taken up by Singer (1981), who argues that the extent to which particular perceptions and misperceptions concerning the use of force are common to victims and offenders, these populations are not clear-cut, but rather they alternate in a network of subcultural relationships. Furthermore, subcultural norms embedded in a subculture of violence may place offenders in the role of victim in so far as these norms justify retaliation (Singer 1986).

Other theoretical frameworks applied to an understanding of the relationships between victim and offenders include social learning and control theories. Social learning theories, for example, have been used to explain intergenerational patterns of family violence (Fagan, Hansen, and Jang 1983), or the idea

that experiencing violence as a victim may result in the victim learning violent and aggressive behaviour (Megargee 1982). For social control theory, involvement in conventional activities may decrease the risk of both offending and victimization, as well as reducing the amount of time one has available to engage in delinquent activity, thereby indirectly reducing the risk of victimization (Lauritsen, Laub, and Sampson 1992).

During the past decade, a small group of researchers have begun to examine the issue of an overlap between adolescent victims and offenders. The initial, and most widely cited study in this area, was conducted by Gary Jensen and David Brownfield (1986), whose results reveal a strong positive association between interpersonal victimization and activities involving the search for fun or use of alcohol (i.e., cruising, partying, and going to bars). Importantly, they found that the risk of victimization increased with increased involvement in delinquent activities and, furthermore, that this relationship was both stronger and more consistent than involvement in other routines. They conclude that, "it is the 'criminogenic' potential of certain routines which accounts for their 'victimogenic' potential" (Jensen and Brownfield 1986: 93).

A number of studies have since emerged which build on the work of Jensen and Brownfield (1986). A review of their findings indicates relatively consistent support for an overlap of victim and offender populations (Lauritsen, Laub, and Sampson 1992; Lauritsen, Sampson, and Laub 1991; Sampson and Lauritsen 1990; Singer 1981; 1986), although this overlap may exist more in the case of violent than property offenses (Fagan, Piper, and Cheng 1987; Lauritsen, Sampson, and Laub 1991). While there is evidence of an overlap in victim and offender populations, however, one key remaining issue concerns the generality of such conclusions. In general, the focus thus far has been on the less serious crimes of assault and burglary (one notable exception being Singer (1986) who looks at victimization in terms of having been shot or stabbed). Moreover, to date the majority of studies are of the United States, which is unique in terms of its unusually high levels of violence and, therefore, is unlikely to be representative of other Western societies. Furthermore, aside from Wolfgang (1958) and Singer (1986), all of these studies have relied on self-report data. Self-report data have various

limitations, including validity concerns raised by the possibility of dishonest answers or outright failure to admit involvement in criminal activity. Furthermore, these surveys are primarily limited to respondents attending school and, therefore, miss the most serious delinquents and those most at risk of victimization.

Using self-report studies to examine the victim-offender overlap is impossible for the most serious crime of all: homicide. Due to the absence of a living victim, examining the link between offending and homicide victimization requires the use of alternative data sources to self-reports. To date, the only study of which this author is aware that looks at previous offense records of homicide victims and offenders is Wolfgang's Philadelphia study (1958), who found that for homicides committed in Philadelphia between 1948 and 1952, 64 percent of offenders and 47 percent of victims had previous arrest records. This study included all age groups and, thus, the findings are not specifically related to adolescents. The current study, in contrast, uses official homicide data pertaining to youths only.

Methodology

The data used in this analysis were generated by the Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, Statistics Canada. They cover all reported homicide cases from 1985 to 1995 involving victims aged 12 to 17. Information regarding the criminal records of homicide victims was obtained through a police check of the RCMP CPIC (Canadian Police Information Centre) database, the findings of which were then recorded on the Homicide Survey. Data examining criminal convictions are limited to five years, 1991-1995, as criminal conviction data were not collected before 1991. The goal of the present paper is not to test the various theories which have been proposed to explain the link between victimization and offending. Rather, the purpose is to assess whether preliminary support can be generated for understanding victim-offender relationships among Canadian youth homicide victims in terms of a victim-offender overlap. The results of this analysis should indicate whether further investigation using more detailed data is worth pursuing, at which time the various competing theories could be tested. Although it may be argued that homicide is more atypical than the sorts of offenses which

have been the focus of previous investigations of victim-offender links, this does not detract from the importance of its use in the current analysis. Importantly, Wolfgang (1958) did find evidence of a victim/offender overlap in his analysis of Philadelphia homicides. Furthermore, the difference between homicides and other crimes such as serious assaults is probably more a matter of degree than actual differences in the nature of the offenses. Therefore, given that victimization has been shown to predict significantly variation in offending with respect to serious assaults, it is important to examine whether this evidence extends to the most serious form of violence, homicide.

The variables which will be examined in this paper include the following: victim-offender relationships of victims aged 12 to 17 (categorized as spouse/lover, other family, friend/acquaintance, and stranger homicides), the frequency of previous offense records among youth homicide victims, the frequency with which both the homicide victim *and* offender have a previous offense record, the homicide motive in cases where the victim is aged 12 to 17, and the presence of alcohol in cases involving youth homicide victims.

Results

Examining an age breakdown of all homicide victims in Canada between 1985 and 1995 reveals that victims aged 12 to 17 do not constitute a sizeable proportion of the total victim count. In fact, only 4.5 percent (319) of all homicide victims fall into this category, which is an average of 29 per year. Thus, these data suggest that while adolescents are suspected of engaging in more activities that would put them at risk of becoming the victim of a crime, young persons in Canada are not in any great danger of being killed.

Examining the relationship of offenders to homicide victims aged 12 to 17 reveals that this age group has something to fear from family members. Combining the relationship categories of spouse/lover (4.5%) and other family members (26.4%) indicates that about 31 percent of all homicide victims between the ages of 12 and 17 were killed by a relative or someone with whom they were intimately involved. Although the situations leading

up to a killing in these circumstances are likely greatly varied, becoming the homicide victim of someone with whom you have an established relationship, in these cases likely extending over many years, is not the result of involvement in risky behaviours such as those accompanying delinquent activities. There is little reason to suspect that homicide victimization in such cases is linked to engaging oneself in criminal activity in the manner suggested by routine activities and the subculture of violence theories. Since being killed by a stranger, which occurred in 17.4 percent of cases, is probably the result of a chance encounter, these data suggest that only in about half of the cases does the possibility exist that victimization may be linked to previous offending. This is the proportion of victims aged 12 to 17 who were killed by a friend or acquaintance (51.7%), and these are the situations which are most conducive to theorizing about overlapping groups of offenders and victims.

Turning now to the key variables in the analysis, previous offense records, we discover that the overall proportion of Canadian homicide victims aged 12 to 17 with previous criminal records is relatively small. Of the 144 victims killed between 1991-1995 (the only years for which data on previous offense records were collected), 97 (67.4%) did not have a previous criminal record. In 13 cases the victim had a criminal record for a violent offense. 4 of these victims were murdered by a spouse/lover and another 5 were murdered by strangers, neither of which really fit with the notion that engaging in criminal behaviour is linked to future victimization. A slightly larger number of victims, 17, had a previous record for a property offense. In 10 of these cases, the victim was killed by a friend or acquaintance, perhaps suggesting that any increased likelihood of victimization resulting from engagement in criminal behaviour may occur more for property offenses than violent offenses. Finally, 4 cases involved victims with records for drug offenses committed in the past and 5 victims had previous records for other *Criminal Code*/federal statute offenses. In 8 cases, the previous criminal record was unknown. Overall, these data do not generate much support for the hypothesis that there is an overlap between victim and offender populations. If involvement in criminal behaviour is a risk factor for becoming the victim of a crime oneself, it rarely appears to put young persons in danger of the most serious form of victimization, that is, homicide.

To pursue the issue of past criminal records further, the previous offense records of both the offender and victim were examined. What is evident from Table 1 is that homicide cases of victims aged 12 to 17 are more likely to involve an *offender* with a past criminal record than a victim. In cases where the victim had no past convictions, 25 involved offenders convicted of a violent offense, 9 involved offenders with previous property offense convictions, 2 involved offenders with previous drug offense convictions, and 5 involved offenders with other *Criminal Code*/federal statute convictions. In contrast, if we look at those cases where the offender has no previous criminal convictions, there were only 9 cases in which the victim had a past offense record: 4 for violent offenses, 4 for property offenses, and 1 other *Criminal Code*/federal statute conviction. Excluding cases where the previous offense record was unknown for either the victim or offender (15 cases), there were 29 cases in which both parties were found to have prior convictions. In only 5 of these cases were both individuals previously convicted of a violent offense.

In general, then, these findings provide relatively weak support for the hypothesis that there is a link between victimization and offending. Overall, individuals 12 to 17 years of age who are subject to the most serious victimization of all appear to have had little involvement in criminal behaviour themselves. In contrast, it appears that the behaviour of at least some offenders convicted of criminal offenses in the past has escalated to a most serious level, where they now stand accused of murder. The proportion of cases in which both parties have a past record is small (about 20%). If involvement in a network of subcultural relationships leads to an alternation of roles as victims and offenders as suggested by Singer (1981), one would expect the overlap of offense records to be larger than was found here.

As Jensen and Brownfield (1986) found that interpersonal victimization is strongly related to activities involving alcohol use (such as partying and going to bars), examining data with respect to alcohol and drug use may indicate whether such findings can be generalized to young persons murdered in Canada. A breakdown of the alcohol and drug consumption of homicide victims aged 12 to 17 is unfortunately plagued by a large number of unknowns (64.9% of cases), therefore requiring

Table 1
 Previous criminal convictions of homicide victims aged 12 to 17 Years
 by offender previous convictions, Canada, 1991-1995

Offender's criminal record	Victim's criminal record					
	No criminal record	Criminal conviction- violent	Criminal conviction- property	Criminal conviction- drug offense	Criminal conviction- other CC/FS	Unknown
No criminal record	51 (35.17%)	4 (2.76%)	4 (2.76%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.69%)	2 (1.38%)
Crim. conviction- violence	25 (16.55%)	5 (3.45%)	6 (4.14%)	3 (2.07%)	1 (0.69%)	2 (1.38%)
Crim. conviction- property	9 (6.21%)	5 (3.45%)	6 (4.14%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.69%)	1 (0.69%)
Crim. conviction- drug offense	2 (1.38%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.69%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Crim. conviction- other CC/FS	5 (3.45%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.69%)	0 (0.0%)
Unknown	3 (3.49%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (1.16%)	6 (4.14%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)

Note: Data source for all tables: Homicide Survey, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics

caution when drawing any conclusions. Where data on alcohol and drug consumption are available, it is evident that, at least at the time of the killing, fewer than half of homicide victims 12 to 17 years of age appear to have been engaging in these kinds of activities. 63 (56.3%) of the 112 cases which provide data on alcohol/drug consumption report that no alcohol or drugs were found to have been consumed by the victim. In 31 cases (27.7%), there was evidence that alcohol had been ingested, in 8 cases (7.1%), there was evidence that drugs were ingested while, in 10 cases (8.9%), there was evidence of both drug and alcohol consumption. These findings could be interpreted as providing some limited support for the suggestion that risky activities and those involving the mutual pursuit of fun (such as drinking and partying) lead to an increased risk of victimization in the case of youth homicide.

Examining the homicide motive in cases involving victims 12 to 17 years of age may provide some further indication of the extent to which involvement in criminal behaviour is a risk factor for victimization. In particular, such data should provide an estimate of the proportion of young persons who are murdered during the commission of another criminal offense, such as a theft or robbery. Becoming a homicide victim under such circumstances is likely to be due to bad timing, or being in the wrong place at the wrong time, since it is unlikely that the original intent of the offender was to commit murder, but rather to carry out some other criminal activity. Where victims are placed at risk of being killed as a result of their own involvement in delinquent behaviour, it is more readily accepted that the motive in such cases would be something along the lines of revenge.

Table 2
 Motive of homicides involving victims aged 12 to 17 Years,
 Canada, 1985-1995^a

Motive	Frequency
Revenge	37 (14.4%)
Jealousy	10 (3.9%)
Argument/quarrel	65 (25.3%)
Finance/personal	2 (0.8%)
Crime-related	66 (25.7%)
No motive	18 (7.0%)
Other	59 (22.9%)
Total	257 (100.0%)

^a The motive was unknown in 62 cases which were subsequently excluded from the analysis.

Of the 257 cases for which data on the homicide motive were available, 66 (25.7%) youth victims were killed during a concomitant criminal offense (Table 2). Another 10 (3.9%) were killed out of jealousy. The deaths of these individuals are likely not the result of any engagement in criminal activity on their own part. In 37 cases (14.4%), the homicide was deemed to be

motivated by revenge. It is possible that this category houses those cases which have generated the small amount of support for a victim-offender link thus far. A more detailed examination of cases where the motive was reported as revenge is required to conclude with any confidence that these resemble the scenarios which theories like the subculture of violence have in mind in proposing a link between victimization and offending.

Conclusion

This paper set out to examine whether the link between victimization and offending that has been postulated by a number of researchers over the past decade is replicable in terms of young persons who are the victims of homicide in Canada. The preliminary results of this exploratory analysis suggest that this proposition does not hold true for the majority of Canadian youth homicide victims. Most of these victims do not have a record for previous criminal convictions and most were not found to be consuming drugs or alcohol at the time they were killed. Furthermore, there were even fewer cases where *both* the victim and the offender were found to have a previous conviction, and moreover, it was the homicide offender who was most likely to have been convicted of a criminal offense in the past. The relatively weak support generated for the existence of a victim/offender overlap in the present analysis may be a reflection of the nature of youth crime in Canada more generally. The large majority of crimes committed by youth in Canada are property crimes (Tanner 1996). Furthermore, violence by young people generally does not involve the use of knives or firearms, but rather consists of fist fights and other such means of physical force. Moreover, young people are more likely to be the victims rather than the offenders of violent crime in Canada. One implication of these patterns is that youth crime in Canada as a whole appears fairly minor in nature, with violent crime among young persons a relative rarity. Neither of these patterns imply the existence of a sizeable group of youths forming a homogenous pool of violent victims and offenders in Canada.

Overall, what is relatively clear from these findings is that what places young persons at risk of murder in Canada is likely to be something other than engagement in criminal behaviour.

What the risk factors are for Canadian youth homicide should be the subject of future research. A further recommendation is to undertake a more sophisticated analysis, which may be more supportive of the findings of previous research. Obtainability of data presents a considerable obstacle to carrying out such an analysis, due to the tight restrictions surrounding information on young offenders in Canada. To overcome this, as well as the problem of small case numbers, future analyses on this topic may wish to expand the age range under consideration to include, for example, 18 to 24 year olds. It is possible that these slightly older individuals may be involved in riskier lifestyles and more serious criminal activity, which may generate greater support for the link between victimization and offending than was found here. Also, there may be fewer unknown values in cases of older victims because their offense records may be longer or more serious, and thus police may be more likely to be aware of them when filling out reports. A second alternative would be to look at attempted murder victimization instead of homicides that have actually been committed. Using victims of unsuccessful homicides should enable the collection of information about the circumstances surrounding the victimization and the previous offense record of the victim. This may be one way of alleviating some of the difficulties which arise through the use of official statistics. Furthermore, it may also be the case that murders not successfully completed are more likely to involve an escalating conflict between two parties; with no pre-intention to commit murder, use of lethal weapons is less likely. These kinds of cases may be more likely to fit within the theoretical frameworks proposing that involvement in delinquency increases one's risk of victimization.

The results of the present analysis are particularly interesting when compared to Wolfgang's (1958) finding that a substantial number of homicide victims and offenders in Philadelphia between 1948 and 1952 had previous offense records. What remains to be seen is whether the current findings with respect to Canada turn out to be the exception or the rule. Regardless, the present results are a good reminder that the findings of social research are often bound by time and space.

Notes

1. I am indebted to Orest Fedorowycz at the Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, Statistics Canada, for providing me with the necessary data to do this analysis. Many thanks also to Julian Tanner, A.R. Gillis, and the anonymous reviewers for their advice on an earlier draft.
2. Centre of Criminology, University of Toronto, 130 St. George St., Room 8001, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5S 3H1. Tel.: 416-978-7323 Fax: 416-978-4195
3. Youth homicide victimization in general seems to have generated little research. The only studies which turned up during the literature search for the present paper were concerned with child victims, i.e., those victims aged 13 and under (Silverman, Riedel, and Kennedy 1990) or youth homicide offenders (Meloff and Silverman 1992) and, thus, there is little background information on Canadian youth homicide victims.

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