Reappraising Research on the Victim-Offender Overlap

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Apparent Facts

- Large proportion of victims are offenders and vice-versa
- Victimization among the strongest correlates of offending, and vice-versa
- Violence linkage seems to be the strongest pattern rather reliable across data sources
- Magnitude of the overlap differs under certain ecological conditions
Victimization Offending

Gun Carrying

Risk Heterogeneity

Offending
Core Research Questions: Puzzles

- What mechanisms account for the strong positive association between victimization and offending?
- Under what conditions is the overlap stronger or weaker?
- Do the same theoretical mechanisms predict each outcome?
Scientific Significance of the Overlap

- Prevention of interpersonal violence.
  - Target high-risk groups to maximize benefits
  - Rests on a common cause assumption
- Illuminate scope of leading theories of victimization and offending
- Reveal new insights about the evolution of disputes
- Reduce police officer use of force
Common Design Features

- Cross-sectional surveys
  - *Items assess prior 6 or 12 month victimization experiences, and offending (e.g., Add Health)*

- Longitudinal surveys
  - *Repeated panel designs (e.g., Pittsburgh Youth Study)*

- Hospital admissions, mortality files, and official police data (e.g., arrests)
State of the Evidence

- Little of the overlap explained by standard theoretical processes or adjustments for confounding
- Exhausted the pool of theoretically-derived assumptions from *mainstream* criminology
- Recent work has clarified but not unmasked the complex sources of this phenomenon
- Few major advances in recent years
Limitations of Method I

- Survey items create questionable dichotomy, masks incident dynamics
  - Obscures characteristics of conflicts, and the victim’s potential role
  - Single items actually capture elements of offending and victimization in an incident
  - May yield strong positive, but artificial correlation
Continued.

- Blunt research tools: may cause some of the correlation that doesn’t exist
Victim: “In the past year have you been physically attacked by someone you did or did not know?”

Offender: “In the past year did you attack someone with a weapon such as a knife, stick, gun, or club?”
Person A and B in a Dispute

Person A: insults B in front of his friends
Person B: levels threats of violence at A
Person A: responds with moderate physical aggression: forceful shove against wall
Person B: then strikes A on face, fracturing his jaw causing him to hit the ground
Person B: exits the situation with his friends
Limitations of Method II

- Non-recursive pathways, complicates causal assumptions
  - Difficult to isolate causal mechanisms
  - Obscures "true" effect of victimization on offending, and vice-versa
  - Can be easily resolved with "blunt or aggregate" survey items
Limitations of Method III

Temporal ordering:

- Some attempt to minimize causal problems by specifying prior year lags
- Yet lags omit information between years
- Difficult to know (with current data) if the victimization and offending events are related
- Comes at a cost to empirical clarity
- Ned to isolate “initial” event (amorphous)
Continued.

- Lack of within-person designs; few studies control for unobserved confounds
  - *Effects may be over-stated*
  - *Yet they aren’t the panacea*
Limitations of Theory and Scientific Scope

- Disciplines speak past one another
  - Large literature on aggression in psychology and social psych of direct relevance to the overlap
  - Narrow criminological focus
- Hypotheses framed from standard crim. theories
  - Other theories neglected, but hold potential clues
Ways Forward I

- Focus on design challenges: implications of item definitions, and response patterns
- Study non-offender victims, and non-violence
- Develop new datasets with variables from broader list of social science theories
- Study social interactions
Ways Forward II

- Experimental research: competitive games, interactional dynamics, aggressive intent
  - Allows the manipulation of “aggression” to isolate causal mechanisms
- Develop exp. prevention programs as a pathway to understand mechanisms behind overlap
  - School-based, arrest based, court-based
  - Does Z reduce prob. of victims becoming offenders?
Ways Forward III

- Examine mechanisms unfolding during early developmental periods
  - Toddlerhood and earlier
  - Evocative traits
  - Longitudinal data usually omit infant and toddler years
  - Prospective designs as the standard
Ways Forward IV

- Expand the definition of what constitutes “offending” – rely on operational definitions of aggression or coercion
  - Precise understanding of the behaviors that are correlated with victimization risk
  - Shift the focus of research to a broader range of behaviors
Concluding Thoughts

- Learned a great deal from null findings
- The sources of the overlap have significant implications for theory and prevention
- Inter-disciplinary focus may be most profitable: examples: formal deterrence, terrorism
- Requires new theoretical and data tools