

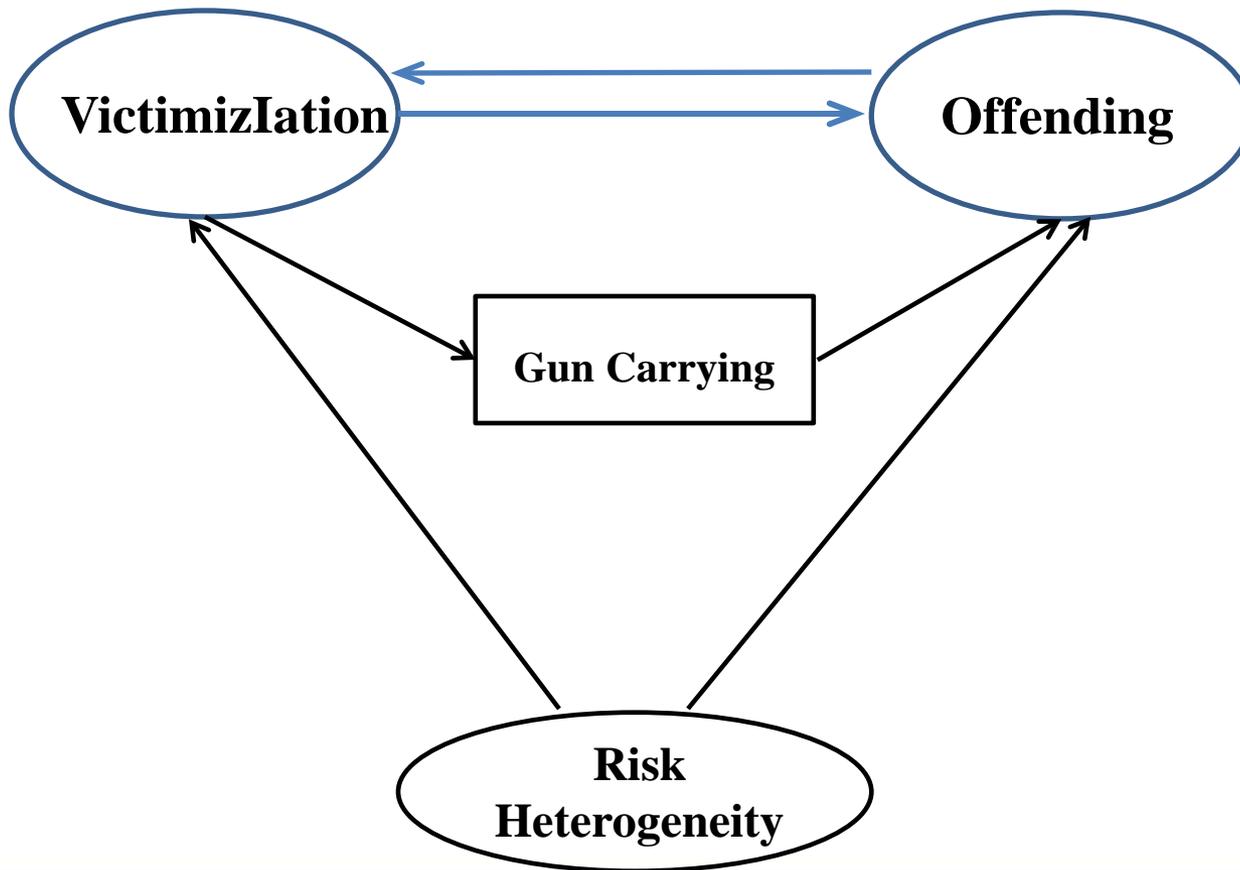
# Reappraising Research on the Victim-Offender Overlap

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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



# 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