

## **Predictors of Violent Behaviors in Youth: Implications for Prevention and Treatment**

Stephanie L. Bruhn, Kathryn R. Wilson, Mary Fran Flood, and David J. Hansen  
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

### **Poster Presented at the 39<sup>th</sup> Annual Convention of the Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies, Washington, DC, November, 2005**

#### **Introduction**

Violent behavior continues to be a growing concern for every member of society. As violent behavior increases and reports of the impact of violence are distributed, citizens become concerned for their safety and want solutions to prevent violence. Professionals have difficulty gaining a good understanding of why people become violent. Youth who engage in violent behaviors present an even greater challenge to professionals who work with these youth.

Research has shown that between 9 and 50% of White youth reported carrying a gun (McKeown, Jackson, & Valois, 1998). In addition, over 37% of students indicated participating in a fight within the last 30 days (McKeown et al., 1998). Examining characteristics which may make a youth more likely to engage in violent behaviors is essential to designing effective prevention programs.

Sussman, Dent, and McCullar (2000) investigated the relationship between peer group self-identification and violence and found that high-risk youth who identify with particular groups are more likely to act out aggressively. Peers are not the only ones who influence youth. Research has shown that familial factors such as witnessing domestic violence are associated with externalizing problems (Elze, Stiffman, & Doré, 1999). Poor or absent parenting has also been shown to relate to increased juvenile homicide (Shumaker & Prinz, 2000).

Individual risk factors such as substance use have also been shown to predict poor outcomes among youth (McKeown et al., 1998). In addition, age of the youth has been examined as a potential risk factor for violent behaviors. For example, youth who engage in aggressive behaviors at an earlier age are more likely to engage in violent behaviors as adolescents and adults (Chan, 2004). Gender has also been extensively studied with regard to its impact on risk of engaging in violent behaviors. Chan (2004) suggested that males are more likely than females to engage in violent behaviors at earlier ages.

The purpose of the present study was to examine risk factors which may be predictive of violent behaviors in youth such as arson, cruelty towards animals, assault, homicidal attempts, and sexual perpetration on others. It was hypothesized that being male would be more and older would be predictive of violent behaviors. Furthermore, it was hypothesized that a history of physical abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect; exposure to domestic violence; being removed from the home due to abuse; truancy; and divorce would be predictive of these violent behaviors in youth.

#### **Method**

The sample consisted of 197 youth with a mean age of 12.67 ( $SD = 3.02$ ; Range = 4 to 18 years) who completed psychological evaluations on the psychiatric unit of a medical hospital located in Midwestern United States. Participants were 81.1% Caucasian, 8.7% Multi-racial, 5.6% African-American, 2.6% Hispanic, 1.5% Native American, and .5% Asian-American. Male youth made up 66% of the sample.

Participants were individually interviewed and completed a standard battery of psychological assessments including measures of personality, anxiety, depression, intelligence, achievement, and suicidality upon admission to the hospital.. If parents or caregivers were involved in the hospitalization, attempts were made to obtain parent reports of the youth's current and past functioning.

Trained graduate students coded several demographic variables based on the clinical interview as well as a collateral file review. These variables included referral issue, diagnoses, current living situation, presence of current and past suicidal ideation and self-harmful behaviors, suicide attempts, presence of psychotic symptoms, anti-social behaviors, physically and verbally aggressive behaviors, legal history, substance abuse history, school variables, therapy history, presence of any significant life events (e.g., death of a family member), abuse history, perpetration issues, social history, and out-of-home placement history. These variables were coded based on youth self-report with corroborating information from other's reports or file reviews whenever possible.

## Results

Bivariate correlations indicated that arson was significantly associated with truancy, divorce, removal from the home due to abuse, history of physical abuse, sexual abuse, and exposure to domestic violence. Assault significantly correlated with truancy, removal from the home due to abuse, history of neglect, and history of sexual abuse. Truancy and a history of sexual abuse were significantly associated with cruelty to animals. Homicidal attempts significantly correlated with truancy, removal from the home due to abuse, history of neglect, history of sexual abuse, and exposure to domestic violence. Finally, sexual perpetration was significantly associated with truancy, removal from the home due to abuse, history of physical and sexual abuse, history of neglect, and exposure to domestic violence. See Table 1 for specific bivariate correlations.

Regression analyses indicated that a history of sexual abuse and divorce were predictive of arson,  $R^2 = .22$ ,  $F(12, 177) = 4.21$ ,  $p < .001$ . A history of sexual abuse and a history of being removed from the home due to abuse were predictive of assaultive behaviors,  $R^2 = .15$ ,  $F(12, 177) = 2.51$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Another regression examining predictors of cruelty towards animals was significant,  $R^2 = .17$ ,  $F(12, 177) = 3.02$ ,  $p < .01$ , with a history of sexual abuse contributing to the model. A history of physical and sexual abuse were predictive of homicidal attempts,  $R^2 = .20$ ,  $F(12, 175) = 3.68$ ,  $p < .001$ . A final regression analysis indicated a history of exposure to domestic violence was predictive of sexual perpetration on others,  $R^2 = .16$ ,  $F(12, 175) = 2.68$ ,  $p < .01$ . Interestingly, neither age nor gender significantly predicted violent behaviors in youth. See Table 2 for specific beta weights.

## Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to investigate risk factors which may be predictive of violent behaviors in youth such as arson, cruelty towards animals, assault, homicidal attempts, and sexual perpetration on others. It was hypothesized that being male and older would be predictive of violent behaviors in youth. Furthermore, it was hypothesized that a history of physical abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect; exposure to domestic violence; a history of being placed outside the home due to abuse; truancy; and divorce would be predictive of these violent behaviors in youth.

Overall, there was some support for one hypothesis in the current study. A history of sexual abuse, physical abuse, exposure to domestic violence, divorce, and being removed from the home due to abuse were predictive of several violent behaviors. On the other hand, a history of neglect and truancy were not predictive of any violent behaviors. However, there was no support for the hypothesis regarding gender and age of the youth. Specifically, being a male youth was not predictive of violent behaviors. In addition, being an older youth did not significantly predict more or less violent behaviors in youth.

Results suggest that identifying youth who may possess some of these characteristics and intervening would be beneficial in possibly preventing violent behaviors. Prevention programs designed to get these youth involved in positive activities, help them learn problem solving strategies, and positive coping skills would be beneficial.

In addition, treatment for youth who have engaged in violent behaviors could address issues that coincide with victimization factors such as a history of sexual abuse to help those youth develop and use positive coping skills rather than violence. Increasing psychological understanding of youth at risk for violent offenses and subsequent interventions can be used in various settings (e.g., schools), which may be more effective when addressed by professionals and caregivers across multiple settings.

Table 1. Bivariate Relationships between Risk Factors and Violent Behaviors

	Arson	Assault	Cruelty To Animals	Homicidal Attempts	Sexual Perpetration
Physical Abuse	.18**	-.05	-.03	-.06	.19**
Sexual Abuse	.35***	.19**	.27***	.32***	.21**
Neglect	.27***	.14*	.11	.16*	.19**
Divorce	.19**	-.01	-.03	-.02	-.01
Truancy	.14*	.17*	.17*	.22**	.15*
Exposure to Domestic Violence	.18**	.08	-.02	.18**	.28***
Removed from Home	.26***	.24**	.06	.21**	.14*
Gender	-.04	-.03	-.07	-.07	-.02
Age	-.01	-.11	.08	-.05	-.07

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

Table 2. Beta Weights for Risk Factors and Violent Behaviors

	Arson	Assault	Cruelty to Animals	Homicidal Attempts	Sexual Perpetration
Physical Abuse	-.01	-.25	-.25	-.47**	.25
Sexual Abuse	.61***	.34*	.72***	.60***	.10
Neglect	.07	-.03	.06	-.01	.05
Divorce	.01*	.001	.002	.002	-.004
Truancy	.06	.06	.11	.08	.04
Exposure to Domestic Violence	-.02	-.04	-.15	.03	.11*
Removed from Home	.12	.24**	.004	.18	.01

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$