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Title: Contextual influences on peer relationships: Implications for youth violence prevention

Text:

A systematic approach to youth violence prevention requires understanding of the factors that influence violence. While emphasis is often placed on examining individual-level risk and protective factors for youth violence perpetration, a comprehensive understanding of all factors that influence violence must take into account the complex interplay between individual, relationship, and contextual factors.

A number of contextual characteristics that increase the probability of youth violence have been identified. For example, crime and violence tend to be highest in areas characterized by high concentrations of poverty and unemployment, high levels of residential instability, family disruption, crowded housing, and low community participation. School factors, such as dropout rates and school size, have also been linked to increased rates of violence in schools.

Peer relationships are one of the key contexts that are most salient in adolescence. A comprehensive account of the role of peer relationships in youth violence requires

recognition of the connection between the developing individual and his or her social contexts. Peer groups represent social contexts that influence individual phenomena, and peer groups are nested within other contexts, such as neighborhoods and schools, that also influence individual factors. For example, studies have examined how interpersonal adjustment during adolescence is influenced by the interaction between the behaviors of individuals and the characteristics of the peer group to which they belong. Such studies suggest that the determinants of youth outcomes such as violence are not invariant across contexts but that they depend on the interactions between contexts and peer influences.

The proposed symposium will explore the complex interrelationships between individual, peer, and contextual factors, and the influence of those relationships on youth outcomes. The first paper will examine the extent to which parental influences moderate school climate and peer influences on aggression in middle school youth. The second paper will focus on how setting-level characteristics at both the school and classroom level and peer norms for aggression influence beliefs about aggression and aggressive behaviors. The third paper examines the influence of neighborhood characteristics on youth outcomes, with particular emphasis on understanding how changes in neighborhood (due to moving) affect disruption of peer networks, and in turn influence youth outcomes. The discussant will address important implications for youth violence prevention efforts for the findings presented in the symposium, and future opportunities to extend the work and apply findings to prevention research.

Theme Groups: 1 Key social relationships

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