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## Introduction

Violence by and against youth, ranging from gang-related drive-by shootings to mass killings during school, has attracted considerable public and scholarly attention since 1990 (see, e.g., Cloud 1999; Howell 2009; Loeber and Farrington 1998; Office of the Surgeon General 2001; Thornton et al. 2002; Zimring 1998). Some social commentators speak of “super-predators” or violent offenders as if there is some unique characteristic that can be used to identify those adolescents who will become involved in violence (Capaldi and Patterson 1996; Fox 1996). No such label or stigma accurately captures the variety of behavior engaged in by adolescents. In fact, the notion that purely “violent offenders” per se exist may be open to debate (Capaldi and Patterson 1996; Farrington 1994; Klein 1984).

In his examination of the court careers of juvenile offenders in Arizona, Snyder (1998, 429) found that individuals who committed the violent offenses of murder and non-negligent manslaughter, kidnapping, violent sexual assault, robbery, and aggravated assault were a rarity. The vast majority of individuals were classified as non-chronic offenders (fewer than four offenses) with no serious offenses (burglary, serious larceny, motor vehicle theft, arson, weapons offenses, and drug trafficking) or violent offenses. Furthermore, the majority of those referred for violent offenses also committed nonviolent offenses. This finding lends support to Klein’s (1995) contention that most juvenile offenders participate in “cafeteria-style” delinquency, making the juvenile who specializes in violence indeed rare. Thus, when we use the term “violent offender” (or “violence victim”), it is important to remember that we are referring to individuals who commit a variety of offenses, only some of which are violent.

Our primary goal in writing this book is to demystify youth violence by identifying factors associated with youths' involvement in violence, both as perpetrators and, importantly, as victims. We examine youth violence, gang membership (arguably a key factor in understanding much youth violence and victimization), and violent victimization while also focusing on the unique effects of sex and race/ethnicity on these forms of violence. We frame our work around our own research, a large school-based survey of middle-school students. To understand youth violence better, we will merge the relatively recent public health perspective with the more traditional criminological literature. During the past fifteen years or so, research and policy dealing with youth violence has moved from talking about theoretical explanations for the phenomenon and using these perspectives to justify youth policy (such as labeling theory and its attendant non-intervention strategies or deterrence theory and its more recent accountability legislation) toward taking a public health perspective that outlines risk factors associated with youth violence. Adopting this approach, we examine the risk factors associated with youths' involvement in violence as offenders, gang members, and victims and propose a theoretical framework that links these separate risk factors into a model for understanding youth violence.

Another focus of this book is the connection among youth violence, gang membership, and victimization. Recent research has tackled gangs, drugs, and violence (Howell and Decker 1999); the relationship between gang membership and violence (Esbensen and Huizinga 1993; Hill et al. 1999; Maxson 1999; Thornberry et al. 2003); the link between delinquent behavior, including gang membership, and victimization (Loeber, Kalb, and Huizinga 2001; J. Miller 2001; Peterson, Taylor, and Esbensen 2004); the criminal behavior of gang and non-gang youth (Huff 1998); the intersections of gang membership, delinquent peers, and delinquent behavior (Battin-Pearson et al. 1998); and the relationship between violence and victimization (Esbensen and Huizinga 1991; Lauritsen, Sampson, and Laub 1991). To the best of our knowledge, however, no single work has examined how these three types of violence overlap, and few studies have considered the extent to which sex and race/ethnicity affect these relationships. Among the questions we will explore are:

- What is the prevalence of the various forms of youth violence? What is the overlap among the three types of violence?
- Are there variations by sex and race/ethnicity in the prevalence of youth violence?
- What are the risk factors associated with youth violence? What are the independent and cumulative effects of these risk factors? And are there differences by sex and race/ethnicity?

## Data Sources on Youth Violence

To better appreciate some of the issues associated with youth violence, it is important to understand the sources of information about the phenomenon. While we provide in-depth discussion of data sources in subsequent chapters, we believe it is important to review the main sources of information about the nature and scope of youth violence. Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) maintained by the Federal Bureau of Investigation provide the most commonly cited information about crime, including juvenile crime, in the United States. These data, reported annually by law enforcement agencies throughout the United States, include crimes known to the police, arrests, and crimes cleared by arrest, and they are useful for providing one picture of who offends and how offending changes over time. It is important to note that the scope and nature of reporting has changed throughout the history of the UCR. Arrest records were not reported separately by age, sex, and race until 1952; all fifty states were not represented until 1960; and data about arrestees' ethnicity were collected only between 1980 and 1987, when the federal Office of Management and Budget's authorization to collect these data expired (Federal Bureau of Investigation 2004).

Using UCR data, youth violence can be described in a variety of ways. For example, we can look at the total number of juveniles arrested or the relative number of arrests of juveniles (i.e., X number of arrests per Y number of juveniles, or "rates"). Using rates can answer questions about the proportion of the youth population that has been arrested for violent crime and whether juveniles' arrests for violence are higher now than they were in the past. Caution must be used, however, because low base numbers for some offenses—particularly for serious violent offenses—can give the appearance of huge increases in offending over time when the actual increase in the number of offenses is in fact small. Other useful questions we could ask to help understand the scope of youth violence are: What percentage of all arrests of juveniles is for violent offenses? For what percentage of all violent arrests are juveniles responsible? In addition, we could ask how these percentages have changed over time and how they are distributed by sex and race/ethnicity.

Clearance rates provide a different set of information by reporting the number of crimes that are solved or cleared by arrest rather than the number of offenders arrested for a crime. This distinction is important, given the group nature of adolescent offending. Snyder and Sickmund (1999, 63) report that youths are "twice as likely as adults to commit serious violent crimes in groups." One consequence of this tendency to engage in group activities is that arrest data may overestimate the number of offenses committed by juveniles (but not the number of offenders), and data on crimes cleared by arrest may underestimate the number of juvenile offenders for the same reason (i.e., although five juvenile offenders might be arrested for committing one crime together, only one crime is actually cleared as a result of these five arrests).

The National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) is another source of information on the prevalence, frequency, and type of violent victimization in the United States, as well as some information about violent offenders, from victims' perceptions of their aggressors. The NCVS, a nationally representative survey of households, has been used to compare statistics on crime from other data sources, such as the UCR. Because the NCVS surveys ask about experiences of victimization, they can uncover and document crime that is not captured in law enforcement statistics. For example, crimes not reported to the authorities or that do not come to the attention of authorities would not be included in the UCR, but they could appear in the NCVS.

The influential self-report research conducted by Short and Nye (1958) initiated a new trend in the study of delinquency and youth violence. Juveniles' self-reports about involvement in violence provides another piece of the total picture of youth violence, adding to arrest data captured by law enforcement and data reported by victims of crime. Early self-report research, however, often focused on more minor behavior than violence. In the late 1970s, self-report studies started to include serious behavior, providing better information about youth violence and even serious violence. Many self-report studies have been cross-sectional (one-shot) in nature. If conducted with representative samples, these designs can provide a wealth of information about the nature of youth violence, but are unable to disentangle the temporal ordering issue (e.g., which came first: the potential "cause" or the observed "effect?"). Longitudinal (panel or cohort) studies of delinquency, while less common due to their time-, labor-, and resource-intensive nature, allow causal relationships to be examined. Trends in youth violence can be examined using data from several nationally representative projects. The annual Monitoring the Future (MTF) survey, for example, assesses self-reported drug use and delinquency, as well as a host of other issues, among high-school seniors (see, e.g., Johnston et al. 2006); the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, conducted by the U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics, gathers information about behavior such as sexual activity, status offending, drug use and sales, delinquency (but not serious violence), and gang involvement; and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey includes various items regarding weapons and fighting (see, e.g., Centers for Disease Control 2004). These studies do not include measures of more serious violent behavior, however. Several longitudinal panel studies—including the Program of Research on the Causes and Correlates of Delinquency studies (Huizinga et al. 2003; Loeber et al. 2003; Thornberry et al. 2003), Seattle Social Development Study (Hawkins et al. 2003), and Montreal Study (Tremblay et al. 2003)—examine serious violence but do not use nationally representative samples, so caution must be used in generalizing findings from them.

## Limitations of the Data

Self-report data reflect youths' reports of their actual behavior; law enforcement data reflect a societal response to youths' alleged behavior; and victimization data reflect victims' perceptions of offenders and crime. Further, these data sources have different implications for the picture of adolescent offending and victimization. For example, law enforcement estimates may exaggerate sex and racial/ethnic gaps in offending, while self-report data may underestimate these gaps, especially if certain youths are more likely than others to under-report their involvement in violence. None of these data sources is a perfect measure, and one must keep in mind the purposes and limitations of each.

Several weaknesses are inherent in law enforcement statistics. First, information is generally provided in aggregate format, making comparisons across sex, race/ethnicity, and community virtually impossible. In fact, ethnicity often is not recorded or reported (Federal Bureau of Investigation 2004). Second, only information that comes to the attention of the authorities appears in official records. Thus, little information can be garnered about the "dark figure of crime"—those crimes that do not receive official attention. Third, the "dark figure" problem is made worse in the UCR, as some agencies (approximately 7%) do not participate, and others provide only partial reporting (Federal Bureau of Investigation 2004). Finally, since official statistics technically measure only official responses to behavior, they may not accurately represent the actual amount of violent behavior (Geis 1965). This is compounded by the fact that, "if ethnic or racial groups differ in their inclination to report crime to authorities, or if crimes committed by certain groups are more likely to result in an arrest, these factors can bias estimates of racial differences in offending" (D. Hawkins et al. 2000, 1). Another cautionary note with regard to UCR data is that Hispanics (an ethnicity) are often counted as whites (a racial category), thus confounding race and ethnicity (Walker, Spohn, and DeLone 2006). Consequently, arrest statistics cannot be compared directly with some other data sources, including data from our sample.

While using the NCVS for comparisons is helpful in examining patterns in the nature of and trends in crime, the limitations of these data make it difficult to use them as the only source of information about violence—especially when broken down by age and by race/ethnicity. Specifically, only crimes against victims over age 11 are included, and the age and race/ethnicity of perpetrators depend on victims' recall and perceptions, which may be influenced not only by the stress associated with victimization but also by perceptions of who commits crime (Hawkins, Laub, and Lauritsen 1998; D. Hawkins et al. 2000; Walker, Spohn, and DeLone 2006).

Self-report data also have limitations. Although self-report studies are now well accepted in the field of criminology, it is still common, for example, to hear concerns that respondents lie either by not admitting their violations or by exaggerating them. To date, studies have generally found support for the reliability

and validity of self-report measures of offending (Hindelang, Hirschi, and Weis 1981; Junger-Tas and Marshall 1999). Differences in reliability and validity, however, may exist in terms of the types of measures used and demographic characteristics of respondents. While self-report data appear to be reliable and valid across sex (Knight et al. 2004; Sampson 1985), there is mixed evidence of their validity by race/ethnicity and by seriousness of offense (Huizinga 1991, 62). In a recent review, Farrington, Loeber, and Stouthamer-Loeber (2003) concluded that there does appear to be a tendency for African American boys and girls to under-report their involvement in delinquent activity more frequently than their white counterparts. By contrast, Knight and his colleagues (2004) found a reasonable level of agreement in reporting delinquency among racial/ethnic groups, although more so for comparisons between whites and Hispanics than between whites and African Americans.

The different limitations associated with data sources about crime are especially important to keep in mind when thinking about the relationship between sex or race/ethnicity and youth violence. Debate still exists as to whether minorities' over-representation in the juvenile and criminal justice systems results from discrimination or from a tendency among minorities to commit more crime than their white counterparts (Gibbons 1997; Russell 1998; Walker, Spohn, and DeLone 2006; Wilbanks 1987). Influencing this debate is the finding that racial/ethnic differences in offending appear substantial in official statistics, but are less pronounced in self-report data (Elliott and Ageton 1980; Huizinga and Elliott 1986; Walker, Spohn, and DeLone 2006). A similar debate exists about whether violence among girls is on the rise, especially compared with rates for boys. UCR data tend to reflect drastic increases in girls' violent offending and a narrowing of the sex gap in violence, but the NCVS and self-report data show stable trends in both girls' offending and the sex gap in offending (Steffensmeier et al. 2005).

The data on which this book is based are self-reported by a large sample of middle-school students in sites across the United States. The richness of these data allow us to examine the overlap of youth violence, gang membership, and victimization; the factors associated with these experiences; and whether and how these factors vary by sex and race/ethnicity. In addition, using self-report data, in which information is collected about a variety of behaviors, may provide more information than police or court referral data, which usually report information only for the offense (or for the most serious of the offenses) for which an individual was arrested.

## Plan for the Book

Our goal in writing this book is to provide a comprehensive assessment of youth violence in American society in the new millennium. We are constantly bombarded with visions of youth violence, ranging from the infamous school shootings in Columbine, Colorado, to gang-related murders, and reports and information about youth violence are readily accessible. Staff members at the National

Gang Center, for example, comb news outlets nationwide and post gang-related articles on the website at <http://www.iir.com/nygc/summaries.cfm>. Even a brief look might lead the average person to believe that our nation's communities are overrun with gang violence. Of particular interest in this book is the examination of the extent to which common myths and stereotypes accurately describe the nature of youth violence. To accomplish these objectives, we have organized the book into three parts.

Part I, "Understanding Youth Violence," consists of two chapters. Chapter 2 presents an overview of approaches to understanding youth violence, including the risk factor approach and more traditional criminological explanations for youth violence. In Chapter 3, we describe the study, including the measures of risk factors and theoretical perspectives on which our discussions of youth violence are based.

Part II, "Types of Youth Violence," comprises three chapters that provide descriptive accounts of specific types of youth violence and one chapter in which we explore the overlap in the three types of violence. In the first three chapters of Part II, we explore the risk factors associated with each type of violence, as well as the unique roles of sex and race/ethnicity in the prevalence and explanation of offending. In Chapter 4, we provide a detailed account of violent offending, placing youth violence in recent historical context and assessing the nature of youths' violent offending. During the past twenty years, youth gangs have received considerable attention in the media and have become synonymous with youth violence. Because of the prominence of gangs in popular culture, Chapter 5 presents a review of youth gangs and explores the extent to which youths who belong to gangs differ, in terms of offending and risk factors, from youth who are not involved in gangs. Chapter 6 represents the "opposite side of the coin" of youth violence: violent victimization, which we view as a major component of the youth violence experience. Chapter 6 examines violent victimization and scrutinizes more closely the relationship between victimization and gang membership.

In Chapter 7, we turn our attention to the overlap among the three types of violence reviewed in Chapters 4–6. To what extent are youths present in one, two, or all three categories of violence? We then examine the cumulative effect of risk factors on behavior, specifically violent offending—that is, does the presence of multiple risk factors or the presence of risk factors in multiple domains increase the probability of offending? In Chapter 7 we also explore the extent to which the various risk factors influence youth violence when controlling for other factors.

Part III, "Preventing and Responding to Youth Violence," consists of two chapters. In Chapter 8, we present and test a theoretical framework for understanding youth violence, and in Chapter 9, we review potential responses to youth violence. Importantly, throughout the book we pay special attention to the unique roles of sex and race/ethnicity in youth violence. In light of our findings, we discuss the merits of gender- and race/ethnicity-specific programs in Chapter 9.