

# Today's Offender, Tomorrow's Victim: Analyzing the Connections Between Offenders and Victims

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## Abstract

This paper examines the link between victims and offenders and how these roles are often interchangeable when it comes to a youth's involvement in crime. Usually, this connection is disregarded because of the focus on the immediate situation and not the youth's experiences with both roles. Because of this strong association between offenders and victims, the focus of this paper is about what stops a victim from becoming an offender and vice versa. The aspects focused on are individual and social factors, as well as the interactions and overlap between these factors. Generally, it was found that the criminal justice system and social service supports tend to only focus on individual factors while ignoring the social environmental aspects. This paper demonstrates the importance of not only acknowledging a youth's role as both an offender and victim, but also the importance of addressing all aspects around how and why they got involved in criminal activity. By understanding the significance of these factors, this information can be used and integrated into the criminal justice system to help youth reduce their involvement in crime or to provide supports that address the cycle of victimization and offending.

## Introduction

In many societies, the view of youth involves the belief that childhood ends at eighteen years of age and adulthood begins. Yet, this is not always the case, as the age range used to describe youth is continuously being expanded. For some, the definition of youth can start at birth and can include individuals up to age 26 and even higher in some cases, which may make the definition of what makes a youth unclear. This changing and variable age range also modifies how youth are viewed and what is expected of them at specific points in their lives. For example, some people may believe that once a young person turns eighteen, then they are entirely on their own and responsible for becoming self-sufficient. However, becoming an independent adult can be very difficult, especially when an individual has other social factors and personal experiences that may impact them. In some cases, a youth may even be at-risk due to their involvement in risky behaviours, attitudes, perceptions, and experiences that may result in undesirable outcomes. Many voluntary behaviours like substance abuse, gang involvement, or premarital sex are risky because they can put the youth into a more exposed situation. These behaviours can make transitioning into adulthood even harder than it already is. However, some situations are outside of control for the youth, like exposure to maltreatment.

One of the external factors that may impact a youth's development and ability to become independent is by being victimized. Being a victim can negatively impact a young person's life experiences. Victimization may include being a victim of crime, as well as experiencing maltreatment and adverse childhood experiences (Wylie & Rufino, 2018). In addition to being a victim of crime, being the offender, or the person who causes harm, can also affect youth, as being involved with crime impacts their decisions to participate in other risky behaviours like being involved with drugs and alcohol, socializing with deviant or dangerous individuals, behaviors that contribute to injuries and violence, tobacco use, and truancy. The general belief is that that victims and offenders are mutually exclusive groups and that an individual can only belong to one or the other. However, this is not always the case as an adolescent can be both a victim and an offender. This is a fascinating relationship as is it common for offenders to have a history of being victimized, and similarly, for victims of crime to also be involved in criminal behaviour. The relationship between victim and offender is intersecting and reciprocal, which can have implications for a youth's future and further involvement in crime.

Being both a victim and an offender can change how a youth views themselves and what they see as reasonable behaviour, especially when they become deeply entrenched in the cycle

of crime and violence. This affects their behaviour because the way they act is also influenced by how they view themselves and their knowledge of both the victim and offender roles. They then may be more likely to take on the behaviours in one of those roles if they view themselves as primarily a victim or an offender. But they may also choose to act in a way that disassociates them from a certain label. For example, a youth that is involved with gangs may not see themselves as a victim, or they may see the crimes as necessary, so they act in a way that enforces more delinquent behaviour. Experiencing both sides can also change their self-view. For example, in experiencing each role an individual may alter how they approach their actions, as they become more aware of the impact it has on others. Both roles affect youth in different ways, but it is also possible that the intersection of these roles can create many different and unique situations that affect youth in various ways, which can show the importance of addressing both positions together.

Not all youth who are exposed to victimization become offenders, and not all that offend have been victimized. There can be many different reasons why these patterns do not always occur, but individual and social factors have some impact on whether a young person will be involved in both roles, or just one. Individual factors include a youth's personal characteristics and chosen behaviours, while social factors are elements outside of the individual, like the neighbourhood they live in and the people they associate with. This paper examines how these two types of social factors can stop victims from becoming offenders and vice versa. In addition, the paper explores how knowledge of these factors can provide better support to youth that can help them work through their issues and prevent them from becoming further entrenched in crime. Developing a better understanding of how these roles intersect can be beneficial to understand how these relationships are connected and how they influence each other, so one can have a better understanding of how youth become at-risk and involved in crime.

### Individual Factors

Commonly, when considering offenders and victims, the focus tends to be on the individual characteristics and experiences of the youth in question. The emphasis is on what the individual has done or how they have been victimized, which tends to ignore surrounding factors affecting the situation. However, it is essential that individual factors be examined in order to understand the similarities and differences between offenders and victims, as well as what factors can help stop one of those identities from transforming into the other. The background of the individual, including gender, ethnicity, class, marital status,

and age, all impact leisure activities, vocational activities and professional activities that a person may be involved in (Pauwels & Svensson, 2011, p. 165). In their research conducted in two European cities, Pauwels and Svensson (2011) found gender and immigration status to be more significant predictors of a higher level of offending in all types of crime, compared to factors like family structure, low self-control, lifestyle risk, and victimization (p.170). These results could be due to males being more willing to participate in risky behaviours, or because they are more likely to have a combination of characteristics that contribute an increase chance of offending, like aggression and impulsivity. In addition, immigration status could also be significant due to the intersection of different inequalities that immigrants face, like socioeconomic background and racism. Therefore, if a victim does not have these significant background characteristics then they may be less likely to offend in the future.

Aside from gender and immigration status, another significant impact for youth arises from personality factors. One of the main characteristics is the person's level of aggression. Van Gelder, Averdijk, Eisner, and Ribaud (2015) found that the level of aggression explains why some people may resort to violence and offending after they have been victimized because they are more likely to act out violently (p. 669). A young person's aggression level may make them more likely to behave badly or retaliate because of the previous victimization they have experienced. They may also be more likely to offend or resort to violence if they have a low tolerance for frustration, no matter if they had been a victim or not. An individual's level of risk-taking is also important, as it can lead a person to offend due to their lack of concern for the possible consequences, which shows that victims who do not become offenders may lack these features. Other traits like low intellectual capacity and a lack of future orientation may also be able to differentiate between individuals who become offenders or victims, but not enough research has been done to know for certain (TenEyck & Barnes, 2018, p.70). Another individual factor that has gained much empirical support is self-control. This factor is a significant predictor for whether a person will be involved in crime because the lower the self-control, the more likely a person will act impulsively (Pauwels & Svensson, 2011, p. 172). TenEyck and Barnes (2018) compare victims, offenders, and victim-offenders and find that victim-offenders have the lowest levels of self-control when compared to only victims and only offenders (p. 75). This is interesting because it demonstrates that not only is self-control a critical factor, but it has a more significant effect in situations where offenders and victims cycle through these roles.

There are many other individual features that may make a person more likely to be victimized, which can explain why some youth may have been brought into the cycle of crime and offending, and why some individuals may not be victimized as much or at all. For example, dominance may be able to predict who will become a victim or offender because people who are passive and do not assert themselves are more likely to be targeted for victimization. In addition, offenders may be able to avoid being victimized because they have developed more confidence due to their dominant nature, which victims may lack and therefore stops them from committing a crime (Van Gelder et al., 2015, p. 659). Physical features can also play a part in who is more likely to be victimized. For example, females and younger youth are more likely to be victimized because they have weakened physical conditions, which also explains why these individuals are less likely to carry out violent crimes, because they may physically be unable to (Schreck, Stewart, & Osgood, 2008, p. 879). These traits, therefore, explain why some offenders may not become victims, but also why some victims are targeted.

A youth's mental health state is also an essential factor to consider because it has a significant impact on a person's choices and experiences. Wylie and Rufino (2018) studied early justice system involved young offenders and found that mental health issues were quite common. About two-thirds of youth in the system had one or more mental health symptoms, which were also found to be very similar to the offenders that are deeply involved in the system as adults (Wylie & Rufino, 2018, p. 566). The study also found that juvenile offenders who had experienced victimization in the past were more likely to participate in recidivism sooner than those without a past of victimization. Victimization appears to impact their mental health state and the way that they function and approach criminal behaviour by trying to protect themselves or retaliate against others.

In particular, anxiety, depression, and isolation play a part in victimization and offending (Van Gelder et al., 2015, p. 658). For example, specific characteristics like anxiety and depression may make youth more likely to be victimized, as they may be more vulnerable and easily targeted. The idea of isolation is related to social bonds to others and the community with the idea that they can be helpful, in the sense that these bonds can disconnect youth from deviant others. However, isolation can also be a hindrance as youth pull away from supports and any help for their victimization or involvement in crime. Internalizing problems can contribute to anxiety, depression, and isolation. The way that a person internalizes their issues can affect the way they see themselves, as they may not see themselves as victims, or their actions as being wrong or illegal.

## Social Factors

Although individual factors are essential to examine and are often the main focus when youth are involved with a crime, the environment surrounding the individual also plays an important role. Routine activities theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979) proposes that there are three conditions necessary for a crime to be committed, including a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the lack of a guardian. This theory explains how victimization and offending are connected because engaging in criminal activity puts one in a position where they are at a higher risk of being victimized (Wylie & Rufino, 2018, p. 565). Also, in addition to the social environment, a young person may be exposed to other offenders that may commit crimes against them or influence them to commit their own crimes (Chen, 2009, p. 121; Van Gelder et al., 2015, p. 656). The last condition is the lack of a suitable guardian, may be absent due to detachment or isolation from others. DeCamp, Zaykowski and Lunn (2018) discovered that if a youth is involved in risky behaviours, then they are less likely to seek protection from adults or law enforcement, which puts them more at risk because they are enhanced targets with little protection (p. 670). Routine Activities theory demonstrates that when it comes to the environment surrounding a person, there is a definite cycle, and once in the cycle, it is hard to get out of the pattern of victimization and offending. Therefore, for a victim and offender to not incorporate the other role, they need to be aware of these factors and attempt to remove themselves from these risky situations and environments.

Another significant impact on a person is the emphasis that social setting has on one's life. Many different aspects of a person's surrounding environment and experiences impact how they are likely to act in the situations that they put themselves in. Norms of violence explain how an individual may act out in a certain way given a particular situation. If a child has experienced abuse or witnessed abuse daily, then they are more likely to think that the behaviour is normal, and they will use it as their response. This, in turn, can make someone more likely to offend. In addition, it has also been found that the greater the number of adverse childhood experiences, such as abuse and neglect, parental divorce, and family violence, the shorter the time between criminal acts, and the more lasting the effect on experiences later in life (Wylie and Rufino, 2018, p. 559; DeCamp et al., 2018, p. 668).

Another social factor is the socioeconomic status of a youth. For example, if the person, or their family, is struggling with finances, they may be more likely to resort to theft, or even prostitution, to make a living, but being in these types of risky lifestyles can increase the chance of victimization at the same time. Having a specific socioeconomic background can

affect where one lives. They may live in neighbourhoods that are unsafe and encounter lots of crime. Being in a criminogenic environment increases the risk of offending and victimization over time (DeCamp, et al., 2018, p. 670). Furthermore, the subculture that they live in also exposes these youth to crime. For example, if they live where street culture or gang culture is emphasized, they may see that retaliation supports these types of behaviours (TenEyck & Barnes, 2018, p. 86). Overall, the primary way to stop the cycle is to remove youth from these situations or environments that may be risky. However, this is easier said than done, especially when considering such options as removing youth from their homes.

If youth are in environments due to their risky lifestyles, they are at an increased risk of victimization or offending. Many different risk factors can put these youth in these hazardous situations including drug use, alcohol use, tobacco use, hanging out with deviant peers, having deviant parents, going out at night, and attending parties. TenEyck and Barnes (2018) found that victim-offenders reported twice the number of delinquent acts than victims, offenders, and abstainers of crime, which demonstrates how the relationship between offenders and victims is significantly increased by these risky lifestyles (p. 79). This can be explained by research conducted by Pauwels and Svensson (2011), as they describe how crime is a social interaction wherein individuals interact with people that are similar to themselves (p. 166). Therefore, if a person is hanging out with a group of offenders, then one has a higher probability of becoming an offender as well. This is also a pronounced demonstration of how offending contributes to the chance of becoming a victim, because of association and similar risks between people. Even socializing outside of the home more often is a risk factor, because young people are being exposed to more offenders, as well as putting themselves in riskier situations like ones where they may be inebriated by alcohol or drugs (TenEyck & Barnes, 2018, p. 69). Again, the easy solution would be to remove the youth from these situations and reduce their chances of engaging in risky lifestyles, but this could also be very difficult because youth disobey or ignore these risks even when they have been educated about them. Despite these ways that youth criminality can be reduced, the cycle of being involved in crime is so strong that the best way to protect against it is to ensure that young people never get involved in the first place, which again is not always possible.

### **Interactions Between Individual and Social Factors**

Typically, when considering young offenders or victims, attention is mainly paid to the events that occurred and to the role of the individual. This usually includes looking at individual factors and determining how these factors

influenced the situation. For example, a young offender may be viewed as lacking self-control, which is then used to explain why the youth committed the crime. This leads to a situation where the individual is solely blamed for the offence or even blamed for being victimized. However, in the same sense, individual factors can also be used to excuse the offender's actions and prevent them from taking responsibility, which makes the situation even more complicated. Offenders may claim that they have no control over these characteristics, such as personality traits, in order to avoid taking responsibility for their actions. Therefore, the importance of looking at the surrounding environment is crucial because without doing so, one can only know part of the story as to why the criminal activity occurred and not all of the contributing and mitigating factors. The social context should not be ignored when considering victims and offenders, because there are so many different factors that can contribute to one situation. To have a better understanding of these youth, one needs to look at the bigger picture, outside of the actual act, to see why the behaviour or event transpired and what has led to that point of occurrence.

Even though it is essential to consider social factors, that does not mean that individual factors should be ignored. In addition, the way that these factors interact, and overlap is also significant. The intersection of the individual and the social includes a variety of factors that do not fit entirely in either area. Social bonds are an example of this, as a youth's relationship with family or friends can impact both criminality and victimization. Research finds that deviant peers can have a large impact on youth behaviours and experiences. Even in examples of parental attachment, which is generally considered to be a positive feature of parent-child relationships, there are cases where a parent is involved with crime or other risky behaviours that are detrimental to their children if they are socially bonded. These social bonds may also include belonging to social or community groups, without which individuals may be at a higher risk for criminal behaviour (TenEyck & Barnes, 2018, p. 76). However, attachment to groups like gangs can also create a different set of attachment to criminal involvement. The attachment can then affect a person's environment as well as their personal characteristics.

Social environmental factors can affect the person on an individual level. For example, trauma has a major role in many difficulties for youth. Mark Halsey (2018) describes trauma as occurring when one loses a sense of safety and place to retreat to where they can deal with emotions or experiences (p. 20). Trauma can include having physical or psychological violence in the youth's life, either in their home or in their daily encounters, which can also be termed as different forms of victimization. Trauma can have a negative impact on the individual if it is not worked through

properly or stays unresolved. For example, unresolved trauma can affect youth by creating mental health issues or behavioural problems, showing how the environment can impact individual issues. Wylie and Rufino (2018) found that 90 percent of youth who reported victimization also experienced trauma, which then led to emotional and behavioural problems (p. 559). This can mean directing internalized rage and pain at other people, which can result in victims acting out in violent, and possible criminal, ways because of the trauma they have not dealt with.

In addition, trauma can also lead to the development of mental health issues because of what the individual has witnessed or experienced. Social factors triggering mental health issues is a real possibility that has the potential to create many problems for a young person. Furthermore, criminally involved youth who are placed in community care facilities, juvenile centres, or even prisons are not given the opportunity to address their trauma, so they cannot move forward. These types of environments do not encourage individuals to work through these issues, but instead usually end up compounding them or making their mental health issues and behavioural problems even worse, especially when they may face additional abuse in these settings (Halsey, 2018, p. 27, 29). Overall, the impact of trauma is enormous for both victims and offenders, as the situation they are in can evoke more issues. For example, a youth who was abused at a young age and has a tendency to act impulsively may have very different experiences and motivations to offend than a youth who acts impulsively but has not had adverse experiences of victimization. This makes it difficult to pinpoint what exactly will make a youth offend or be victimized because of different intersections of these factors, but one can examine what will put the youth in a more vulnerable position for victimization or offending.

## Discussion

Although the connection between victims and offenders has been well established, it is still difficult to know exactly what to do with this information and how to implement change in a positive and productive way. How can knowing and acknowledging this information be used to benefit youth that have become involved in crime? Change must be implemented at three different levels: the individual level, institutional level, and structural level. At the individual level (micro) level, it is important to be aware of environments and behaviours that are risky. This can be beneficial because people may be able to change certain aspects of their lives to decrease their risk. Youth may be more willing to reach out to help and address their own mental health concerns because such a strong correlation is known. This does shift some responsibility to the individual, as it is based on their own decisions about behaviour and choices. As well, informing

youth that they have been victimized can impact how they see themselves. In a positive way, the youth may begin to recognize the harm that is happening and do something about it. Conversely, the young person may also become more vulnerable or overly accepting of being labelled as a victim, which can lead to learned helplessness and believing they have no control. Generally acknowledging victimhood will affect how a youth views themselves, which can be either positive or negative depending on how they internalize this role.

The institutional (meso) level includes an individual's relationships with others and surrounding institutions like families, schools, and communities. At this level, there are insufficient supports to address problems experienced by youth. One of the ways to address these problems is by enacting more programs around substance use prior to the age of 13. Research has shown that this has an incredibly strong association with involvement in crime, so if programs can deter substance use then it is possible to reduce the number of youth involved in the cycle (DeCamp et al., 2018, p. 672). In addition, programs for youth may also need to be reworked. Generally, the relationship between individual and social is ignored, even though it is incredibly important to address both. Therefore, one can see the effect this information can have on the types of program and supports offered, as well as how they approach these matters. In the supports that do exist, victimization and offending are not usually addressed together, and even more commonly victimization tends to be less emphasized than offending. Victimization should be considered especially when it comes to looking at offenders and their crimes. These programs should also include more preventative factors like intervening once a person becomes a victim in order to ensure that they do not offend.

The literature discusses two different approaches to these programs. The first is relying on the criminal justice system to create and use programs that are offered jointly to address both victimization and offending, which is a great step forward (TenEyck & Barnes, 2018, p. 80). This type of program is noteworthy because it reduces the risk of programs or supports only trying to help "true victims" or victims that are not involved in crime (Schreck et al., 2008, p.873). Generally, offenders are viewed as only offenders, thus their victimization is often ignored because it is overshadowed by their involvement in crime. The implications of this type of programming would include a more rehabilitative approach to youth where the focus less on punishing the youth, like with imprisonment or fines, and more on helping the young person make changes, so they do not end up in the same position again. However, this approach will not always work, so it is important to punish and deter those youth who do not benefit from a

rehabilitative option. The second approach is to tailor programs specifically for individual youth. This approach includes working with a young person to identify the factors and experiences that put them at risk of becoming involved in crime, and trying to address these factors and work through the effects of these experiences. For example, a youth that may be living in a dangerous neighbourhood may consider living with another family member in a better environment. These programs would then be offered as alternative measures and other alternatives for youth that have offended but can also be introduced in victim services to proactively help victims from possibly offending. These tend to take more time but have a better success rate (Van Gelder et al., 2015, p.668). These programs would then look at all the factors that a certain youth faces and address these in a manner than can actually be beneficial for a youth.

Lastly, the structural (macro) level, including societal structures and processes, requires that we enact changes in how we think about and set up our society. One way to make changes at this level is by modifying the way that society views offenders and victims. This would include creating more understanding about how victims may not always be uninvolved in their victimization, and that offenders may have many factors affecting their offending. In addition, the major impact here would be not viewing victims as only helpless, uninvolved, and fragile people, but instead see the importance of including them in justice processes and increasing their active participation and supports. This is important because these labels carry very different implications for the people they are applied to. To take this further, society would then need to amend how they view youth who are involved in crime, from troubled children to individuals who can be productive members of society when they are helped properly. We need to move away from the notion that they are lost causes and try to place priority on and make more meaningful modifications in the youths' lives. These changes then may need to be even bigger than changing policies. Measures to help youth may also need to come from outside of the criminal justice system and may include possibly larger and totally different structures be set up to address these. However, it may be possible that a completely different set up of the justice system and how society handles or defines crime is necessary, which can be very difficult to imagine or create.

Overall, by beginning to acknowledge and address not only the connection between offenders and victims but also what can stop youth from becoming either, one can see how there can be constructive changes in society to help youth. By making these changes there is the possibility of reducing the number of youths who become involved and stuck in crime, which is tremendous considering early involvement in the criminal justice system tends to lead to a lifelong

involvement and lengthy incarceration sentences. Therefore, it is important to help these children before they become so deeply entrenched in crime, and when they do not face the harsher punishments and the fewer opportunities for rehabilitation in the adult system. One can see how beneficial it would be for adolescents if they could get out of the victim-offender cycle and one of the best ways to do this is to look at the roots of their criminality or victimization in various social and individual factors. Although it is not an easy thing to address these factors and make changes in youths' lives, the possible benefits are unlimited. These changes may need to be complete overhauls to the way that society works when it comes to things like economic issues and supports for those in risky situations. The main point is that we have been moving in the right direction, but it is going to take a lot of drastic changes before things are in a much better position. Therefore, it is very important that more work is done to help youth involved in and victimized by crime.

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