Correlates Associated with Escalation of Delinquent Behavior in Incarcerated Youths

Richard A. Van Dorn and James Herbert Williams

This study investigates the extent to which attitudes, family, and environmental correlates are associated with the escalation from nonviolent to violent offending among incarcerated youths. Escalation was defined as an adjudicated violent offense only after arrests and adjudications exclusively for nonviolent offenses. Data were collected from 50 respondents (25 escalators and 25 maintainers of nonviolent offending) incarcerated in a secure facility in the midwestern United States. Beliefs that power equates safety and a violent home environment were salient in understanding escalation in offending behavior, and prior criminal victimization was moderately significant. Implications for individual and family preventive interventions and delinquency theories are discussed.

Key words: adolescence; attitudes; correlates; delinquency; escalation

The majority of youths in the United States engage in some type of delinquency before advancing to late adolescence or their adult years (Maguin et al., 1995; Williams, Ayers, Van Dorn, & Arthur, in press; Williams & Van Dorn, 1999). Various studies have examined delinquency and violence focusing on individual attributes, family characteristics, school achievements, peer relationships, and community environment (Farrington, 1994; Hawkins et al., 1998). However, studies examining escalation from nonviolent offending to violent offending have been less prevalent (Ayers et al., 1999; Loeber, Stouthamer-Loeber, Van Kammen, & Farrington, 1991).

Earlier research investigating the trajectory of adolescent involvement in criminal behavior (for example, initiation, escalation, and desistance) found that early initiation and conviction for delinquent acts increases the risk for chronic offending through adolescence and into adulthood (Ayers et al., 1999; Farrington, Loeber, & Van Kammen, 1990; Loeber, Stouthamer-Loeber, Van Kammen, & Farrington, 1991). Loeber and colleagues (1991) found that youths who commit acts of major delinquency are more likely to progress to violent offending compared with those who begin and continue committing minor delinquency. The study discussed in this article investigated correlates related to escalation from nonviolent offending to violent offending.

Of the 2.6 million juveniles arrested in 1998, 95 percent were for nonviolent offenses including burglary, frauds, and minor property offenses (Snyder & Sickmund, 1999). Over that same time span, approximately 112,200 juveniles were arrested for such violent offenses as murder and nonnegligent manslaughter, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault (Snyder & Sickmund).

In analyzing the National Youth Survey (NYS) data, Elliott (1994) found that 36 percent of African American males and 25 percent of non-Hispanic white males reported engaging in one or more serious violent offenses. NYS data also indicated that the frequency of nonviolent offending increased threefold over a three-year period before the appearance of a serious violent offense.

Accurately assessing transitions (and escalation patterns) between delinquent behaviors requires...
knowledge of recidivism and reoffending among youths. In a study of 399 juvenile detainees, Dembo and colleagues (1995) found significant rates of recidivism within 42 months of initial arrest. The results of their study indicated that 56 percent of the participants had one or more arrests for a felony property offense, 43 percent for a misdemeanor property offense, 34 percent for a felony violent offense, and 31 percent for a misdemeanor violent offense.

Many researchers have identified a significant correlation between reoffending and increased involvement with the juvenile justice system (Austin, Elms, Krisberg, & Steele, 1991; Baird, 1987; Krisberg & Austin, 1993). After committing a violent offense, youths are more likely to be rearrested for a violent offense than are those without prior violent arrests (Lattimore, Visher, & Linster, 1995).

Prospectively identifying the correlates of escalation from nonviolent offending to violent offending provides the opportunity to intervene and minimize the likelihood that youths will escalate their seriousness of offending behavior. This study explores possible correlates that may distinguish between youths that escalate from nonviolent offending to violent offending in comparison to those who maintain their involvement in nonviolent offenses. We used attitudes toward gangs, beliefs regarding power and safety, prior criminal victimization, and household violence to explore escalation to violent behavior or continued involvement in nonviolent behavior.

Gang affiliation and involvement in violent offending are strongly related (Thornberry, 1998; Williams & Van Dorn, 1999). The rapid proliferation in the numbers of gangs and gang members since the early 1980s (Klein, 1995; Williams & Van Dorn) has been associated with higher rates of violent offending. Gang members have been found to engage in more serious delinquent behavior than nongang members (Hill, Howell, Hawkins, & Battin-Pearson, 1999), have a higher tolerance for delinquent behavior, and express fewer prosocial norms (Esbensen, Huizinga, & Weiher, 1993).

Youth’s beliefs regarding power and safety also have been identified as correlates of involvement in violent behavior. Two aspects related to power and safety—carrying a gun and beliefs affiliated with gang membership—have been explored (Shapiro, Dorman, Burkey, Welker, & Clough, 1997) based on earlier research regarding the instrumental utility of aggression (Tolan, Guerra, & Kendall, 1995) and self-protection (Ash, Kellerman, Fuqua-Whitley, & Johnson, 1996). These findings provide another probable link between personal attitudes and involvement in violent behaviors. This statement is based on earlier research examining the instrumental utility of aggression in youths (Tolan et al.). Youths who endorse attitudes related to power over others may be at increased risk of involvement in violence or of the instrumental use of aggression. These attitudes may be reinforced if there is also a strong belief in the utility of guns and gangs. Specifically, youths who believe that carrying guns or involvement with gangs creates safety and feelings of power over others appear to be at increased risk of involvement in violent behavior.

A history of criminal victimization and exposure to violence have been correlated with subsequent involvement in delinquent behavior (Rivera & Widom, 1990; Williams, Stiffman, & O’Neal, 1998) and possibly subsequent violent behaviors (Paschall, 1996). One possible mechanism linking prior criminal victimization to later delinquency or violence has to do with mental health consequences and its sequelae. Increased levels of depression, emotional distress, anxiety, and anger secondary to prior criminal victimization or exposure to violent crime have been shown to increase risk of future involvement in violence (Paschall; Martinez & Richters, 1993; Rivera & Widom; Singer, Anglin, Song, & Lunghofer, 1995).

Violent home environments have been shown to have deleterious effects on children’s development (Martin, Sigda, & Kupersmidt, 1998; McGaha & Leoni, 1995) and have been identified as a risk for future violent behavior (Williams & Van Dorn, 1999). Similar to research on criminal victimization, studies have begun to explore the link between violent home environments and internalizing problems and their subsequent expression as externalizing or conduct problems (Jaffe, Wolfe, Wilson, & Zak, 1986; Martin et al., 1998).

On the basis of growing literature regarding correlates of juvenile delinquency (Hawkins et al., 1998), we included individual attitudes and environmental factors, including prior criminal victimization and a violent home environment, as correlates that may differentiate between escalators and maintainers. We hypothesized that youths who escalate in their criminal involvement are more likely to have had experiences with prior criminal
victimization and violent home environments. Therefore, escalators may be more likely to express attitudes supporting involvement in violent behavior, including distorted thinking about power and safety over others and the utility of aggression (as has been modeled in the home) or the utility of aggression for self-protection (as related to experiences with criminal victimization or perceived threats). Furthermore, we hypothesized that escalators will have more favorable attitudes toward gangs; also related to the utility of aggression, protection, or perceived threats.

Method

Data for this study were collected using structured interviews of 50 male respondents detained in a secure facility in the Midwest. Interviews lasted approximately one and one-half hours. The sample was equally divided between youths first arrested and adjudicated for a nonviolent offense and then subsequently rearrested and adjudicated for violent offenses (escallators) and youths first arrested and adjudicated for a nonviolent offense and then subsequently rearrested and adjudicated for nonviolent offenses (maintainers). Criteria for inclusion in the study were determined by review of the official court records. Participants received $25 for participation, which was placed in their account at the facility.

Participants

The mean age of the participants was 15.78 years (SD = 1.34 years). The mean age for escalators was 15.92 (SD = 1.47), with the mean age for maintainers being similar at 15.64 (SD = 1.22). The majority of the participants were African American (n = 38, 76 percent) with the remainder being white, non-Hispanic youths (n = 8, 16 percent), Hispanic youths (n = 2, 4 percent), and American Indian youths (n = 2, 4 percent).

Official records indicated that escalators had an average of 12.16 lifetime arrests, and maintainers had an average of 7.24 lifetime arrests. The range of adjudicated violent offenses in the escalators' files included assault, discharging a weapon into an occupied dwelling, robbery, rape, murder, and criminal trespass with a deadly weapon. The range of adjudicated nonviolent offenses in the youths' records included possession and sales of drugs, tampering/grand theft auto, burglary, stealing over $50, stealing under $50, runaway, truancy, and curfew. The average age that escalators were initially placed on probation was 12.52 years of age, and the average age for maintainers was 13.72 years of age.

Because of the extreme responses from the respondents regarding the number of times they had been suspended from school, we restricted the range from zero to 35. Using this range, the mean for escalators was 21.75 times (SD = 13.43), and the mean for maintainers was 11.79 (SD = 11.79). Forty-eight percent (n = 12) of the escalators and 28 percent (n = 7) of the maintainers reported being expelled from school at least one time in their life. Sixty percent (n = 15) of the escalators and 48 percent (n = 12) of the maintainers had repeated a grade. A significant number of the escalators and the maintainers received special education services. Similar proportions of the escalators (44 percent) and maintainers (36 percent) were placed in behavior disorder classes.

Measures

Dependent Variable. Delinquent classification and transition of offending behaviors was developed by identifying those youths who, after initial adjudication for a nonviolent offense, were subsequently adjudicated for a violent offense (escallators), and those who, throughout their life, had been adjudicated solely for nonviolent offenses (maintainers). This definition of escalation is supported by Elliott’s (1994) findings that nonviolent offending increases threefold over a three-year period prior to the appearance of a serious violent offense.

In this study, escalators and maintainers were placed on probation for nonviolent offenses at ages 12.52 and 13.72, respectively, and they were interviewed at ages 15.92 and 15.64, respectively. These ranges of age when first placed on probation and age when interviewed, therefore escalating or maintaining, are close to the three years identified by Elliott.

Independent Variables. Attitudes toward gangs were measured by nine categorical items (α = .69) summing respondents' attitudes and bonding to gang activities and membership. The items were taken from Measuring Violence-Related Attitudes, Beliefs, and Behaviors Among Youths (Dahlberg, Toal, & Behrens, 1998). Examples of items used in developing this scale included: “I think you are safer and have protection if you join a gang.” “Some of my friends at school belong to gangs.” “I think it is cool to be in a gang.” “My
friends would think less of me if I joined a gang.” Response categories for these items were 0 = not true for me and 1 = true for me. Nadel and colleagues (1996) developed and have used this item, which has an internal consistency of .74, with high school–age students.

“Power and safety” was measured by summing responses from four items (α = .75). These items measured respondents’ beliefs about power and safety as related to guns and gangs. Items used in developing this scale were “Carrying a gun makes people feel powerful.” “Carrying a gun makes people feel safe.” “Belonging to a gang makes kids feel safe because they’ve got people to back them up.” “Kids in gangs feel like they’re part of something special.” Responses for all the items were agree, disagree, and not sure (Dahlberg et al., 1998). This measure was developed for use with children and adolescents ages eight to 18. (For more information on the reliability and validity of this measure, see Shapiro and colleagues, 1997).

“Prior criminal victimization” assessed the respondents’ experiences of being victimized during the year preceding the current incarceration. This construct was assessed with a seven-item scale (α = .82). Examples of items used in this scale are “Did anyone try to rob you?” and “Were you knifed, shot at, or attacked with a weapon?” The responses for the history of criminal victimization were yes and no. Again, because of wide-ranging reports of victimization during the past year, the range was restricted to 30 times (adapted from Hawkins & Catalano, 1998).

“Violent home environment” was explored with a three-item index assessing the respondents’ family history of violence. Items contained in this index include “When you were growing up did anyone in your household … carry a handgun? and physically beat up or seriously hurt other people?” Responses for these items were yes or no (adapted from Hawkins & Catalano, 1998). The measure for both prior criminal victimization and violent home environment have been used extensively in research based on the Seattle Social Development Project (SSDP). (The interested reader is referred to any of the publications from the SSDP including Williams, Van Dorn, Hawkins, Abbott, & Catalano, 2001.)

Results
We used hierarchical logistic regression analyses to examine the independent association of attitudes toward gangs, beliefs regarding power and safety, criminal victimization in the past year, and violent home environment with delinquency classification (escalator and maintainer). However, in the first step of the model, we included an official measure of total times arrested to account for the potential bias that the escalators had started their offending behavior earlier than the maintainers. Also, our decision not to include a variable controlling for gang membership was predicated on the fact that all respondents, regardless of their classification, endorsed either current or historical gang membership.

Attitudes toward gangs and perceived beliefs about power and safety were entered into the regression model at the second step to examine the associations of attitudes and beliefs with escalation of delinquent behavior. Incidents of criminal victimization over the past year were next entered into the model to explore its impact on delinquency classification. In the final step, violent home environment was entered into the model.

The overall chi-square [χ^(2, N = 50) = 4.064, p < .05] controlling for number of times arrested was moderately significant (p < .10) at step 1 (Table 1). At step 2, positive attitudes about gangs or gang involvement and perceived beliefs about power and safety were entered into the model. Positive attitudes about gangs were significant (p < .01) in differentiating the two classifications of delinquency, and beliefs about power and safety was moderately significant (p = .06) in differentiating between the two delinquency classifications. At this stage in the model, as can be seen from the odds ratios in table 1, those with positive attitudes toward gangs were 1.84 times more likely to have escalated to a violent offense and those with attitudes favorable to power and safety were 1.71 times more likely to have escalated in their offending behavior. When criminal victimization was entered into the model (step 3), the model chi-square remained significant [χ^(4, N = 50) = 28.943, p < .001] and the step (improvement) chi-square was moderately significant [χ^(2, N = 50) = 3.558, p = .06], with those escalating to violence 1.19 times more likely to have experienced criminal victimization within the year prior to the current incarceration. In step 3, positive attitudes toward gangs remained significant (p < .05), with an odds ratio of 1.84, and beliefs regarding power and safety remained moderately significant (p =...
Table 1
Hierarchical Logistic Regression Analysis of Delinquency Classification (maintainers and escalators) as a Function of Number of Times Arrested, Attitudes, Beliefs, Criminal Victimization, and Violent Home Environment for Incarcerated Youths (N = 50)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>Wald Test (z-ratio)</th>
<th>Odds Ratio</th>
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<th>Wald Test (z-ratio)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Number of times arrested</td>
<td>.06†</td>
<td>2.95</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>NS</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>NS</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>1.81</td>
<td>NS</td>
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<td>Attitudes toward gangs</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.61**</td>
<td>7.22</td>
<td>1.84</td>
<td>.61*</td>
<td>5.43</td>
<td>1.84</td>
<td>.29</td>
<td>1.20</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perceived power and safety</td>
<td>.54†</td>
<td>3.64</td>
<td>1.71</td>
<td>.40†</td>
<td>2.61</td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>.66*</td>
<td>4.33</td>
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<td>Criminal victimization</td>
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<td>.17†</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>.20†</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>1.22</td>
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<td>Violent home environment</td>
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<td>-2 log likelihood (\chi^2)</td>
<td>65.251</td>
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<td></td>
<td>43.930</td>
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<td></td>
<td>40.372</td>
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<td>33.679</td>
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Note: NS = not significant.
†p < .10. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.
.10), with an odds ratio of 1.50. This would indicate that both attitudes and environmental aspects of the respondents’ lives might account for differences in delinquency. In the final step, the entering of violent home environment \[\chi^2(1, N = 50) = 6.693, p < .01\] improved the overall fit of the model and perceived power and safety \((p < .05)\) and violent home environment \((p < .05)\) were significant and prior criminal victimization \((p = .07)\) was moderately significant. Escalators were 3.5 times more likely than maintainers to have experienced a violent home environment, 1.93 times more likely to endorse attitudes supportive of the relationship between power and safety, and 1.22 times more likely to have been criminally victimized. At this step, perceived beliefs regarding power and safety appeared as significant for the first time; it had been moderately significant throughout; positive attitudes toward gangs or gang involvement were nonsignificant for the first time, and criminal victimization remained moderately significant throughout. Because of the small sample size, we reran the analyses after randomly deleting one case from each classification to check for stability of results. Although these findings are not presented here, there were no appreciable differences in the results.

These findings indicate that individually held beliefs regarding the relationship between power and safety and a violent family environment are significant correlates able to differentiate between the escalators and maintainers in this study whereas prior criminal victimization remained moderately significant throughout the models. The small sample size may be partially responsible for prior criminal victimization only reaching marginal significance. Furthermore, our hypothesis that positive attitudes toward gangs would differentiate between the two groups was not significant in the final model, although positive attitudes toward gangs was significant until that point.

**Discussion**

This study supports previous findings in delinquency and youth violence literature indicating that both individual and familial correlates are important in distinguishing youths who escalate to violent offending in comparison to those who maintain involvement in nonviolent delinquent behavior. This study used cross-sectional data collected from youths with a mean age of 16 for escalators and maintainers. The age of this sample indicates that the respondents had experienced a significant proportion of their adolescent life span. Earlier research has shown that the peak ages for offending are between 15 and 17 (Snyder & Sickmund, 1999). Although this study was unable to follow these youths throughout adolescence, the findings have identified meaningful differences between the two groups. These differences can be used to inform future research on transitions in delinquent behaviors.

The association between this transition (escalation) and personal and environmental factors held despite the fact that both groups of respondents had multiple arrests, which were controlled for in the first step of the model. In earlier parts of their arrest history, they may have been classified differently. This work is just the beginning of a process that would eventually treat these arrests as a chain of events that, with each additional event, should provide better classification of youths likely to commit a subsequent violent offense. (For a review of screening or classification based on multiple gating, see Hallfors & Van Dorn, 2002; Loeber, Dishion, & Patterson, 1984; or Williams et al., in press.)

Whereas arrest rates for violent crimes committed by youths have shown a decline over the past several years (Williams et al., in press), a report by the Surgeon General identified youth violence as an ongoing national epidemic (Office of the Surgeon General, 2001). Consequently, identifying correlates delineating transitions from nonviolent offending to violent offending needs to be better informed. Delinquency research ought to guide empirically based interventions that increase the probability of dampening the influence of these identified correlates. Specific to this study, early identification of and intervention for youths who reside in violent home environments and youths who have been criminally victimized, may reduce cognitive attributions that support hostile beliefs that develop as a result of exposure to violence (Paschall, 1996) or being a victim of violence (Singer et al., 1995).

Martinez and Richters (1993) supported the notion that witnessing violence as a youth may be associated with an outlook that the world is an unsafe place where others are out to get you and everyone is an enemy. These cognitive attributions may strengthen the development of beliefs aligned with the notion that power equals safety.
and positive attitudes toward gangs. The results from this study show that youths who escalated to violent crimes were also more likely to have been victims of various crimes, although this finding was moderately significant throughout our models. This result further supports the notion that delinquent youths feel that the world is not a safe place and that one way to cope may be through physical aggression and violence.

Although our findings indicate that beliefs supporting the relationship between power and safety, prior victimization, and a violent home environment could be distinguishing correlates between transitions in delinquent behavior, this study has some limitations. First, all data used in this study were cross-sectional; therefore, causality cannot be inferred. Second, because of the small sample size, we were only able to test a limited number of correlates in the individual and family domains. A larger sample would have allowed for the inclusion of more correlates in more domains. The small sample size also limits the generalizability of the findings.

Finally, because of the cross-sectional nature of the data, we were unable to follow these respondents through adolescence. It is possible that some of the youths that, up until this point had maintained nonviolent offending, could actually escalate to violent offending. However, the mean age of maintainers indicates that the group, as a whole, had entered the “peak years of offending” (Snyder & Sickmund, 1999). Research has shown that after this age period, involvement in delinquency declines and the likelihood of escalation to violent offending is reduced (Elliott, 1994; Snyder & Sickmund). Therefore, the findings should be interpreted with caution.

The results of our study underscore the importance of future research investigating the longitudinal impact of various correlates of violence (Williams, Van Dorn, Hawkins, Abbott, & Catalano, 2001) that have been identified in cross-sectional studies such as this.

Implications for Practice

The results of this study suggest implications for prevention and intervention strategies. First, they are consistent with earlier research linking violent offending to a multitude of correlates across domains in the adolescents’ lives (Williams et al., in press; Henggeler & Hoyt, 2001; Williams & Van Dorn, 1999). The findings also suggest that prevention and intervention efforts should address the interconnectedness of these multiple factors concurrently. For example, interventions might try to promote prosocial beliefs regarding power and safety, in addition to addressing the consequences of prior criminal victimization or residing in a violent home environment, because these correlates may place individuals at increased risk of involvement in future violent behavior. These identified correlates may be most malleable in family interventions where multiple individuals who influence the adolescent’s behavior are present and can work in concert to address risks (Henggeler & Hoyt).

Preventive interventions addressing criminal victimization and a violent home environment should adhere to the large and continually developing body of literature supporting individual and family interventions and cognitive and behavioral modification (Henggeler, Melton, Brondino, Scherer, & Hanley, 1997; Henggeler, Melton, & Smith, 1992; Meichenbaum & Fitzpatrick, 1993). Strengthening families by various family therapies have verified long-term effects in the reduction of antisocial behaviors. These therapies (for example, multisystemic family therapy, functional family therapy, structural family therapy) address multiple domains while improving both individual attributions and family contexts. Four of the main benefits of these therapies are the ability to address identified problems as a unit; the delivery of services in the natural settings of the youths and their families; observation of interactions between multiple systems and procuring input from these multiple systems (for example, school, teachers, peers); and addressing known correlates of antisocial behavior (Henggeler & Hoyt, 2001). Findings from this study can strengthen future research by incorporating the significant correlates of this study into larger studies and eventually into interventions.

In summary, our findings indicate that individual beliefs, prior criminal victimization, and a violent home environment are possible factors that can prospectively differentiate between those who escalate to violent offending and those who maintain nonviolent involvement in delinquency. Although measures of mental health were not directly assessed in the study, the results suggest that future research should include these measures as possible mediating factors for escalation or maintenance of offending behaviors. If this is done,
research could inform prevention and intervention strategies related to mental health problems assumed to arise from criminal victimization and violent home environments.

References


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