



Brief report

Parental and kinship ties, and low self-control: Violence perpetration among rural African American adolescents from the Black Belt

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: A substantial body of research supports both social control and self-control theories in explaining violent or deviant behaviors. Most previous work has focused on the links between family ties or bonds and deviance, along with low self-control. A potentially untested and overlooked bond is the extended kinship network, particularly among African American youth. The current study tested the extent to which kinship ties explained unique variability in violence perpetration, net the effects by family ties, low self-control, and background variables.

Methods: Data were collected from rural African American adolescents enrolled in a poor, rural public school located in the Black Belt in the Southeastern United States. The sample included $N = 610$ adolescents (55.9% female; $M_{\text{age}} = 15.64$, $SD = 1.74$).

Results: Findings from hierarchical regressions provided evidence that kinship ties explained unique variance in violence perpetration, above and beyond the effects of parental support and low self-control.

Conclusions: Study findings provide some support for the unique importance of kinship ties in understanding variability in adolescent violence perpetration in this sample of poor, rural African American adolescents. Thus, they highlight a potentially unique extra-familial source of socialization and social control; this finding, in particular, has important theoretical and practical implications for prevention and intervention efforts targeting violent behaviors among rural African American youth.

Violent crimes have been in decline in the United States; however, concerns remain about the prevalence of violence among African American youth who are more likely to become victims and perpetrators of violent behaviors ([Office of Juvenile Justice & Delinquency Prevention, 2019](#)). Research has consistently linked violent behaviors in adolescence to a lack of strong social ties to parents, families, and other important adults, consistent with control theories ([Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990](#); [Hirschi, 1969](#)). According to social control theory ([Hirschi, 1969](#)), adolescents who have emotionally close affective ties with parents or other adults, and who engage in conventional activities in society, are more likely to conform to social norms due to a social bond, primarily socialized through the family, and thus are also less likely to commit norm-violating behaviors. Control theories also identify individual self-control as key in understanding conformity versus norm violations among youth, itself the result of socialization and a strong social bond early in life

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(Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Hirschi, 1969).

An important extension of this thinking and work is whether the extended family, kinship ties, might also uniquely add to these social bonds, above and beyond relationships with parents, for instance, particularly among African American youth. Some research supported this, particularly for African American adolescents living in high poverty (Harris et al., 2017). Given the limited data, it remains unclear the extent to which kinship ties and the extended family system function as notable sources of social control. To further address this knowledge gap, the current study tested tenets by both social control and self-control theories to understand variability in violence perpetration in an impoverished sample of rural African American youth, specifically; in addition to parental support and low self-control, it tested the additive effects by kinships ties. Although most studies on African American youth have focused on urban youth, very little is known about African American youth living in non-urban, rural developmental contexts. Thus, the current study focused on a sample of rural African American adolescents residing in destitute poverty in a county part of the Black Belt. Initially named for its dark and fertile soil, the “Black Belt” refers to approximately 200 counties across several non-metro, high poverty rural regions in the Southern United States, stretching from Texas to Virginia. These counties are comprised of predominantly African American residents (Wimberly, 2010). In comparison to youth residing in other rural areas of the United States, African American adolescents living in the Black Belt are at a disproportionately greater risk for poverty, adversity, and associated adjustment problems (Wimberly, 2010). Therefore, it is paramount to study the unique conditions these youth face as very little research has been carried out on this population.

1. The current study

The current investigation, framed by control theories, sought to test the importance of kinship ties in understanding variability in violence perpetration in a sample of poor rural African-American adolescents from the Black Belt. Therefore, the following hypotheses were tested: (H1) low self-control would be an important correlate of violence perpetration, net any effects by background variables; and (H2) kinship ties and parental support would be unique correlates of violence perpetration, above and beyond low self-control and background variables.

2. Methods

2.1. Sample and procedure

Data were collected from 7th through 12th grade students enrolled in a rural public school with about 800 African American students living in the Southeastern Black Belt region (see Table 1). According to census figures, 70.7% of the county population were African Americans, in comparison to 26.8% of the total State population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Further, school district data about the school indicated that over 90% of youth were eligible for free and reduced lunches, and over 96% were African American. The school agreed to participate in the study, following approval by the school district and a university institutional review board. A letter explaining the importance of the study, a support letter from the administration, and an informed consent letter were sent home with students for their parents to sign; participants were also asked to sign a Minor Assent form before completing the questionnaire. Data

Table 1
Sample description (n = 610).

Variables	N	%
Sex		
Males	269	44.1
Females	341	55.9
Grade level		
Grade 7	132	21.6
Grade 8	112	18.4
Grade 9	127	20.8
Grade 10	92	15.1
Grade 11	102	16.7
Grade 12	45	7.4
Family Structure		
Two biological parents	168	27.7
Other family situation	439	72.3
Maternal Education		
Some high school	311	52.6
Some college	131	22.2
College Degree	70	11.8
Graduate Degree	34	5.8
Paternal Education		
Some high school	341	58.8
Some college	82	14.1
College Degree	37	6.4
Graduate Degree	29	5.0

were collected in classrooms during a 60-min period using confidential paper and pencil surveys.

3. Measures

Parental support. Four items from the Adolescent Family Process measure (Vazsonyi et al., 2003) assessing maternal and paternal support were combined to create a single measure of parental support. Adolescents were asked whether both parents “put me down in front of other people.” Responses were given on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Responses were reverse coded for parental support so that a higher score indicated a higher level of parental support ($\alpha = 0.83$).

Kinship ties. Adolescents were asked to rate six items part of the Kinship Ties Measure (KTM; see Appendix A) about other adults (other than their parents) with whom they had a close and instrumental relationship; the same set of items were administered three times, for up to three other adults. Adolescents most commonly identified aunts, grandparents, uncles, and cousins. An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) on the six items provided evidence of a single factor, with item loadings ranging from .68 to .83 ($M = 0.75$); thus, a decision was made to average the three sets of six items to compute a single kinship ties score (18 items in total). Responses were scored such that a higher score indicated stronger kinship ties score ($\alpha = .92$).

Low self-control. Twenty-four items were used to measure low self-control (Grasmick et al., 1993; Vazsonyi & Crosswhite, 2004). A sample item included “I often act on the spur moment without stopping to think.” Responses were given on a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*); higher scores indicated higher levels of low self-control ($\alpha = 0.93$).

Violence perpetration. Six items from the assault subscale part of the NDS (Vazsonyi et al., 2001) were used to assess violence perpetration. A sample item included: “I hit or threatened someone.” Items were measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale with responses ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The scores were averaged, and higher scores indicated a higher level of violence perpetration ($\alpha = 0.92$).

4. Data analysis plan

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and hierarchical regression in SPSS 26 software. Bivariate analysis followed by a three-step hierarchical regression analysis tested the extent background variables (age, sex, family structure) and control theory variables (low self-control, parental support, and kinship ties) predicted violence perpetration.

5. Results

Descriptive statistics are reported in Table 2. Hierarchical regression analyses tested the effects by background and control theory variables on violence perpetration in the following three steps (Table 3). The first step of the hierarchical regression showed sex was significantly associated with violence perpetration, and the model explained 11% of the variance in violence perpetration. In step 2, low self-control uniquely predicted violence perpetration, net any effects by background variables (H1), explaining an additional 5% of the variance; age and sex remained statistically significant. Next, parental support and kinship ties were added in a final Step 3 (H2); age, sex, low self-control, kinship ties, and parental support were significant and explained 22% of the total variance in violence perpetration.

6. Discussion

Framed by social and self-control theory, the current study sought to test the importance of kinship ties in understanding violence perpetration in a sample of poor rural African-American adolescents residing in the Black Belt. More importantly, the study tested the extent to which adults external to the family of origin (kin) uniquely influenced the likelihood of violence perpetration, in effect, testing whether non-parental adults provided unique affective and support functions, known to instill conformity and prevent norm-violations, above and beyond the effects of both low self-control and parental support. The following important findings emerged.

Table 2

Correlations of background variables and predictor variables predicting violence perpetration ($n = 610$).

Variables	# of items	α	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Age	–	–	15.64	1.74	–						
2. Sex	–	–	–	–	.01	–					
3. Family structure	2	–	1.72	.45	.04	.05	–				
4. LSC	24	.93	2.91	.75	–.06	–.14**	–.02	–			
5. Kinship ties	18	.92	3.46	.85	–.03	.18**	–.04	.08	–		
6. Parental support	8	.83	3.58	.92	.04	.14**	.02	–.44**	–.08	–	
7. Violence perpetration	6	.92	1.92	1.12	.09	–.27**	–.02	.24**	–.12*	–.28**	–

Note. LSC = Low Self-control scale.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

Table 3
Summary of hierarchical regression analysis for background variables and predictor variables predicting violence perpetration ($n = 610$).

Step	Predictors	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>R</i> ²	ΔR^2
1	Background Variables				.11	
	Age	.07	.04	<i>ns</i>		
	Sex	-.74***	.14	.000		
	Family Structure	.08	.15	<i>ns</i>		
2	Background Variables and LSC				.16	.05
	Age	.07	.04	<i>ns</i>		
	Sex	-.67***	.13	.000		
	Family Structure	.10	.14	<i>ns</i>		
	LSC	.33***	.08	.000		
3	Background Variables, LSC, Kinship Ties, and Parental Support				.22	.06
	Age	.08*	.04	.028		
	Sex	-.58***	.13	.000		
	Family Structure	.07	.14	<i>ns</i>		
	LSC	.20*	.09	.022		
	Kinship Ties	-.21**	.07	.005		
	Parental Support	-.31***	.08	.000		

Note. LSC = Low Self-control scale; *ns* = non-significant.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

First, as expected, low self-control was an important correlate of violence perpetration in this sample, consistent with previous research (Koon-Magnin et al., 2016; Vazsonyi & Crosswhite, 2004). Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, both parental support, as well as kinship ties, uniquely explained variance in violence perpetration, above and beyond low self-control. This indicates the efficacy of kinship ties during the socialization process of these youth, consistent with what Hirschi (1969) termed developing or building a social bond. This study adds to the literature on the salience of kinship ties among African American youth; few studies have tested how kinship ties are important in explaining variability in norm violating behaviors.

Study findings are also consistent with some of the evidence from the youth mentoring literature, which has shown how unrelated adults prove instrumental in the development and variability of developmental outcomes among adolescents, both positive and negative ones (Fruht & Wray-Lake, 2013). They also have implications for violence prevention and intervention programs targeting violence perpetration. Beyond focusing on traditional control theory variables, prevention efforts aiming to decrease violent behaviors among youth should consider incorporating the potential influences by extended kinship ties, as well as the ones by parents, in instilling conformity and preventing norm-violating behaviors, including violence perpetration.

The current study findings cannot be considered without its limitations, including the cross-sectional nature of the data, which precludes any conclusions related to causality. This also includes the fact that the sample was largely homogeneous from a single, high-poverty, rural school, which restricts the generalizability of study findings to other African American youth in different developmental contexts. At the same time, the study underscores the importance of control theory constructs, including parental support, kinship ties, and self-control, on violence perpetration in an otherwise understudied sample of rural African American adolescents living in destitute poverty. An additional methodological limitation includes that the data were exclusively collected using self-reports, thus potentially introducing mono-method bias. Therefore, future work should aim to perhaps include multiple operationalizations, as well as informants, for instance. In conclusion, and despite these limitations, study findings highlight the potential unique importance of kinship ties in this sample of rural African American youth in understanding violence perpetration.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2020.10.002>.

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