

# The role of family, peers and school perceptions in predicting involvement in youth violence

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**Abstract:** This study explored the relative importance of family, peers and school in predicting youth violence. The analysis was done on a nationally representative sample included 8,394 students from grade 6<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> in Israel. Measures of youth violence included bullying, physical fights and weapon carrying. The findings suggested that all three social systems had significant relations with youth violence, respectively. Variables found to predict violence were: *Family*- lack of parental support regarding school; *Peers*- Lack of social integration or too many evenings out with friends; *School*-feeling of school alienation, low academic achievement and perceptions of frequent acts of violence in school. School perceptions had the strongest predicting power. Findings emphasized the importance of focusing on improving the daily school experience in reducing youth violence.

**Keywords:** Violence, adolescence, school climate, social support, bullying, physical fights, weapon carrying, Israel

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## INTRODUCTION

Three main social systems affect the lives and behavior of young people: family, friends and school (1,2). There is no doubt that youth behaviors, including deviant behavior such as violence, are influenced by their daily experiences within each of these domains.

Studies on aggressive children have found that they tend to have negative attitudes toward school, have higher risks of dropping out, and have lower achievement compared with children who are not aggressive (3). Failure in school was highly associated with delinquency (4), violence (5), vandalism (6), and also with violent behavior later in life (7).

Not only difficulties in school affect the child's behavior, but also his relationship

with significant others, including family members, friends and teachers. Several researchers suggested that negative relations with parents and having deviant friends were strongly associated with involvement in delinquency (8,9). The effects found for these associations were much stronger than usually found in similar studies in social science (10). Elliot and colleagues (11) believed that connection with deviant friends was the leading cause of involvement in delinquency. Poor parenting was viewed as an indirect variable affecting the motivation of youth to connect with deviant friends.

In contrast to Elliot and colleagues, who stressed peer influence as more important than family, Gottfredson and Hirschi (12) suggested a model based on the "Control

Perspective". According to this approach, inadequate parenting was the leading cause of children associating with delinquent peers and involvement in juvenile delinquency. Insufficient parenting caused children to be more impulsive, aversive and risk-taking. These children would be more likely to have deviant friends and be involved in juvenile delinquency.

Stouthamer-Loeber and Loeber (13) carried out a meta-analysis of studies on youth violence and delinquency. They reached the conclusion that certain measures of poor parenting were the best predictors of youth delinquency. These measures included: lack of control over the child, inadequate discipline, lack of involvement of parents in the child's life, and rejection of the child.

It appeared that aggressive children learned at home how to be hostile towards authority (14,15). Their parents encouraged aggressive behavior by inconsistent discipline, using corporal punishment, failure in determining boundaries, neglect of reinforcing pro-social behaviors, and having inadequate interaction with the child. Children from such families often do not learn proper problem-solving techniques. In fact, when parental behavior rewards the child's violent behavior, this encourages the child to be violent in other situations. There is a correlation of 0.73 between the scale of anti-social behavior at home and the scale of anti-social behavior at school, one year later (16).

This study aimed at finding how these three systems, family, friends and school, affected violence among Israeli youth. Based on the literature it was expected that risk behavior such as involvement in violence towards other youth would be more associated with school and peer relations, then with family perceptions. That is due to the growing importance of friends and of school in the social lives of adolescents.

## METHODS

### Source of Data

The study was based on a secondary analysis of data from the Israeli National Survey conducted in 1998 as part of the World Health Organization's Health Behavior in School-Aged Children (HBSC) cross-national survey.

The Israeli HBSC was conducted in May 1998 on a nationally representative sample of 8,394 students from grade 6<sup>th</sup> through 10<sup>th</sup> in the secular and religious public school systems, including both Jewish and Arab schools. The sample was drawn from a national list of schools and classrooms provided by the Ministry of Education.

### Survey Instrument

The HBSC uses a standardized questionnaire that includes measures of many domains affecting the daily lives of youth, such as: perceptions of parental and peer support, school climate, health related risk behaviors (e.g. smoking, drinking, eating habits), mental and physical health, youth violence, and injuries. The instrument is an in-class, self-administrated anonymous questionnaire.

### Measures

Three indicators of youth violent behavior were examined in this study: a) *Bullying*- this measure was derived from the question: "How often have you taken part in bullying other students at school this school year?" b) *Physical fight*- measured by the two questions: "During the past 12 months, how many times were you involved in a physical fight..." and "...in a physical fight in which you were injured and needed medical treatment?" c) *Carrying weapon*- measured by the question: "During the past 30 days, on how many days did you carry a weapon such as a knife, club or gun, for self-defense?"

### Predisposition Variables

These include a) Gender: boys vs. girls; b) Ethnicity: Jews vs. non-Jewish pupils (including Moslems, Druze, Christian Arabs and Bedouins); c) Three age groups were compared: grades 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> (primary school), grades 8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> (secondary school), and grade 10<sup>th</sup> (high school).

### Family Support scales

Two family scales were built using factor analysis. Both scales range from 1 to 6 and are in the negative direction, naming, the higher the score, the lower the support.: a) Emotional support. and b) Instrumental support. The first scale is the mean of the student answers to seven questions: 1-4 "How easy is it for you to talk to the following persons about things that really bother you?" (father/ mother/ elder brother / elder sister). 5. "My mother encourages me to do well at school". 6. "My father encourages me to do well at school". 7. "My parents expect too much from me at school". ( $\alpha=0.59$ ).

The second scale, "Instrumental support", is the mean of the answers to five questions: 1-2: "If I have problems at school my mother/father are ready to help me." 3-4: "My mother/father is willing to come to school to talk to teachers." The scale ranges from 1 to 6 - the higher the score the lower the instrumental support that the child feels he has from his parents. ( $\alpha=0.74$ ).

### Peers

Four different scales were constructed following factor analysis: a) Spend less time with friends: This scale measures the frequency with which youth spend time with friends after school and how many evenings per week do they usually spend out with friends. ( $\alpha=0.53$ ); b) Lack of peers support: The student was asked how easy it was for him to talk with friends from the same sex/the opposite sex about things that

bothered him/her. ( $\alpha=0.44$ ); c) Difficulties in having close relations: Students were asked how many close friends they had, and whether it was easy or difficult for them to make new friends. ( $\alpha=0.30$ ); d) Feel lonely: Answers to a single question about how often they feel lonely.

**School** Twenty two items related to school perceptions were included in the questionnaire. Factor analysis suggested eight scales as follows: a) General school perception. This scale included how much they like their school, if the school is clean, how comfortable they feel in school, and whether they feel that they belong at school. ( $\alpha=0.76$ ); b) Lack of fairness. This scale was built from the following questions: "In our school the students take part in making rules", "The students are treated too severely in this school", "The rules in this school are fair", "Our teachers treat us fairly". ( $\alpha=0.62$ ); c) Lack of teacher support was built from these questions: "My teachers encouraged me to express my own view in class", "When I need extra help from my teachers, I can get it", "My teachers are interested in me as a person". ( $\alpha=0.72$ ); d) Alienation from school. The student was asked on how many days did he/she skip classes or school this term and how often does he/she think that going to school is boring. ( $\alpha=0.37$ ); e) Negative social climate was measured by the following items: "How often does it happen that other students don't want to spend time with you at school and you end up being alone", "The students in my class enjoy being together", "Most of the students in my class are kind and helpful", "Other students accept me as I am". ( $\alpha=0.62$ ); f) Low academic achievement. The student was asked: "In your opinion: What does your class teacher think about your school performance compared to your classmates?"; g) Lack of physical safety in school. The student was asked how often

he/she feels safe at school; h) High rates of violence in school. This scale measures perceptions of the respondents about how often bullying and vandalism occurs in their school, and how often they have seen a classmate carry a weapon ( $\alpha=0.55$ ).

## RESULTS

The analysis was based on hierarchical series of logistic regression models using "enter" method in four steps. The first stage of analysis focused on examining the relationship between the three social systems and bullying, physical fights and weapon carrying. The findings are presented in Table 1. Table 1 is sub-divided into three parts: i) results for bullying; ii) results for physical fights; and iii) results for weapon carrying. Each part includes additional sub-deviation by three regression models.

All the models present the results of social system variables entered in the regression analysis models, over and above the effects of gender, ethnicity and grade.

As for demographic variables, results show that these variables have the highest coefficient regression compared to all other variables. This is especially true in the case of gender which ranges from  $\beta$ 's of 0.31 to 0.26. In generally, it seems that boys are more likely than girls to be involved in violence, Arab students are likely than Jewish students to be involved in violence, and bullying and physical fights are more frequent in younger age groups than in older ones.

Model 1 presents the results of regression analysis predicting bullying, physical fights and weapon carrying by the two scales of family support. The two family support scales show statistically significant coefficients suggesting that students with lack of family support are more likely to be involved in youth violence. However, despite the highly significant coefficients, the magnitudes of

the  $\beta$ 's are relatively low (0.04- 0.08). The  $R^2$ 's for models including only the three predisposition variables are about 0.08-0.13. The inclusion family support added only one or two percent to the variance explained.

Results of regression models including peer support variables are presented in Model 2. Peer measures were entered in the equation over and above predisposition variables. Regression coefficients show that respondents who report having difficulties with close relations (a small number of close friends or difficulties making new friends) are more likely than others to be involved in violence ( $\beta=0.11-0.13$ ). In addition, findings suggest that students who spend more time with peers are more involved in violence ( $\beta=0.07-0.10$ ). Magnitudes of coefficients for the other two peer variables are statistically significant, but low.

Model 3 shows the influence of school factors on violence. Except for the influence of demographic measures, factors found to have the highest regression coefficients on all three dependant variables were: "Alienation from school" ( $\beta=0.09-0.11$ ), "Low academic achievements" ( $\beta=0.08-0.10$ ), and "High rates of violence in school" ( $\beta=0.10-0.12$ ). As to the latter, strong association might also reflect some confounding effect between the perception of violence in school and the personal conduct of violence. However, the other two school scales have no inherent confounder and they also associate with violence outcomes. School perception explained 14 - 17 percent of the variance of the three dependent variables.

Table 2 presents results of regression models including all variables from across the three social systems that had significant regression coefficients in the previous analysis. After controlling for the effect of demographic measures, it appears that youth who: have difficulties in school; feel

Table 1. Regression models predicting youth violence by perceptions of parental support, peer support and school respectively.

Predictors	Bullying			Physical Fights			Weapon Carrying		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Gender	0.29***	0.30***	0.26***	0.30***	0.31***	0.28***	0.27***	0.27***	0.23***
Demog.	0.09***	0.10***	0.16***	0.14***	0.15***	0.20***	0.10***	0.12***	0.17***
Grade	-0.08***	-0.10***	-0.11***	-0.09***	-0.10***	-0.11***	0.00 n.s.	-0.00 *	-0.02***
Parents	Emotional support 0.04***			0.04***			0.05***		
	Instrumental supp. 0.07***			0.08***			0.08***		
Friends	Time with friends -0.08***			-0.07***					
	Peers support -0.05***			-0.03 *					
	Ease of friendship 0.11***			0.11***					
	Feel lonely 0.01 **			0.01 *					
School	General perception 0.01 n.s.								
	Fairness -0.00 n.s.								
	Teacher supp. 0.02 **								
	Alienation 0.11***								
	Social climate 0.01 **								
	Achievements 0.10***								
	Physical safety 0.02***								
	School violence 0.12***								
Adj Rsq	0.11	0.12	0.16	0.14	0.14	0.16	0.10	0.11	0.14
N	7,773	7,524	7,524	7,718	7,474	7,474	7,803	7,547	7,547

Numbers in cells are linear regression coefficients, P-values are presented as follows: P<0.05 \*, P<0.01 \*\* and P<0.001 \*\*\*.

All predictors have negative scales. Namely, the higher the scale, the more negative is the measure (e.g., lack of support, negative school perception).

Table 2. Regression models predicting youth violence by perceptions of parental support, peer support and school together

Predictors	Full model			
	Bully	Physical fights	Weapon carrying	
Demog.	Gender	0.30***	0.28***	0.24***
	Ethnicity	0.17***	0.24***	0.16***
	Grade	-0.02***	-0.03***	0.02***
Parents	Emotional support			
	Instrumental supp.	0.06***	0.07***	0.04***
	Time with friends	-0.07***	-0.04***	-0.12***
Friends	Peers support			
	Ease of friendship	0.05***	0.03***	0.09***
	Feel lonely			
School	General perception			
	Fairness			
	Teacher supp.			
	Alienation	0.11***	0.10***	0.07***
	Social climate			
	Achievements	0.08***	0.07***	0.08***
	Physical safety			
School violence	0.12***	0.11***	0.10***	
Adj Rsq	0.18	0.18	0.14	
N	7,524	7,474	7,547	

Numbers in cells are linear regression coefficients, P-values are presented as follows: P<0.05 \*, P<0.01 \*\* and P<0.001 \*\*\*.

All predictors have negative scales. Namely, the higher the scale, the more negative is the measure (e.g., lack of support, negative school perception).

alienation from school; perceive high rates of violence in school; spend more time with friends; have difficulty making close friends; and feel that their parents don't give them support (especially support regarding school), are more likely to be involved in bullying, physical fights and weapon carrying. The combined model explains 18% of the variance in bullying and physical fights, and 14% of the variance in weapon carrying.

Segregated analysis conducted for boys vs. girls, Jewish pupils vs. Arab pupils, and for three distinct age groups, revealed that

the final model fits data for all sub-groups. However, the effects and the percent of variance explained were stronger for boys, Arab students, and students from younger age groups.

## DISCUSSION

In order to fully understand what causes youth to get involved in violence as a way of negotiation with the world, we must first understand what in their social environment may lead them to violence.

The influence of the predisposition measures is known and well documented.

Studies have showed that boys are more likely to be involved in violence than girls (17,18,19). It was also found that minorities tend to be more exposed to violence than majority populations (20), and that daily involvement in violence tends to decrease with age (17,21). This study confirms these findings.

The aim of this study was to understand which elements of the youth's social environment most influence their violent behavior. In order to fully understand what causes him or her to get involved in violence, we first measured every social system alone.

The first social environment we investigated was the family. Some theories focus on the family as the primary influence on children's behavior (12,22). There is no doubt that the family has an impact on children's behavior, but to what extent is the family involved in processes leading to youth violence? When we measured family factors alone, we found that youth who have no emotional or instrumental support from their family were more likely to be involved in bullying, physical fights and weapon carrying. However, when we regressed those family factors together with peer and school factors, no partial effect was found for emotional support. Instrumental support, on the other hand, still had a significant partial effect on violence over and above the effects of peers and school. Note that in our study, "instrumental support" was measured by the involvement of parents in the youth's school life. It appears that youth who feel they did not get support from their parents when they have difficulty in school tended to be more violent. Thus, it is perception of lack of parental support regarding school (and not merely parental support in general) that has the strongest relationship with youth violence.

The second social environment investigated involved peers. Findings suggest

that on the one hand, youth who are more involved in violence tend to be very sociable - they spend large amounts of time with friends and feel that they do have social support from their friends. However, they also feel lonely and have difficulties in establishing close connections. It is reasonable to suggest that there are two groups who are involved in violence: i) adolescents who are sociable and view violence as a way of spending time with friends and as a way of reassuring their status in the group, and ii) youth who feel lonely and rejected and choose violence as a way of expressing their frustrations. It is also reasonable to assume that violent youth spend time with friends, but the nature of these relationships are such that deep inside the violent youngster felt he or she had no real close friends. Some studies have found that the bully has more friends than the average pupil (23,24), but Gottfredson & Hirschi (12) believed that this relationship was less rewarding than those of average youth.

When social involvement and difficulties having close relations were entered in a model together with family and school factors, they still had significant partial effects. In fact, social involvement had the highest beta coefficients from all the social systems on weapon carrying. It appears that youth, who spend a large amount of time with friends, and youth who feel they have difficulties having close relations, are more likely to be involved with violence over and above perceptions of family and school.

The final social setting we investigated was the school. When the school system was regressed alone, almost all school factors had significant effects on violence. The factors that had significant effects on bullying, physical fights, and weapon carrying were: "Alienation from school", "Low academic achievements", and "High rates of violence in school". It appeared that youth, who felt bored and tended to be absent from school with no justification,

felt they had low achievements, and witnessed frequent violence in their school, tended to be more involved in violence.

School factors, together with pre-disposition measures, explained the highest proportion of variance in dependent variables – i.e., higher than did family or peer factors.

When school factors were added to the equation together with family and peer factors, they still had the highest significant partial coefficients. “Lack of academic success”, “feelings of alienation”, and “high amount of violence in school”, had highly significant coefficients in relation to bullying, physical fights and weapon carrying. It appeared that youth that had negative experiences in school tended to get involved in violence more often than other students. In the age span of 12-16 years (that was studied here), school was the most significant social environment. This was where youth must exhibit their capabilities and where they are in competition with other students for recognition from teachers, other pupils and even their families. Failure in school was a most traumatic experience that caused pupils to feel they must replace this harmful surrounding with another, more supportive one. Pupils who did not integrate in the school system, and whose parents did not help them with school, turned to the only place where they could find support: socialization with peers who included violence in their behavior repertoire. Together they could harass other children and feel superior if not in their studies then in their physical abilities.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study supported the view that one way to reduce youth violence is to promote a more positive daily experience in school. This can be done on the academic level and/or by strengthening extracurricular activities (e.g. sport, arts, and community involvement) as a contra-balance. In

addition, our data also suggested that strengthening the involvement of parents in school life and increasing social skills can also serve to decrease the rate of youth violence in school.

Improving school perceptions is a challenge that has several faces. It should concentrate both on supporting academic achievements for pupils who are showing difficulties, and by identifying and improving other aspects of school life that were found to be negatively perceived by pupils and/or staff.

This study emphasized the importance of the three social systems in determining the level of youth violence and the need to concentrate on strategies that improve child's perceptions and experience within these settings as a means to reduce youth violence.

We should note that due to limitations of this study, the direction of causality could not be determined. However, evaluation studies in Europe (WHO-NHPS-EVA) proved that when improving school perceptions by an intervention program, improvements of a host of health behaviors are documented (25). We therefore believe that this should be the case in Israel too.

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