REACH

Supporting Military Families Through Research and Outreach

Peer Victimization

Research Brief

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Introduction

In social science, the term peer victimization refers to someone – usually a child – being the target of aggression by peers. Aggressive behavior can be either overt (e.g., hitting, taunting) or relational (e.g., excluding from groups or spreading gossip)[7], and includes behaviors popularly referred to as bullying. In addition, the focus here is on victimization from peers, or those of a similar age. Victimization from parents, siblings, or other adults are not considered in this research brief.

Peer victimization is common among school children, and is associated with a variety of psychological, academic, social, and family factors. In this brief, we will provide a summary of the research on the frequency of peer victimization and the factors associated with experiencing peer victimization along with implications and recommendations for prevention efforts.

Research Findings

Estimates of the prevalence of peer victimization have varied considerably. Studies show that between 30 and 60% of students have been victimized during the current semester or school year[12,29,33], and 6 to 15% of children were victimized once a week or more frequently[29]. These children experiencing weekly (or more frequent) victimization are considered "frequent victims". Therefore, victimization is a problem that most children experience at least at some point, and frequent victimization (although experienced by a minority) occurs for a significant group of children. In addition, rates of peer victimization have been found to be comparable across countries[32], indicating that victimization occurs across countries and cultures.

Keywords

Externalizing problems are behavioral problems that are disruptive or harmful to others, for example getting into fights or skipping school.

Internalizing problems are emotion and mood problems, for example anxiety and depression; these can be experienced as general symptoms or as a serious disorder.

Peer victimization is the experience of being the target of aggression by peers.

**Prosocial skills** are behaviors that benefit or help others.

Psychosocial factors are issues related to a person's psychological development within a social context.

Psychosocial factors

A substantial amount of research has examined the factors that are associated with peer victimization[5]. This research demonstrates that children who are victimized by their peers tend to be physically weak (according to either self-assessments or reports by peers), have low self-concept (the beliefs an individual holds about themselves; their sense of self), exhibit low levels of prosocial and social skills (like sharing and cooperating), suffer internalizing problems (e.g., depression, anxiety), and experience some externalizing problems (e.g., hyperactivity, delinquency, but not especially high or low levels of aggression)[8,14,15,23,26]. There also exists a smaller body of longitudinal studies that show us whether these factors occur prior to (i.e., risk or protective factors) or are consequences of (i.e., likely outcomes) peer victimization[15,16]. As might be expected, physical weakness is a risk factor, that occurs prior to and can set up conditions for peer victimization. Notably, other physical characteristics such as being short, obese, or wearing glasses are not consistently related to victimization. In contrast, prosocial behaviors, assertiveness (but not aggressiveness), and behaviors that can lessen potential conflict all predict lower levels of victimization over time. Thus, these behaviors can be considered protective factors against peer victimization.

The associations of peer victimization with self-concept, internalizing problems, and certain externalizing problems are more complex. Each of these is a consequence of being victimized by peers, as victimization leads to lower self-concept and more internalizing and externalizing problems. However, low self-concept and internalizing problems also predict increases in peer victimization over time, presumably because children with these problems are viewed as "easy targets" by aggressors. These "easy targets" might be less likely to defend themselves and more likely to reward aggressors. Aggressors may be rewarded when their victims show signs of suffering or relinquishing resources (like giving up a toy). In addition, children with externalizing problems, especially hyperactivity, are likely to annoy or otherwise provoke aggressors[27]. Thus, there is a cycle in which these factors place children at risk for victimization, and the victimization leads to further problems in these areas. This cycle may explain why peer victimization is highly stable across time and contexts.

Influences

Peer Victimization

- **Low self-concept**
- **Internalizing problems**
- **Externalizing problems**

Predicts further increases in
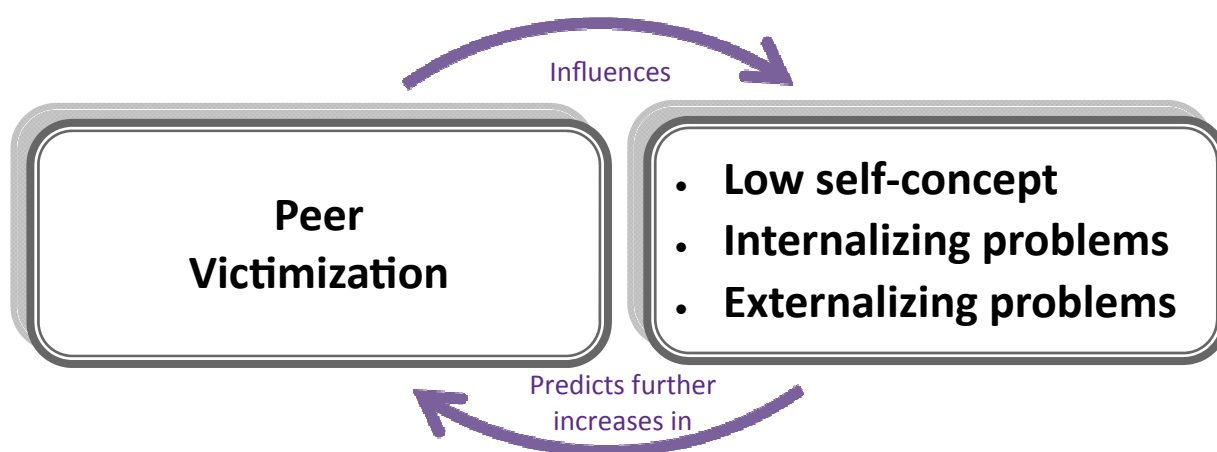
Academic factors

Victimization is also associated with academic problems such as low school enjoyment, perceptions of school as unsafe, school avoidance and absenteeism, low academic ability and achievement, and enrollment in special education or similar classes[5,22]. Longitudinal research of these academic factors is limited, although some conclusions can be drawn. First, victimization predicts disliking school. This consequence is intuitive, but can be further considered in light of findings that victims often view school as unsafe and that victimization leads to a desire to avoid school and increased absenteeism. Second, victimization is weakly associated with lower scores on standardized tests and lower school grades, but the longitudinal evidence is inconclusive in that it is demonstrated in some studies but not others[19]. Nonetheless, poor academic achievement is likely a consequence of victimization; if children are worried about being victimized, they are less focused on academic work. In addition, academic achievement may be a risk factor for victimization, perhaps as a focus for teasing. It is important to note, though, that norms for academic achievement may impact the way in which achievement predicts victimization: school cultures in which academic achievement is valued may place low-achieving children at risk for victimization, whereas cultures in which academic achievement is devalued might place high-achieving children at risk. Finally, there is some tendency for students in special education classes to be more victimized than their peers. Whether this association would remain if other factors (e.g., behavioral problems, poor peer relations) were taken into consideration has not been addressed .

Social factors

Peer victimization is strongly related to children's social relationships[7]. Acceptance (being liked) and rejection (being disliked) by peers, in general, and having few or no friends are strongly related to victimization. Low peer acceptance and high peer rejection predict increases in victimization. Children who are rejected and not well liked by their peers are likely seen as easy targets by aggressors, and aggressors may receive positive reinforcement (e.g., peers cheering on attacks) for targeting these children. In addition, children with few or no friends may not have friends to protect them from potential aggressors. Poor social status is also a consequence of peer victimization of friendships because peers may distance themselves from the targeted child.

Thus, victimization and social status occur in a cycle, similar to the psychological factors described earlier. It is important to note that not all friendships are the same – friends with certain characteristics (e.g., physical strength, peer acceptance) can protect children from victimization, but the friends of victimized children tend to also be victimized, have personal and interpersonal risk factors, and be unwilling or unable to offer protection.

Is related to

Rejection	Peer
Having few or no friends	Victimization

Sets the conditions for
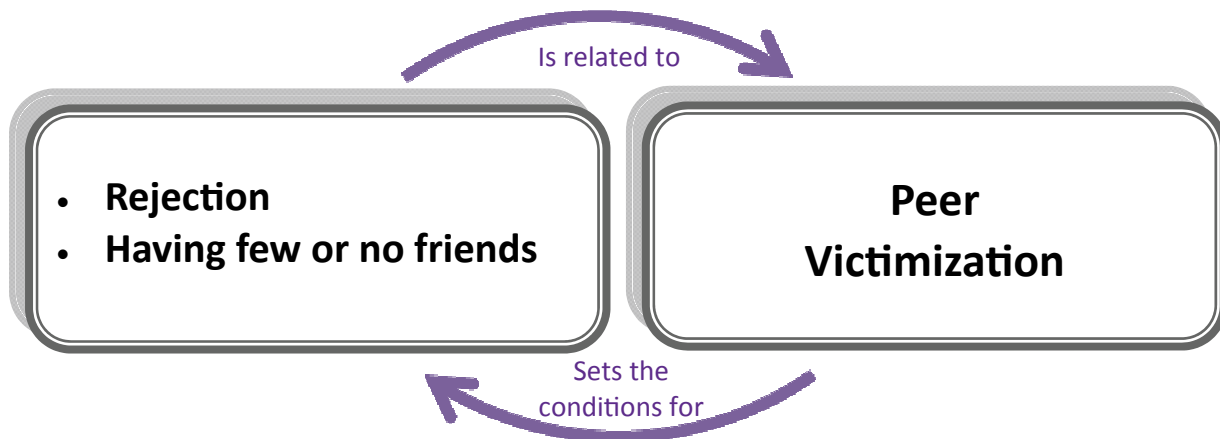
Family factors

There also exists a small body of literature identifying relations between peer victimization and family factors[25]. Several parenting behaviors have been explored in association with peer victimization. Parents' provision of support[13], involvement[13,23], and responsiveness[20] are all negatively associated with victimization; that is, as parents are more supportive, involved, and responsive in a child's life, that child is less likely to be victimized. Other factors may vary depending on the gender of the child. For example, there is mixed evidence that overprotectiveness and intense closeness are positively associated with victimization among boys, but not girls[10,20]; whereas demandingness and coercion are positively associated to victimization among girls, but not boys[10,20]. Child abuse, a more extreme form of coercive parenting behavior, has also been connected to peer victimization[9,31]. This association may exist because children who are abused by their parents often do not learn how to manage their emotions in a healthy manner, putting these children at greater risk for peer victimization[31].

Two components of family structure that have been examined with victimization are family size and intactness (presence vs. absence of father). In several studies, these components have not been found to be significantly related to victimization[1,4,28], though some have found a small association between victimization and father absence[2,11,21]. The mechanisms by which father absence leads to victimization may include higher risk of maladaptive parenting behavior (negative parenting practices) brought on by parental distress, and lost opportunities for the child to develop social skills through interaction with a second parent. Across several studies, little evidence supports an association between family socioeconomic status and victimization[3,17,24,34]. However, exposure to community violence (direct victimization but not merely witnessing violence) is linked to greater peer victimization in the school context, with this association partially mediated by the development of emotional dysregulation, the inability to appropriately manage emotions[30]. Thus, while socioeconomic status appears to be unrelated to victimization by peers, it may have an indirect impact through associations with neighborhood violence which, in turn, may promote the development of personal risk factors that place youths at risk for in-school victimization.

> Having friendships with peers who are not victimized and friends with certain characteristics (physical strength and peer acceptance) may protect youth from victimization.

Future Directions for the Field

Although the existing research has provided a foundation for understanding peer victimization, there are at least three important directions for future research. First, there is a need for further longitudinal (long-term) research to clarify which, and over what time periods, these personal, academic, social, and family factors serve as risk factors versus consequences of peer victimization. Second, more systematic comparisons between studies are needed to understand for whom these findings are strongest. For example, are these findings consistent across children's ages, for military children, or for those with different ethnic backgrounds? Finally, it is important for future research to investigate the features that build protective factors against victimization. For instance, social support from friends or family could provide protection and even moderate a personal risk factor from translating into victimization, or peer victimization from leading to negative outcomes[14,15,16]. However, such buffering has not yet been widely and systematically studied.

Implications

Implications of these research findings should be considered at several levels of context, including:

Individual

- Prevention and intervention efforts focused on developing socially skilled behaviors in youth may help reduce peer victimization among children.

- Given that peer victimization occurs in a cycle with depression, anxiety, and low self-concept, it may be necessary to address these psychological issues in addition to any peer victimization that may occur.

- Interventions that aim to reduce risk factors (e.g., depression) and increase protective factors (e.g., social skills) may indirectly reduce victimization.

Family

- Family-focused interventions, particularly those increasing parental support, involvement, and responsiveness might reduce peer victimization through parenting behaviors.

- Given that some family factors predict peer victimization differently for boys and girls, a child's gender should be considered in any prevention or intervention efforts.

- Families experiencing father absence should be aware of this risk factor and strive to support and build other protective factors.

School

- About half of elementary school children report victimization, with rates decreasing throughout middle and high school. This means that school staff may be unaware of most victimization.

- Efforts to reduce victimization may also improve academics and school safety.

- Peer relations, including group status and friendships, are strongly related to peer victimization. As such, supporting and building healthy peer groups are therefore a key focus for school-based prevention and intervention efforts.

Community

- Exposure to community violence is associated with victimization by peers at school. Communities experiencing violence can support prevention and intervention efforts to reduce peer victimization in schools.

- Common prevention programs aim to involve parents, all school personnel, and adults in the community.

In Practice

PROGRAMS

- Interventions for victimized children should focus on both the victimization, supporting and building protective factors, and minimizing risk factors.

- Peer relations are strongly related to peer victimization, and should be a key focus of programs to reduce victimization.

- The KiVa program, which places substantial emphasis on the peer group (increasing defending of victims and reducing assistance of aggressors), has been found to be highly effective in Finland (Karna et al., 2011).

POLICIES

- Schools and other settings serving youth should have stated rules against peer victimization, a planned response to occurrences, and regular training for staff.

- Policies should address all forms of peer victimization, including covert forms in addition to physical forms of victimization like physical bullying.

- The impact of existing and developed policies should be assessed by measuring whether impacted children report lower peer victimization

Summary

Victimization is a problem that most children experience at least at some point, and frequent victimization (although experienced by a minority) is experienced by a significant group of children. There are identified individual, academic, family and social factors that can put children at risk for peer victimization. However, there are clear areas that can be addressed to support and build factors in these areas that protect children from peer victimization. Supports may include school-based programs that build and support healthy peer groups, parenting programs that promote healthy parenting practices and community prevention programs that aim to reduce and prevent community violence.

Future Reading
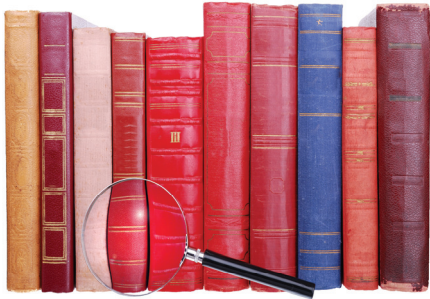
- **CDC—Understanding Bullying—Fact Sheet**
  http://www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/pub/understanding_bullying.html
- **U.S. Department of Health and Human Services**
  http://www.stopbullying.gov/
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