Far from a monolith: A typology of externalizing behavior among African American youth

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Background

Because externalizing behaviors such as aggression and substance use often co-occur in adolescence, it makes sense to study them using person-centered (e.g., latent class analysis) rather than variable-centered approaches. Our study uses a large database with a nationally representative sample and employs a person-centered approach that identifies externalizing behavior profiles of African American youth and offers new evidence of their potential etiology and consequences. To this end, we examine predictors (e.g., interpersonal factors, academics) of each of these profiles and their association with adolescent substance use and involvement in the criminal justice system.

Study Design and Methods

Drawing from the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (2015-2018), we conducted a latent class analysis based on five externalizing behavior indicator variables – serious fight, attack to harm, stealing, drug selling, handgun carrying – using a nationally representative sample of 7,326 African American adolescents, aged 12-17 years. For model validation correlates, we examined a range of psychosocial and demographic factors. We then conducted multinomial logistic regression analyses to examine the relationships between externalizing behavior profiles and psychosocial factors, substance use, and criminal justice system involvement.

Key Findings

We identified three distinct behavioral profiles among African American youth: *No Involvement* **(74.4%)**, very low involvement in all externalizing behaviors examined; *Serious Fight* **(23.3%)**, high likelihood (95%) of involvement in a serious fight, lower levels of attacking to harm (20%), negligible levels of stealing, drug selling, and handgun carrying; and *Multidimensional Externalizing* **(2.3%)**, very high levels of involvement (60% to 80%) in all externalizing behaviors examined.

- **The vast majority of African American youth (74.4%) reported no involvement in any of the externalizing behaviors examined in this study.**
- Over forty percent (42%) of youth in the *Serious Fight* profile reported living in households earning < $20,000 annually, which may indicate that they live in low-income neighborhoods that place them at greater risk for interpersonal violence. Excluding engaging in serious fights, **the rate of one or more externalizing behavior among African American youth (11.7%) was comparable to that of non-Hispanic White youth (10.5%)**. Further, African American youth showed lower rates of participation in theft, drug selling, and handgun carrying compared to non-Hispanic White youth.
- **A small (2.3%) but important subset of African American youth reported involvement in an array of externalizing behaviors.** Individuals in this subset tended to be older and male, and reported low levels of psychosocial protection and high levels of psychosocial risk, substance use, and criminal justice system involvement.

Implications and Next Steps

The *Multidimensional Externalizing* profile highlights the need for further improving prevention interventions for African American adolescent boys who may live in high-risk neighborhoods.

Future research examining situational and contextual factors related to involvement in violence among very low-income African American youth may provide useful insights for individual and community-level preventions efforts.

Our findings make a powerful and rigorous empirical argument for ending the well-documented demonization of Black youth in the U.S. The assumption should not be that Black youth are involved in multiple externalizing behaviors when barely 1 in 50 Black youth report this involvement. Rather, the data shows that most (74.4%) Black youth are not engaging in any externalizing behaviors, and that most of those who are involved in serious fights (23.3%) are not involved in other externalizing behaviors.

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