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## Exploring Bullying And Peer Victimization Among African American Adolescents In Chicago's Southside

Jeoung Min Lee  
*Wayne State University*

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**EXPLORING BULLYING AND PEER VICTIMIZATION AMONG AFRICAN  
AMERICAN ADOLESCENTS IN CHICAGO'S SOUTHSIDE**

by

**JEOUNG MIN LEE**

**DISSERTATION**

Submitted to the Graduate School

of Wayne State University,

Detroit, Michigan

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

2020

MAJOR: SOCIAL WORK

Approved By:

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## DEDICATION

*To my dedicated and supportive husband:*

*Hae Soo Seo*

*Children:*

*Eric Donghyuck and Dong June*

*And*

*Friends:*

*Larry Karnes, Susan Karnes, Ju Yeon Park, Alba Leone, and Petra Telgkamp*

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## CHAPTER 1 RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH BULLYING AND VICTIMIZATION AMONG URBAN AFRICAN AMERICAN ADOLESCENTS: AN APPLICATION OF THE ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS FRAMEWORK

### Introduction

Bullying is recognized as a subset of aggressive behavior that can increase the risk of psychosocial problems, adverse health conditions, social relationship difficulties, lower academic performance, criminal offenses, and risk-taking behaviors (e.g., alcohol/drug use) and suicidal behaviors (Borowsky, Taliaferro, & McMorris, 2013; Connell, Morris, & Piquero, 2017; Gladden, Vivolo-Kantor, Hamburger, & Lumpkin, 2014; Juvonen, Yueyan, & Espinoza, 2010; Kaltiala-Heino, Frojd, & Marttunen, 2010; van Geel, Vedder, & Tanilon, 2014).

According to Olweus (1993), a pioneer of bullying research, a *bully* is an individual youth or a group of youth who frequently intimidate other, often powerless students over time. Researchers have identified two types of bullying. Direct bullying involves face-to-face confrontation, such as hitting, kicking, punching, pushing, or name-calling (Craig, Pepler, & Blais, 2007; Woods & Wolke, 2004). Indirect bullying occurs without face-to-face confrontation, such as spreading rumors or sending negative messages online (Craig et al., 2007; Wolke, Woods, Bloomfield, & Karstadt, 2004; Woods & Wolke, 2004).

Despite an increasing number of anti-bullying programs (e.g., Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, KiVa Anti-Bullying Program, and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports) implemented in school districts, evidence on the effectiveness of these programs on reducing bullying has been limited (Bradshaw, 2013). Effective bullying interventions and prevention programs require an understanding of racial/ethnic differences among students. Because each racial/ethnic group has a unique background and characteristics, their experiences of bullying may differ. To develop effective bullying prevention and intervention programs, there is a need to

understand the risk and protective factors of bullying perpetration and victimization that are unique among African American children and adolescents within various environments.

This current study applies the ecological systems framework to examine the experiences of bullying among urban African American adolescents. The ecological systems framework, including the micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems, takes into account a range of influences in adolescent behaviors (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Understanding the risk and protective factors of bullying perpetration and victimization may contribute to the development of effective bullying prevention programs for African American adolescents in urban areas. Risk and protective factors from their encompassed surrounding environments can contribute to understanding African American adolescents' bullying dynamics. Therefore, understanding these risk and protective factors might provide practical strategies to promote effective bullying prevention programs.

#### *Bullying among African American Youth*

Few studies have focused on the bullying experiences of low-income African American youth in urban areas. A combination of race and low socioeconomic status (SES) can help understand bullying involving African American youth (Fu, Land, & Lamb, 2012; Goldweber, Waasdorp, & Bradshaw, 2013; Graham & Juvonen, 2002; Nansel et al., 2001). Fu et al.'s (2012) study from a sample of 12th-grade male African American students found that those who live with a single-parent or no-parent family in poor urban areas were more likely to be victimized by their peers. Adolescents with less advanced social skills have some difficulties in maintaining healthy peer relationships, and they have a higher likelihood of becoming victims of bullying. According to Goldweber et al.'s (2013) study findings, because of different race, skin color, appearance, and low socioeconomic status, urban African American youth are likely to be at a heightened risk of being victimized by their peers. However, Nansel et al.'s (2001) study which consisted of

adolescents in the 6th through 10th grades reported about 21.7% of African American students bullied others once or twice a week, while 15.8% of African American students were bullied by others once or twice a week.

### **Ecological Systems Framework**

To understand human development, it is important to consider environmental influences, such as families, friends, and neighborhoods. Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems framework comprised micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystem (see Figure 1), which are four nested systems that can provide a contextual understanding of human development and behavior. For example, parents and peers are situated in a community setting. This framework can help identify potential risk and protective factors in multiple environmental contexts. In detail, micro-, exo-, and macrosystems will explain how African American students' encompassed environmental contexts affect their bullying involvement, and with regards to the mesosystem, interactions among systems would establish other phenomena, which may in turn increase or reduce the probability of their bullying involvement.

### **Individual Traits**

#### *Biological Sex*

The role of biological sex differences in bullying varies among African American samples (Fitzpatrick, Dulin, & Piko, 2007; Kliewer, Dibble, Goodman, & Sullivan, 2012; Leff, Lefler, Khera, Paskewich, & Jawad, 2012; Nansel et al., 2001; Peskin, Tortolero, & Markham, 2006). Studies find that male students are engaged in greater physical bullying (Fitzpatrick et al., 2007; Nansel et al., 2001; Varjas, Henrich, & Meyers, 2009), while female students engage in

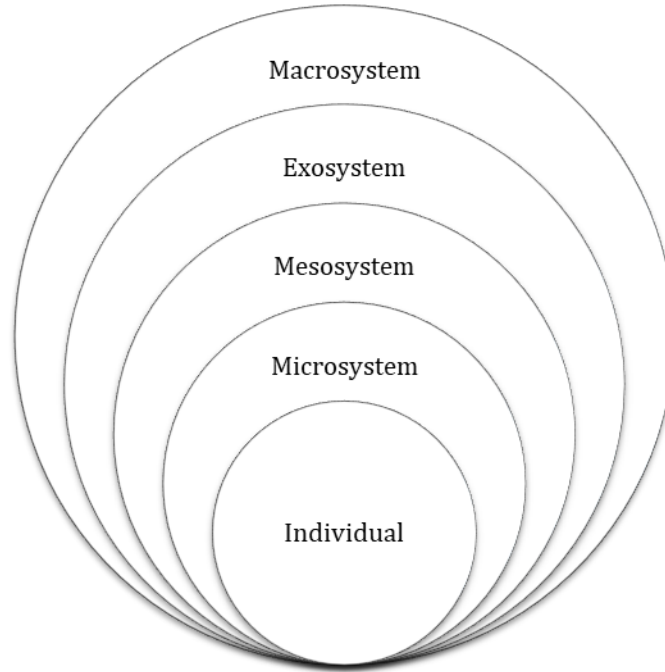


Figure 1. *Conceptual Framework for Understanding Ecological Systems of Bullying Victimization and Perpetration*

relational aggression (Goldstein, Young, & Boyd, 2007; Leff et al., 2012; Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009). On the other hand, other studies found that both males and females are equally likely to be involved in bullying perpetration and victimization (Kliewer et al., 2012; Peskin et al., 2006).

#### *Age*

Studies suggest that bullying perpetration and victimization peak during early adolescence (ages 10–14) and decrease as adolescents grow older (e.g., Fitzpatrick et al., 2007; Luk, Wang, & Simons-Morton, 2012; McDade, King, Vidourek, & Merianos, 2017; Peskin et al., 2006; Waasdorp, Bradshaw, & Leaf, 2012). Early adolescence is a developmental period when youth experience emotional, psychological, and physical changes and new school settings.

## **Microsystem**

The microsystem is the first level of the ecological systems framework. It consists of an immediate environment (e.g., home, school) that directly influences adolescents. The microsystem-level factors include parental monitoring, deviant peer relationships, teacher support, and religious involvement.

### *Parenting*

Parents play an important role in their child's socialization (Langlois & Downs, 1980). As documented in numerous empirical studies, parental emotional support, parental monitoring, and positive parent-child relationship are found to decrease youths' involvement in bullying (Barboza et al., 2009; Bettencourt & Farrell, 2013; Low & Espelage, 2013; Shetgiri, Lin, Avila, & Flores, 2012; Wang et al., 2009). According to one study, African American students have fewer protective factors (e.g., parental monitoring and empathy) than other racial groups (Low & Espelage, 2013). Bettencourt and Farrell (2013) found that non-victimized aggressors and aggressive victims were less likely to report receiving parental support than victimized youth and well-adjusted youth. Interestingly, aggressive victims had higher parental support than non-victimized aggressors. Also, according to a study conducted by Shetgiri et al. (2012), African American youth who talk with their parents were less likely to be involved in bullying than those who do not have talks with their parents. Furthermore, parental awareness of their child's friends, activities, and whereabouts was associated with decreased risk of children's bullying as indicated in Luk et al. (2012).

### *Peer Relations*

Peers are regarded as the most important social support group for adolescents, and peer groups can strongly influence an adolescent's behavior (Forbes & Dahl, 2010). Studies find that

students' bullying involvement is strongly influenced by aggressive behaviors of their peers and their relationship with a deviant peer group (e.g., Barboza et al., 2009; Bettencourt & Farrell, 2013; Fitzpatrick et al., 2007; Haynie et al., 2001; Luk et al., 2012; Shirley & Cornell, 2011; Wang et al., 2009; Weiss et al., 2005). For example, time spent with peers in the evening might increase an adolescent's risk of behaviors, such as drug use, bullying, and the co-occurrence of both (Luk et al., 2012). Even though a great number of peers make youth feel a sense of fulfillment and less isolated, frequent peer interactions might increase bullying risks (Barboza et al., 2009). On the other hand, Bollmer, Milich, Harris, and Maras' (2005) study of students aged 10–13 years, with externalizing behavior symptoms but with a high-quality friendship showed a reduced risk of bullying behaviors; those students who had internalizing behavior symptoms and with a low-quality friendship were more likely to become a bullying victim.

### *Teacher Support*

Schools are students' primary place to build social relationships (Willms, 2003), thus, most of the direct and indirect bullying incidents occur on school grounds where adults are absent (Astor, Benbenishty, Marachi, & Meyer, 2006). When schools are characterized as being highly structured and supportive and engage in fair discipline, teachers might be supportive and show a willingness to help students, which can contribute to fewer bullying incidents (Gregory et al., 2010). However, African American students are less likely to seek help from their teachers when they have been involved in bullying incidents or received threats of violence than their White counterparts (Shirley & Cornell, 2011). Because African American students are found to be less trusting of their teachers, they do not believe that teachers will help them. Consequently, they may have an increased risk of displaying maladaptive behaviors, such as bullying others (Shirley & Cornell, 2011).



### *Religious Involvement*

Limited studies have addressed the association between students' religious involvement and bullying. Religious involvement may promote a strong sense of social affiliation, social support, social networking, and life satisfaction (Ellison & George, 1994; Lim & Putnam, 2010). Religious beliefs may also buffer negative outcomes of stressful events, such as bullying and bullying victimization. Relationally victimized students with low intrinsic religiosity are also more likely to be depressed (Helms et al., 2015). Additionally, Fu et al. (2012) found that African American male students who lived with a single parent or in a no-parent family and did not attend religious services had experienced high levels of bullying victimization over time as religious involvement is linked with social support and social network. Interestingly, religious involvement could also increase the risk for bullying, as one study that reported a positive association between church attendance and bullying victimization (Abbotts, Williams, Sweeting, & West, 2004).

### **Mesosystem**

The mesosystem is the second level of the ecological systems framework. The mesosystem examines the interactions between two or more microsystems (see also Kellaghan, Sloane, Alvarez, & Bloom, 1993). To understand adolescent bullying involvement, it is important to consider the connection between parents and peers, and parents and teachers. Studies demonstrated that a high level of parental monitoring is negatively associated with youth's problem behaviors (e.g., bullying; Hill et al., 2004; Luk et al., 2012; Spriggs, Iannotti, Nansel, & Haynie, 2007), but positively associated with the quality of relationships with peers (e.g., Allen, Porter, McFarland, McElhaney, & Marsh, 2007).

Interactions between teachers and students, and between teachers and parents can influence students' behaviors and their peer relationships in school (Lee & Song, 2012; Waasdorp et al.,

2012). Supportive parents and teachers are important protective factors, which can help youth promote healthy behaviors which may, in turn, reduce the probability of bullying involvement. Thus, youth with a high level of parental monitoring might decrease the likelihood of bullying perpetration and victimization. However, youth who engage with delinquent peers and those who have received a lack of teacher support might have an increased likelihood of bullying perpetration and victimization. Because exposure to peer deviance and the lack of teacher support can negatively affect the development of adolescents' healthy behaviors, interactions between a delinquent peer relationship and the lack of teacher support might promote their bullying involvement.

### **Exosystem**

The exosystem is conceptualized by Bronfenbrenner (1977) as “an extension of the mesosystem embracing other specific social structures, both formal and informal” (p. 515). The external context, including the status of parents' work, traits of the neighborhood, health and welfare services, and social networks, indirectly influences individual development and behavior (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). The exosystem does not directly influence the individual but can affect the individual's microsystem. For example, less social support can increase parental stress in a low-income neighborhood and can adversely affect the parent-child relationship, which may contribute to an adolescent's conflicts with peers.

Social disorganization is defined as neighborhood factors (i.e., resource deprivation, ethnic heterogeneity, and residential mobility) contributing to eroded social controls and a community's ability to maintain common values (Sampson & Groves, 1989). Youth living in a disorganized neighborhood are likely to witness crime and violence in their neighborhood (Schreck, McGloin, & Kirk, 2009). These risks (i.e., neighborhood factors) threaten families' well-being, which

disrupts the development of healthy youth behaviors. For this study, a disorganized neighborhood and the presence of adults in the household who have been incarcerated are considered to be exosystem-level factors. Although the disorganized neighborhood and incarcerated adult family members are not an individual's proximal environments, these factors might increase their aggressive behaviors or vulnerability, which might lead them to engage in bullying perpetration and victimization.

### *Disorganized Neighborhood*

A few studies found that unsafe neighborhood environments with a lack of adult supervision, crime, high levels of unemployment, poverty, discrimination, or many abandoned houses might increase youths' bullying victimization (Foster & Brooks-Gunn, 2013; Martin et al., 2011; Patton, Woolley, & Hong, 2012). One longitudinal study found that neighborhood disorganization (e.g., drinking in public, gang violence, and presence of graffiti) increased African American youth delinquency (e.g., bullying, fighting, and assault with a weapon) (Martin et al., 2011). Another longitudinal study found that neighborhood problems (e.g., residential instability) increased parent-to-child physical aggression at home, which is connected to children's risk of physical victimization at school in Chicago (Foster & Brooks-Gunn, 2013). Although disorganized neighborhoods do not directly influence children and adolescents' bullying involvement, disorganized neighborhoods can disrupt their safety at home, which could prevent them from becoming bullies or being victimized by bullying at the school.

### *Incarcerated Adult Family Member*

Studies consistently found that current or previous incarceration of African American parents increases the stigmatization of children. Also, children of incarcerated parents might not receive appropriate parental support, be likely at risk of acting out aggressively, and engage in

delinquency (Greene, Haney, & Hurtado, 2000; Hagen & Myers, 2003; Murray, Farrington, Sekol, Olsen, & Murray, 2009; Myers et al., 2013; Rodriguez, Smith, & Zatz, 2009). Children who have incarcerated parents are twice as likely to have behavioral (e.g., antisocial behaviors) and psychological issues (e.g., mental problems) as children without incarcerated parents (Murray et al., 2009). The association between parental incarceration and children's behaviors and mental development has been explored in numerous studies. However, only one study, to date, had examined the relevance of parental incarceration in children's bullying behavior. Myers et al. (2013) found that children of incarcerated parents more frequently engaged in bullying. Because of their vulnerability to a family member's incarceration and the number of stressful life events, the children are deprived of the opportunity to build emotional regulation skills, which makes it difficult for them to manage their bullying behaviors. Accordingly, outcomes of the incarcerated adult family member at home indirectly affect African American adolescents' bullying behaviors in their school.

### **Macrosystem**

Macrosystem, the most distal level of the ecological systems framework, includes, for example, cultural beliefs, policies, and economic conditions, which can affect the microsystems of an adolescent. For this study, the macrosystem-level factors include youth employment status and socioeconomic status. For example, employed adolescents have different routines and lifestyles from their peers who are not employed. Moreover, youth of low socioeconomic status are likely to reside in poor living conditions, which can affect their relationships in their home and in school.

#### *Youth Employment Status*

A positive relationship between employment status and delinquent behavior and drug use has been shown in several studies (Leeman, Hoff, Krishnan-Sarin, Patock-Peckham, & Potenza,

2014; Safron, Schulenberg, & Bachman, 2001). Working outside of the home may increase youth's autonomy but reduces parental monitoring due to spending less time with parents, which may create more opportunities for exposure to deviant peers who may influence delinquent behaviors. Safron et al.'s (2001) study from national samples of 8th-, 10th-, and 12th-graders found that students' long work hours led them to participate less in school activities (i.e., extracurricular activities and sports). There is no research to date on youth employment status and bullying perpetration and victimization. However, if students are working, they are spending less time with school activities and have limited opportunities to develop friendships in school. Therefore, in terms of those different life-routines and lifestyles, they might be less likely to become bullies or victims of bullying compared to students who are unemployed.

#### *Socioeconomic Status*

African American students of low socioeconomic status in urban areas are more likely to be involved in violence (Albdour & Krouse, 2014; Bradshaw, Waasdorp, Goldweber, & Johnson, 2013; Cedeno, Elias, Kelly, & Chu, 2010; Fitzpatrick et al., 2007; Fu et al., 2012; Goldweber et al., 2013; Leff et al., 2014). In Leff et al.'s (2014) study, African American youth who resided in low-income urban areas were found to exhibit aggressive behavior and high levels of psychological distress and were victimized. In Fu et al.'s (2012) study, which included a sample of 12th-grade African American male students, lower socioeconomic status (as defined by low parental education and from single-parent or no-parent families) was found to be associated with severe forms of bullying victimization, such as being injured by weapons, than were non-African American youth from 1989 to 2009.

## Research Gaps

A number of studies have advanced our understanding of the characteristics and correlates of bullying victimization and perpetration among children and adolescents. However, school districts in the United States are becoming increasingly diverse, and implementing best practices requires an understanding of the risk and protective factors of bullying and victimization with African American children and adolescents. There are many studies that found risk and protective factors for bullying and victimization for African American children and adolescents. Studies have been conducted separately, addressing either bullying perpetration or bullying victimization, and several studies have found ecological factors to be important: for example, how parenting practices, friendships, teacher-student relationships, and neighborhood environments influence school-aged students' bullying involvement (Barboza et al., 2009; Bibou-nakou, Tsiantis, Assimopoulos, Chatzilambou, & Giannakopoulou, 2012; Foster & Brooks-Gunn, 2013; Georgiou, Fousiani, Michaelides, & Stavrinides, 2013). However, studies have not yet clarified how the relationship between parental monitoring and exposure to peer deviance, the relationship between a lack of parental monitoring and a lack of teacher support, or the relationship between disorganized neighborhoods and exposure to peer deviance affect children and adolescents becoming bullies or being victimized by bullying. To address the research gaps, the current study examines ecological factors associated with both bullying perpetration and victimization among urban African American children and adolescents.

## Method

### Hypotheses

This study addresses several hypotheses to examine factors associated with bullying and victimization by applying the ecological systems framework.

*Direct Effects*

- Hypothesis 1a: Parental monitoring, teacher support, and religious involvement are negatively associated with bullying and victimization, while exposure to peer deviance is positively associated with bullying perpetration and victimization.
- Hypothesis 1b: Exosystem-level factors, including disorganized neighborhood and incarcerated adult family member are positively associated with bullying perpetration and victimization.
- Hypothesis 1c: The macrosystem-level factor of youth employment status is likely to decrease the risk of African American youth engaging in bullying perpetration and bullying victimization, while low socioeconomic status is more likely to increase the risk of bullying perpetration and bullying victimization.

*Indirect Effects*

- Hypothesis 2: Parental monitoring is hypothesized to buffer the association between exposure to peer deviance and bullying perpetration and victimization (mesosystem).
- Hypothesis 3a: Exposure to peer deviance is hypothesized to mediate the association between neighborhood disorganization and bullying perpetration and victimization (mesosystem).

**Data and Sample**

Data were collected from 638 African American adolescents in three high schools, one church youth group, two community youth programs, and four public sites (i.e., parks, fast food outlets, malls, and movie theaters) located in the Southside of Chicago. Approximately 75% of the adolescents belong to low socioeconomic status groups, and their mean age was 15.84 ( $SD = 1.41$ ).

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of the variables.

Flyers providing detailed descriptions of this study were posted at all locations, and the research assistants provided information to potential participants at all locations. Consent forms were sent to the study participants and their parents, and the signed forms were obtained. Youth who were with their caregivers at public sites were recruited were directly given consent forms. Trained research assistants administered the survey questionnaires in quiet places and near the sites. All participants completed the self-report questionnaire which took approximately 45 minutes, and each participant was given \$10.

### **Measures: Variables**

#### *Dependent Variables*

The dependent variables for this study are bullying perpetration and bullying victimization. Measurement of *bullying perpetration* included five items adapted from the University of Illinois Bullying Scale (Espelage & Holt, 2001): “I teased other students,” “In a group, I teased other students,” “I threatened to hurt or hit other students,” “I spread rumors about other students,” and “I excluded other students from my clique of friends.” Response options included 0 = Never, 1 = 1 or 2 times, 2 = 3 or 4 times, 3 = 5 or 6 times, and 4 = 7 or more times during past 30 days. The internal reliability score for the items was  $\alpha = .80$ .

The measurement of *bullying victimization* consists of four items, which were adopted from the University of Illinois Victimization Scale (Espelage & Holt, 2001): “Other students pick on me,” “Other students made fun of me,” “Other students called me names,” and “I got hit and pushed by other students.” Response options included 0 = Never, 1 = 1 or 2 times, 2 = 3 or 4 times, 3 = 5 or 6 times, and 4 = 7 or more times during past 30 days. The internal reliability score for the items was  $\alpha = .87$ .



Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics of the Study Variables (N = 638)*

Variable	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Min	Max
Biological Sex					
Boys	290 (45.5)				
Girls (ref. = 1)	346 (54.2)				
Age		15.84	1.41	12	22
Bully perpetration		2.09	3.21	0	20
Bully victimization		2.13	3.22	0	16
Exposure to peer delinquency		8.31	7.56	0	36
Parent monitoring		15	4.24	2	20
Teacher support		22.10	5.22	6	30
Religion					
not important	83 (12)				
important	536 (84)				
Incarcerated adult family member		.56	.89	0	4
Disorganized neighborhood		5.06	2.44	3	15
Low socioeconomic status					
no	153 (24)				
yes (ref.=1)	476 (74.6)				
Employment status					

no	106 (16.6)
yes (ref.=1)	525 (82.3)

---

The University of Illinois Bullying Scale and the University of Illinois Victimization Scale (Espelage & Holt, 2001) have been widely used to measure bullying and victimization among U.S. adolescents and has demonstrated good validity and high internal consistency with U.S. samples (Chui & Chan, 2015; Espelage et al., 2018; Rose & Espelage, 2012).

### *Independent Variables*

The microsystem level includes relationships with parents, peers, and teachers and religious involvement. Disorganized neighborhood and incarcerated adult family members are regarded as an exosystem level, while youth employment status and low socioeconomic status are regarded as a macrosystem level variable.

The *parental monitoring* variable was derived from a modified version of the Parental Monitoring Knowledge Scale (Brown, Mounts, Lamborn, & Steinberg, 1993) that consists of four items. The scale has demonstrated good validity and high internal consistency with U.S. samples (Branstetter & Furman, 2013; Kerr, Stattin, & Burk, 2010). These items include, “How well do your parent(s) know what you do with free time?” “How well do your parent(s) know where you are most afternoons after school?” “How well do your parent(s) know who your friends are?” “How well do your parent(s) know how you spend money?” Response options are as follows: 0 = Not at all, 1 = Very little, 2 = Somewhat, 3 = Quite a bit, and 4 = Very much. The internal reliability score for the items was  $\alpha = .85$ . Also, to analyze the indirect effect, the parental monitoring variable needed to change the lack of parental monitoring variable, so four items were recorded as 4 = Not at all, 3 = Very little, 2 = Somewhat, 1 = Quite a bit, and 0 = Very much.

The *exposure to peer deviance* variable consists of nine items, which were modified from the Adolescent Delinquency Questionnaire (ADQ; Huizinga & Elliott, 1986). This questionnaire has shown good validity and high internal consistency with U.S. samples (Ingoldsby et al., 2006; Negriff, Ji, & Trickett, 2011). These items include, “How many of your ten closest friends drink alcohol?” “How many of your ten closest friends skip school or class?” “How many of your ten closest friends have smoked marijuana?” “How many of your ten closest friends have used drugs?” “How many of your ten closest friends smoke cigarettes?” “How many of your ten closest friends get into fights?” “How many of your ten closest friends carry guns?” “How many of your ten closest friends use weapons?” and “How many of your ten closest friends have stolen something worth more than \$5?” Response options are 0 = None, 1 = A few, 2 = About half, 3 = Many, and 4 = Most. The internal reliability score for the items was  $\alpha = .89$ .

The *teacher support* variable is composed of six items, which were modified from the Questionnaire on Teacher Interaction (QTI; Wubbels & Levy, 1991). This questionnaire demonstrates good validity and high internal consistency as indicated in studies using nationally representative samples (Den Brok, Brekelmans, & Wubbels, 2006; Scott & Fisher, 2004; Telli, Den Brok, & Cakiroglu, 2007). These items include, “The teachers at my school treat me fairly,” “My teachers care about me,” “Teachers in my school really care about the students,” “Teachers in my school really care about the feelings of their students,” “Teachers in my school put a lot of effort into their teaching,” and “Teachers at my school try to make schoolwork interesting for students.” Response options are as follows: 0 = Strongly disagree, 1 = Disagree, 2 = Neither agree nor disagree, 3 = Agree, and 4 = Strongly Agree. The internal reliability score for the items was  $\alpha = .90$ . To analyze the indirect effect, the teacher support variable needed to change the lack of

teacher support variable, so six items were recorded to 4 = Strongly disagree, 3 = Disagree, 2 = Neither agree nor disagree, 1 = Agree, and 0 = Strongly agree.

The *religious involvement* variable includes one item, which was modified from the Religious Involvement Scale (RIS; Roth et al., 2012). The item is, “How important are your religious/spiritual beliefs and practice to you?” Response options for this item are 0 = Not important, 1 = Slightly important, 2 = Moderately important, 3 = Important, and 4 = Very important.

The *disorganized neighborhood* variable consists of three items, which were modified from the Ross-Mirowsky Perceived Neighborhood Disorder Scale (NDS; Ross & Mirowsky, 1999). The scale shows good validity and high internal consistency in studies that utilized a nationally representative sample (Gapen et al., 2011; Garcia & Herrero, 2007; Kim, 2010). These items include, “On your street are there abandoned homes or apartments?” “On your street are there buildings with broken windows?” and “On your street are there homes with bars on the windows and doors?” Response options are 0 = No, 1 = A few, 2 = Some, 3 = Many, and 4 = All. The internal reliability score for the items was  $\alpha = .78$ .

The *incarcerated adult family member* variable consists of one item: “How many adults in your household have ever been incarcerated (spent time in jail or prison)?” Response options are 0 = No, 1 = 1, 2 = 2, 3 = 3, and 4 = 4 or more.

The *youth employment status* variable consists of one item: “What best describes your current employment status?” Response options are 0 = I only have a regular part-time (after-school) job, 1 = I have more than one part-time job, 2 = I have some informal jobs (babysitting, car wash, etc.), 3 = I volunteer regularly, and 4 = I am currently not employed. The item was utilized in research on employment status (e.g., Cohen & Janicki-Deverts, 2012; Moussavi et al., 2007). For the analysis, it was recorded as 0 = Unemployment and 1 = Current employment.

The *low socioeconomic status* variable consists of one item: “Are you receiving free or reduced lunch and/or Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefit?” Response options are 0 = No and 1 = Yes.

### *Covariates*

Covariates for the present study include biological sex (0 = Male, 1 = Female) and age (continuous).

### **Analyses**

Analyses for the current study included descriptive statistics, Pearson’s coefficient correlations, and multivariate ordinal least squares regression. To examine direct and indirect effects based on the ecological model factors (see Figure 1), three regression models were estimated after controlling for biological sex and age variables. SPSS 24.0 program was used to conduct the analysis. The first model examined the direct effect, the second model examined the interaction effect, and the third model examined the indirect effects. To examine the indirect effect (Hayes, 2017), the PROCESS macro, a component of the SPSS statistical software that analyzes observed variable mediation, moderation, and conditional process, was used (Hayes, 2017). Skew value for bullying perpetration was 2.07 and kurtosis was 4.72, while the skew value for victimization was 1.95 and kurtosis was 3.81. As indicated by Trochim and Donnelly (2006), the acceptable skewness and kurtosis limit value are  $|2|$ , and the current study used a bias-corrected and accelerated (BCa) interval, which corrects for bias and skewness in the distribution of bootstrap estimates (Preacher & Hayes, 2008).

### **Results**

Correlations among all study variables are shown in Table 2. Bully victimization ( $r = .48$ ,  $p = .000$ ), exposure peer delinquency ( $r = .32$ ,  $p = .000$ ), incarcerated adult family member ( $r = .13$ ,

$p = .001$ ), and disorganized neighborhoods ( $r = .22, p = .000$ ) were found to be positively correlated with bully perpetration. Parental monitoring ( $r = -.14, p = .001$ ) and teacher support ( $r = -.25, p = .000$ ) were found to be negatively correlated with bully perpetration. Also, bully perpetration ( $r = .48, p = .000$ ), exposure to peer delinquency ( $r = .21, p = .000$ ), and disorganized neighborhoods ( $r = .18, p = .000$ ) were found to be positively correlated with bully victimization. Age ( $r = -.13, p = .000$ ) and teacher support ( $r = -.10, p = .01$ ) were found to be negatively correlated with bully victimization.

The first model examined the direct effects, which included microsystem, exosystem, and macrosystem factors (see Table 3). Microsystem-level variables included parental monitoring, exposure to peer delinquency, teacher support, and religious involvement. The exosystem-level variables included neighborhood disorganization and incarcerated adult family members, and macrosystem-level variables included youth employment status and low socioeconomic status. Exposure to peer delinquency ( $\beta = .24, p < .001$ ) and disorganized neighborhood ( $\beta = .12, p < .01$ ) were found to significantly correlate with bully victimization, and exposure to peer delinquency ( $\beta = .26, p < .001$ ), teacher support ( $\beta = -.17, p < .001$ ), and neighborhood disorganization ( $\beta = .14, p < .01$ ) were found to correlate with bullying perpetration.

The second model examined the interaction effects for the mesosystem (see Table 4). Parental monitoring did not significantly interact with exposure to peer delinquency and bully victimization ( $\beta = .05, n/s$ ) and bully perpetration ( $\beta = -.01, n/s$ ).

The third model examined the indirect effects, which is displayed in Table 5. After controlling for all covariates, disorganized neighborhoods were found to be directly related to bully victimization (direct effect C':  $\beta = .12, p < .001$ , see Figure 2). Disorganized neighborhood was significantly related to exposure to peer delinquency ( $\beta = .25, p < .001$ ), and exposure to

Table 2. Correlations among the Study

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Biological Sex	-											
2. Age	-.14***	-										
3. SES	.02	.10*	-									
4. Bullying perpetration	-.07	-.00	-.02	-								
5. Bullying victimization	.01	-.13**	-.02	.48***	-							
6. Exposure to peer delinquency	-.20***	.22***	.05	.32***	.21***	-						
7. Parent monitoring	.12**	-.12**	.05	-.14**	-.04	-.19**	-					
8. Teacher support	-.01	.00	.14**	-.25***	-.10*	-.14**	.37***	-				
9. Incarcerated Adult family member	-.09*	.03	.05	.13**	.04	.20**	-.12**	-.08*	-			
10. Disorganized neighborhood	-.08*	.08*	.07	.22***	.18***	.26**	-.09*	-.03	.09*	-		
11. Religion	.12**	-.12**	-.01	-.04	.02	-.10*	.19***	.16***	-.06	.008	-	
12. Employment Status	-.10*	.07	.01	-.07	-.02	-.03	.10*	.04	-.08*	-.08	-.01	-

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Table 3. Results of the Microsystems, Macrosystems, and Exosystems ( $N = 567$ )

Variable	Bully Victimization			Bully Perpetration		
	B	SE	$\beta$	B	SE	$\beta$
Biological sex	.25	.28	.04	-.13	.27	-.02
Age	-.40	.10	-.17***	-.11	.10	-.05
Low SES	-.16	.33	-.02	-.08	.31	-.01
Employment status	.03	.38	.003	-.23	.35	-.03
Parental monitoring	-.01	.04	-.02	-.03	.03	-.04
Exposure to peer delinquency	.10	.02	.24***	.11	.02	.26***
Teacher support	-.03	.03	-.05	-.10	.03	-.17***
Religion	.07	.10	.03	.08	.10	.04
Disorganized neighborhood	.16	.06	.12**	.18	.06	.14**
Incarcerated adult family member	-.04	.17	-.01	.22	.15	.06
$R^2$		.10			.18	
$F$		5.74***			10.60***	

\*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .



Table 4. *Parental Monitoring as a Moderator between Delinquent Peer Affiliation and Bully Victimization/Perpetration*

Variable	Bullying Victimization		Bullying Perpetration	
	B(SE)	$\beta$	B(SE)	$\beta$
Biological sex	.06(.07)	.04	-.02(.05)	-.01
Age	-.11(.02)	-.19***	-.04(.02)	-.08*
Exposure to peer delinquency	.26(.04)	.26***	.25(.32)	.33***
Parental monitoring	-.05(.03)	-.06	-.07(.02)	-.10**
Delinquent peer × Parental monitoring	.04(.03)	.05	-.01(.20)	-.02
R <sup>2</sup>	.09		.13	
F for change in R <sup>2</sup>	11.02***		26.97***	

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

delinquent peer behavior was positively associated with bullying victimization ( $\beta = .22, p < .001$ ). The result showed a significant effect of disorganized neighborhoods on bullying victimization through exposure to peer delinquency (indirect effect [ab] = .05, BCa: CI [0.03, 0.09], see Table 5 and Figure 2). The total effect ( $C = C' + ab; \beta = .17, p < .001$ ) includes the direct effect ( $C'$ :  $\beta = .12, p < .001$ ) and the indirect effect (ab:  $\beta = .05, BCa: CI [0.03, 0.09]$ ) after controlling for all covariates. Results indicated a partial mediation model: exposure to peer delinquency as a mediator partially explains the association between disorganized neighborhood and bullying victimization.

Table 5. Results from the Mediator Analysis

Independent variable (X)	Mediator (M)	Dependent variable (Y)	Effect of X on M (a)	Effect of X on M on Y controlled by X(b)	Total Effect C	Direct Effect C'	Indirect Effect	
							a x b	95% BCa CI
Disorganized neighborhood	Delinquent peer	Bullying	.25***	.22***	.17***	.12**	.05	.03 – .09
		victimization	Covariance	Biological sex	.01	.07		
Disorganized neighborhood	Delinquent peer	Bullying	.25***	.23***	.16***	.10***	.06	.03 – .09
		perpetration	Covariance	Biological sex	-.08	-.02		
Lack parental monitoring	Lack of teacher support	Bullying	.30***	.07	.07*	.05	.02	-.01 – .05
		victimization	Covariance	Biological sex	-.02	-.02		
Lack of parental monitoring	Lack of teacher Support	Bullying	.30***	.17***	.10***	.05	.05	.02 – .08
		perpetration	Covariance	Biological sex	-.09	-.10*		
				Age	-.01	-.03		
				Age	-.08**	-.08**		
				Age	-.01	-.03		
				Age	-.08**	-.08**		
				Age	-.01	-.03		
				Age	-.08**	-.08**		
				Age	-.01	-.03		
				Age	-.08**	-.08**		

\*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Note: BCa (bias-corrected and accelerated) interval addresses bias and skewness in the distribution of the bootstrap estimates

Also, after controlling for all covariates, disorganized neighborhoods were directly related to bully perpetration (direct effect  $C'$ :  $\beta = .10, p < .001$ , see Figure 3), disorganized neighborhood was found to be significantly related to exposure to peer delinquency ( $\beta = .25, p < .001$ ). Exposure to peer delinquency was found to be positively associated with bullying perpetration ( $\beta = .23, p < .001$ ). The result showed a significant effect of disorganized neighborhood on bullying perpetration through exposure to peer delinquency (indirect effect  $[ab] = .06$ , BCa: CI [0.03, 0.09]; see Figure 3 and Table 5). The total effect ( $C = C' + ab; \beta = .16, p < .001$ ) includes the direct effect ( $C'$ :  $\beta = .10, p < .001$ ) and the indirect effect ( $ab: \beta = .06$ , BCa: CI [0.03, 0.09]) after controlling for all covariates. Results indicated a partial mediation model: exposure to peer delinquency as a mediator partially explains the association between disorganized neighborhood and bullying perpetration.

For other indirect effects, lack of parental monitoring was not directly related to bullying perpetration after controlling for the covariates (direct effect  $C'$ :  $\beta = .05$ , n/s; see Figure 4). However, lack of parental monitoring was positively related to lack of teacher support ( $\beta = .25, p < .001$ ), and lack of teacher support were positively related to bullying perpetration ( $\beta = .17, p < .001$ ). The result displayed a significant effect of lack of parental monitoring on bullying perpetration through lack of teacher support (indirect effect  $[ab] = .05$ , BCa: CI [0.02, 0.08], see Figure 4 and Table 5). The total effect ( $C = C' + ab; \beta = .10, p < .001$ ) includes the direct effect ( $C'$ :  $\beta = .05$ , n/s) and the indirect effect ( $ab: \beta = .05$ , BCa: CI [0.02, 0.08]) after controlling for all covariates. Results indicated a fully mediational model: lack of teacher support as a mediator fully explains the association between lack of parental monitoring and bullying perpetration.

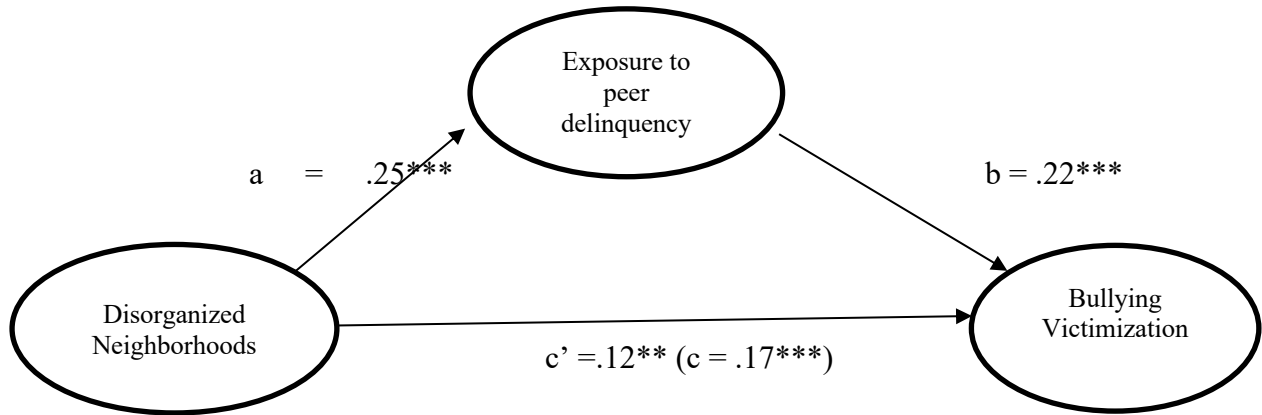


Figure 2. *Exposure to Peer Delinquency as a Mediator between Disorganized Neighborhoods and Bullying Victimization*

Note: a = effect of X on M, b = effect of M on Y controlled by X, C' = effect of X on Y controlled by M, and C = effect of X on Y

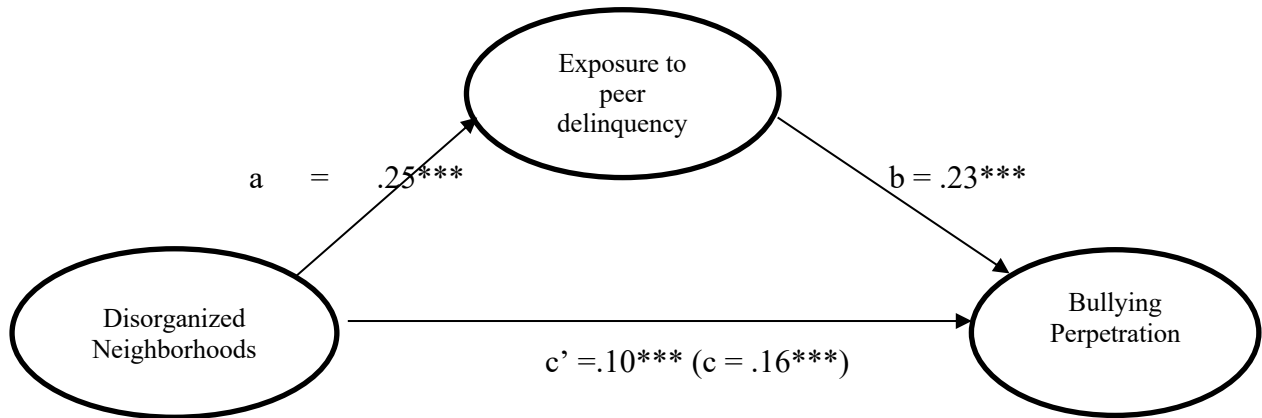


Figure 3. *Exposure to Peer Delinquency as a Mediator between Disorganized Neighborhoods and Bullying Perpetration*

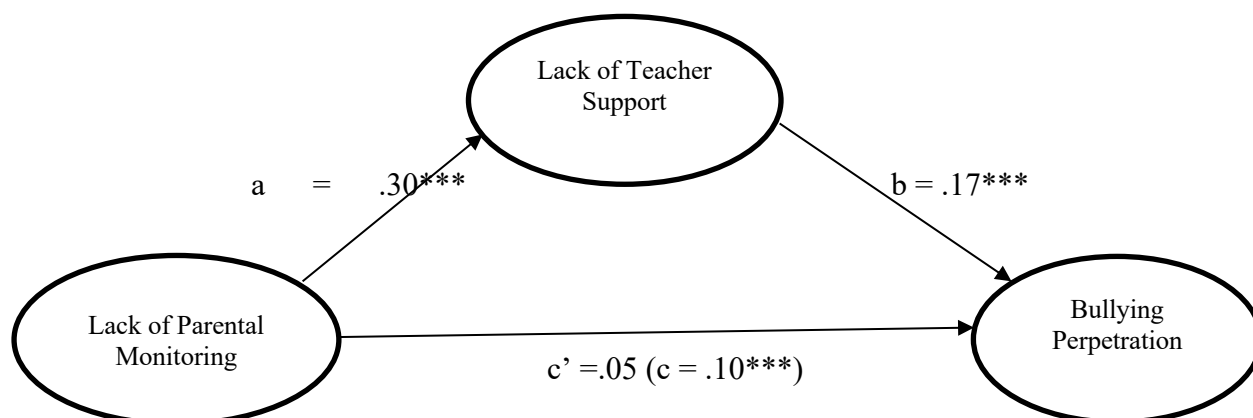


Figure 4. *Lack of Teacher Support as a Mediator between Lack of Parental Monitoring and Bullying Perpetration.*

## Discussion

The present study explored micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems level factors for bullying victimization and perpetration among African American youth in Chicago's Southside, controlling for the covariates including biological sex and age. For the direct effects, including micro-, exo-, and macrosystems factors, exposure to peer delinquency was positively associated with bullying victimization and perpetration, suggesting that exposure to peer delinquency can significantly increase bullying and victimization risks, which are consistent with the hypothesis that exposure to peer deviance is positively associated with bullying perpetration and victimization. Deviant peer affiliation has been found to increase the risk of bullying involvement, as indicated in extant research (e.g., Haynie et al., 2001). African American adolescents residing in low-resourced communities might lack parental monitoring or a father's presence, peers might be the most important influence in their behaviors where they learn misbehaviors (Baldry & Farrington,

2000), increasing bullying behavior (Trucco, Colder, & Wieczorek, 2011). On the other hand, exposure to deviant peer groups might result in adolescents being less able to form positive friendships with peers, which could increase their risk of becoming victims of bullying.

Teacher support was found to be negatively associated with bullying perpetration, which might suggest that teacher support is a significant protective factor that reduces the likelihood of bullying behaviors. Social support from teachers can help prevent internalizing and externalizing behaviors from experiences in bullying (Davidson & Demaray, 2007; Flaspohler, Elfstrom, Vanderzee, Sink, & Birchmeier, 2009). African American students are less likely to seek help from their teachers because of a perceived lack of support in school (Shirley & Cornell, 2011).

Living in a disorganized neighborhood was found to be positively associated with bullying victimization and perpetration, which seems to indicate that a disorganized neighborhood is significantly associated with bullying involvement. Adolescents living in a disorganized or unsafe neighborhood might sense isolated or alienated, which can compromise their relationships and socialization with others, increasing their likelihood of becoming victims (Holt, Turner, & Exum, 2014 ) or perpetrators (de Frutos, 2013; Espelage, Bosworth, & Simon, 2000; Holt et al., 2014) of bullying.

For the indirect effects, including mesosystem factors, exposure to peer delinquency explained the association between disorganized neighborhoods and bullying victimization and perpetration. The findings showed that youth who reside in disorganized neighborhoods are likely to be exposed to peer delinquency, which can increase their risk of becoming bullies and victims. It is not surprising that African American adolescents who live in disorganized neighborhoods have increased opportunities to associate with delinquent peers. Because residing in disorganized neighborhoods is stressful, such as financial inadequacy or psychological distress which hinders

their healthy peer relationships and behaviors, those adolescents might have an increased likelihood of becoming bullies and victims.

Also, another mesosystem supported the hypothesis that the lack of teacher support for African American adolescents who lack parental monitoring might increase the risk of becoming bullying perpetrators. Other studies have also suggested teachers' involvement is the most crucial component of bullying prevention and intervention programs (e.g., Flaspohler et al., 2009). As African American adolescents who live in low-resource communities may lack positive adult role model, teachers can be one of the proximal environments and part of the essential social support group emotionally and psychologically. Therefore, teachers' support is an important determinant of African American adolescents' behaviors.

### **Implications for Research and Practice**

Several limitations of the study need to be mentioned, which have implications for future research. This study uses a cross-sectional research design, so the time-sequential changes cannot be determined. Future studies should use a longitudinal design to estimate the time-order effect of environmental factors associated with bullying involvement. The variables consisted of self-reported measures, so it is possible that the participants may lie or provide what they perceive as the desired answer, which cannot satisfy validity. Future studies should include peers' or teachers' observations in order to eliminate self-reporting bias. Additionally, the measurement of religious involvement included only one item, which is a serious limitation. Thus, future research might include additional items, such as church attendance or spending time in religious activities. Besides, the measurement of low SES status had only one item, so the future study should add low parental education levels or occupations, or a family structure. Moreover, the measurement of incarcerated

adult family members did not provide specific information about members of the family; to address this limitation, future studies should indicate who was incarcerated.

Results from this study seem to suggest that for urban schools located in low-resource communities, teacher support is the most important determinant of African American students' behaviors, so social workers need to work with teachers to involve them in bullying prevention efforts. Therefore, it is important for teachers to be educated and trained. For example, if the teacher preparation program includes bullying intervention strategies (e.g., knowledge of bullying, bullying recognition, empathy training, and bullying prevention and intervention skills), teachers might intervene more effectively to bullying in the schools (Bauman & Del Río, 2005; Beran, 2006; Craig, Bell, & Leschied, 2011). Therefore, bullying training for pre-service teachers is pivotal to reduce bullying in schools.

Also, because of the lack of resources in urban schools, bullying programs need to be cost-effective and easy to administer in a shorter amount of time. Two such programs are the social-emotional learning approach (SEL) and the restorative justice program. Based on SEL's five core competencies—self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness (<http://www.casel.org>), social workers or teachers can provide education about SEL to children and adolescents in schools (CASEL, 2019). SEL lessons help promote students' social-emotional learning skills, including empathy, emotion management, social problem solving, friendship building, and assertiveness, which are implemented at the classroom level (Smith & Low, 2013), so the classroom teachers' role is crucial to developing students' social-emotional learning skills. A limited number of studies evaluated and found that the SEL program was effective in deterring bullying involvement among adolescents (Espelage, Low, Polanin, & Brown, 2013; Espelage, Rose, & Polanin, 2015). A restorative justice approach is another possible



approach. Participants in a restorative justice program were less engaged in bullying and had more respectful interactions with their friends and peers after the program (Morrison, 2002). Research in Australia, Hong Kong, and the United States (Ahmed & Braithwaite, 2012; Morrison, 2002; Wong Cheng, Ngan, & Ma, 2011) also reported that restorative justice effectively reduced bullying behavior among adolescents. Furthermore, Anyon et al.'s (2014) study, which consisted of an African American adolescent sample, showed that participants in the restorative justice program were less prone to engage in bullying behavior. SEL and restorative justice would be effective for urban African American adolescents because social workers and teachers can be trained, these programs can be conducted at schools, be cost-effective, and can enhance prosocial behaviors by helping and collaborating, which is appropriate for vulnerable youth.

Moreover, according to the study findings, community-based bullying prevention intervention would be necessary for future anti-bullying programs. The urban community needs to improve its physical neighborhood environments to help prevent bullying in schools. In addition, social workers, staffs, and teachers need to observe African American students' exposure to peer deviance because they tend to be victims of bullying and bullies.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, this study explored how African American adolescents' ecological systems might be related to their involvement in bullying. Through the examination of the ecological systems factors, this study identified risk and protective factors for bullying involvement among urban African American adolescents. Findings from this study suggest that preventing bullying in urban communities requires consideration of multiple, contextual factors that may foster or inhibit adolescent bullying involvement. Understanding the multiple level etiology of bullying and

victimization is the first necessary step towards the development of effective anti-bullying programs and policies.

## CHAPTER 2 PATHWAYS FROM BULLYING VICTIMIZATION TO SUICIDAL THOUGHTS AMONG URBAN AFRICAN AMERICAN ADOLESCENTS IN CHICAGO'S SOUTHSIDE

### Introduction

A number of studies have attempted to explore psychosocial risk factors for suicidal thoughts and attempts among adolescents (e.g., Hankin & Abela, 2011; Hawton, Saunders, & O'Connor, 2012; Im, Oh, & Suk, 2017; Klomek et al., 2013; Wichstrøm, 2009). Children and adolescents who are victimized by their peers are at a heightened risk of suicidal thoughts and behaviors (Bang & Park, 2017; Barzilay et al., 2017; Geoffroy et al., 2016; Kerr, Gini, & Capaldi, 2017; Romo & Kelvin, 2016; Sharma, Lee, & Nam, 2017; Stanley et al., 2016; Stewart, Valeri, Esposito, & Auerbach, 2017). A more recent study conducted by Stewart et al. (2017) which comprised a sample of 340 depressed adolescents (aged 13–19) recruited from an acute psychiatric treatment program, reported that adolescents who had experienced both direct and indirect bullying victimization were more likely to have attempted suicide during the previous month.

Many of the studies on bullying victimization and bullied youth's psychological health have been conducted with a majority of White participants (e.g., Geoffroy et al., 2016; Kerr et al., 2017; Stewart et al., 2017). In comparison, there is a serious dearth of studies on the psychological distress of bullied African American youth and how their psychological distress affects their health outcomes. The current study builds on the existing studies by examining the relationship between bullying victimization and suicidal thoughts among urban African American youth by applying the Interpersonal-Psychological Theory.

### Prevalence of Bullying and Suicidal Behavior

Bullying is the most common discipline problem in U.S. public school districts (U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2017). In the 2013-2014 academic year, seventeen percent of public

high schools, 25% of public middle schools, and 12% of public elementary schools reported that bullying occurred at least once a week. African American students (25%) reported higher rates of bullying than their White (22%) and Hispanic peers (17%) in 2015 (Musu-Gillette, Zhang, Wang, Zhang, & Oudekerk, 2017) due to their racial identity, colorism, clothing, manner of speech, gender, low socioeconomic status, and religion (Goldweber, Waasdorp, & Bradshaw, 2013).

While youth suicide rates declined from 1996 to 2008 in the U.S. (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2017), youth suicide has increased from 2008 to 2014 (Kann et al., 2016). Evidence from the National Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBS) reported that the number of youths planning suicide plans had decreased from 1991 to 2009 (18.6% to 10.9%) and then increased from 2009 to 2015 (10.9% to 14.6%). According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2018), suicide is the third leading cause of death among African American youth. A total of 730 African American youth (aged 10–24) attempted suicide during 2016, and the number of suicides has increased among African American youth in more recent years (CDC, 2018). African American adolescents were almost five times more likely to attempt suicide than Caribbean Black adolescents (CDC, 2018).

Despite a large body of research on the link between bullying victimization and suicidal thoughts, research to date has not adequately addressed psychological distress and suicidal risks among bullied African American youth.

### **Interpersonal-Psychological Theory**

Low levels of social integration (i.e., levels of attachment to groups) contribute to an individual's suicidal behaviors and tendencies due to a lack of social connectedness or belonging according to Durkheim (1897; as cited by Van Orden et al., 2010). Durkheim (1897) paid attention specifically to social forces (e.g., family conflicts or peer pressure) rather than on individual factors.

Building on Durkheim's (1897) theory, Joiner (2005) developed the Interpersonal-Psychological Theory of Suicide. This theory includes three elements: thwarted belongingness, perceived burdensomeness, and acquired capability of suicide. Joiner's "thwarted belongingness" (i.e., lacking a sense of belongingness or social alienation) is similar to Durkheim's (1897) "lack of social connectedness." Bullying victimization might lead youth to feel disconnected from others (Van Orden et al., 2010). Also, bullied youth may experience burdensomeness (e.g., "I am a burden to others or society, so my death will be of benefit to others."). The co-occurrence of thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness can possibly trigger suicidal thoughts.

Bullying victims may develop interpersonal problems, such as feeling socially isolated from their peers at school, and they may feel they have no worth to other students or to their school. In turn, this might increase their psychological distress (e.g., low self-esteem, depression, and hopelessness). African American youth of low socioeconomic status who experience problems in their neighborhoods may develop psychological distress such as a sense of hopelessness. Life adversities, combined with severe bullying experiences, may gradually lead to suicidal thoughts. The present study explores both direct and indirect associations between bullying victimization and suicidal thoughts, applying the Interpersonal-Psychological Theory.

### **Bullying Victimization and Suicidal Thoughts**

Bullying victimization is linked to long-lasting adverse consequences, such as depression, social anxiety, self-harm, or suicidal thoughts and behaviors (Abdirahman, Bah, Shrestha, & Jacobsen, 2012; Burk, Edmondson, Whitehead, & Smith, 2014; Geoffroy et al. 2016; McDougall & Vaillancourt, 2015; Messias, Kindrick, & Castro, 2014; Romo & Kelvin, 2016; Wolke & Lereya, 2015; Stanley et al., 2016). A significant body of research has examined the association between bullying victimization and suicidal thoughts among middle and high school students (Geoffroy et

al., 2016; Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Holt et al., 2015; Kim & Leventhal, 2008; Klomek et al., 2009; van Geel, Vedder, & Tanilon, 2014).

### **Mechanisms Linking Bullying Victimization and Suicidal Thoughts**

Although a great deal of research has focused on the direct association between bullying and suicide, it is also important to consider possible mediating influences in this association. Because potential mediating effects can explain how victims of bullying with other mechanisms can reinforce or inhibit their suicidal thoughts. A *mediator* is a third explanatory variable that represents a generative mechanism that can elucidate how the predictor variable influences the outcome variable. For this study, the potential generative mechanism of psychological distress, including low self-esteem, depression, and hopelessness, and their associations with bullying victimization and suicidal thoughts are examined.

#### *Low Self-Esteem*

Bullied youth tend to identify themselves as less popular and more worthless than others (de Bruyn, Cillessen, & Wissink, 2009; Feng, Waldner, Cushon, Davy, & Neudorf, 2016; Pellegrini, Bartini, & Brooks, 1999; Seals & Young, 2003). Bullying victimization can create barriers to establishing friendships and developing interpersonal relationships, and a lack of social connectedness can result in loneliness and a sense of being a burden. *Self-esteem* is defined as one's emotional self-evaluation of both positive and negative worth (Rosenberg, 1965). However, bullying victimization might reinforce a negative attitude toward oneself. Low self-esteem resulting from bullying victimization can also reinforce suicidal thoughts. Surprisingly, few studies have investigated whether low self-esteem might mediate the association between bullying victimization and suicidal thoughts. For instance, Jones et al. (2014) examined the role of self-esteem among 67 adolescents, aged 13–17 with a mood disorder or an anxiety disorder. Of these

adolescents, 53.7% had a history of non-suicidal self-harm, and 44.8 % had a history of suicide attempts. The findings indicated that victims of bullying are more likely to have low self-esteem, which would reinforce suicidal thoughts. Feng et al.'s (2016) study of 5,340 students in Canada, aged 9–14, also found that verbally or electronically bullied students were more likely to have suicidal thoughts at least once in the previous 12 months than students who were not bullied.

### *Depression*

Depression is recognized as the most common psychosocial problem as a result of bullying victimization (Cole et al., 2016; Hamilton et al., 2016), which may be associated with suicidal thoughts and attempts (Barzilay et al., 2017; Bauman, Toomey, & Walker, 2013; Brunstein Klomek, Marrocco, Kleinman, Schonfeld, & Gould, 2007; Brunstein Klomek et al., 2016; Taylor, Sullivan, & Kliewer, 2013; Wang, Lai, Hsu, & Hsu, 2011). A study of 137 participants with treatment-resistant depression found that childhood adversities, including traumatic events (e.g., parental separation/divorce, or death of a relative/friend) and bullying victimization experiences were linked to chronic depression, which predicted lifetime suicide attempts (Tunnard et al., 2014). However, relatively few studies have explored whether depression moderated or mediated the association between bullying victimization and suicidal thoughts (Barzilay et al., 2017; Bauman et al., 2013; Sampasa-Kanyinga, Roumeliotis, & Xu, 2014). For instance, Barzilay et al.'s (2017) study of 11,110 students from European Union countries found that depression moderated bullying victimization (i.e., physical, verbal, and relational bullying) and suicidal thoughts.

### *Hopelessness*

A feeling of *hopelessness* is defined as a sense of negative cognitive schemas, which shows a negative attitude, a lack of motivation, and low future expectations (Beck, Weissman, Lester, & Trexler, 1974; Hamilton et al., 2015; Hewitt, Norton, Flett, Callander, & Cowan, 1998; Siyahhan

et al., 2012). Hopelessness is also one of the most commonly reported psychosocial outcomes of bullying victimization (Abdirahman et al., 2012; Hanley & Gibb, 2011; Siyahhan, Aricak, & Cayirdag-Acar, 2012). Abdirahman et al.'s (2012) study of 6,780 middle school students in the Caribbean found that bullied students had more mental health problems than non-bullied students. Victims of bullying reported higher rates of symptoms of sadness, hopelessness, loneliness, insomnia, and suicidal thoughts in the past 12 months than non-bullied students.

Feelings of hopelessness can also explain how experiences in bullying victimization can contribute to suicidal thoughts. However, a limited number of studies have explored how hopelessness impacts bullied youths' suicidal thoughts and behaviors. A study conducted by Bonanno and Hymel (2010) found that social hopelessness mediated the association between bullying victimization and suicidal thoughts.

### **The Present Study**

Exploring the association between bullying victimization and suicidal thoughts among African American youth is crucial as suicide is the third-highest cause of death among school-aged African American youth. Bullied African American adolescents who live in urban areas with low-income families might have high levels of psychosocial distress, which could influence their suicidal thoughts. However, no empirical study has specifically addressed the association between bullying victimization and suicidal thoughts among African American youth. To understand the complex dynamics between bullying victimization and suicidal thoughts among this population, it is necessary to examine several mechanisms linking bullying victimization and suicidal thoughts. Bullied African American adolescents' psychosocial distress as such potential mechanisms can explain how experiences in bullying victimization reinforce suicidal thoughts, and significant mechanisms as risk factors can contribute to the development of suicide prevention programs for



these youth. Therefore, this study examines the association between bullying victimization and suicidal thoughts through the mediating roles of low self-esteem, depression, and hopelessness, controlling for biological sex, age, and government assistance by applying the Interpersonal-Psychological Theory. The following hypotheses are proposed: (1) bullying victimization will be associated with an increase in suicidal thoughts (direct effect), and (2) low self-esteem, depression, and hopelessness will mediate the association between bullying victimization and suicidal thoughts (indirect effects).

## **Method**

### **Sample and Procedure**

This study utilizes data collected between August 2013 and January 2014. Data were collected from three high schools; one church youth group; two community youth programs; and four public sites, including parks, fast food outlets, malls, and movie theaters in low-income communities (i.e., incomes below the city average) with predominantly African American residents in the Chicago's Southside. Participants consisted of 638 African American adolescents with an age range of 12 to 22 years; 45.5% were male, and 54.2% were female (one person was missing, and one did not self-identify), and the mean age was 15.84 ( $SD = 1.41$ ) (see Table 1).

To recruit the participants, permission was first obtained from high school principals and leaders of church groups and community youth programs. Flyers explaining this study were posted at all locations, and research assistants provided information to the potential participants. High schools, churches, and community programs provided a letter including a detailed description of this study with consent forms to the participants and their parents. The youth returned consent forms signed by their parents and themselves. High schools, churches, and community programs administered the questionnaires in their respective locations. For youth recruited in public sites,

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics of the Study Variables (N = 638)*

Variable	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Min	Max
Biological sex					
Female	346 (54.2%)				
Male	290 (45.5%)				
Age		15.84	1.41	12	22
Government assistance					
No	153 (24%)				
Yes	476 (74.6%)				
Bully victimization		2.13	3.22	0	16
Hopelessness		.56	1.02	0	4
Low Self-esteem		12.76	5.07	7	35
Depression		1.85	1.86	0	8
Suicidal thoughts		.39	.92	0	4

the questionnaire was administered in quiet places or near the sites. To minimize interruptions and maintain confidentiality, trained research assistants supervised the participants while they completed the self-report questionnaire. The survey took approximately 45 minutes to complete, and those who completed the survey were compensated with a payment of \$10 each.

## Measures

The main dependent variable of this study is suicidal thoughts, which was measured with a single item, "Thoughts of ending your life during the past 7 days." Response options include, (0) Not at all, (1) A little bit, (2) Moderately, (3) Quite a bit, and (4) Extremely. Other studies have used similar response options and items (e.g., Rivers & Noret, 2013; Russell, Ryan, Toomey, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2011).

The independent variables of this study are bullying victimization, low self-esteem, depression, and hopelessness. Bullying victimization measure consists of four items, which were taken from the University of Illinois Victimization Scale (Espelage & Holt, 2001). Items derived for the study are: "Other students pick on me," "Other students made fun of me," "Other students called me names," and "I got hit and pushed by other students." Response options for bullying victimization include (0) Never, (1) 1 or 2 times, (2) 3 or 4 times, (3) 5 or 6 times, and (4) 7 or more times during the past 30 days. The internal reliability score for the items in this study was  $\alpha = .87$ . This scale has been widely used to measure bullying perpetration and bullying victimization among U.S. adolescents and has good validity and high internal consistency with U.S. samples. Alpha ranged from .84 to .90 in these studies (Chui & Chan, 2015; Espelage et al., 2018; Rose & Espelage, 2012).

Self-esteem was measured with seven items, which were derived from a modified version of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Greenberger, Chen, Dmitrieva, & Farruggia, 2003). These items include, "I feel that I have a number of good qualities," "All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure," "I am able to do things as well as most other people," "I feel I do not have much to be proud of," "I take a positive attitude toward myself," "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself," and "I don't respect myself most of the time." Response options for the self-esteem items include

(0) Strongly disagree, (1) Disagree, (2) Neither agree nor disagree, (3) Agree and (4) Strongly agree. The internal reliability score of the items for this study was  $\alpha = .80$ . This scale is one of the most widely used measures of self-esteem and has demonstrated good reliability and validity in previous studies; alpha for these studies ranged from .57–.95 (Milevsky, Schlechter, Netter, & Keehn, 2007; Orth, Trzesniewski, & Robins, 2010).

Depression was measured with two items, which were adapted from the Harvard National Depression Screening Scale (HANDS; Baer et al., 2000), and includes “Feeling no interest in things” and “Feeling blue.” Response options are (0) Not at all, (1) A little bit, (2) Moderately, (3) Quite a bit, and (4) Extremely. The internal reliability score for the items was  $\alpha = .56$ . This scale has shown good validity and high internal consistency in the previous studies; alpha for these studies ranged from .87–.94 (Hopko & Colman, 2010; Soberay, Faragher, Barbash, Brookover, & Grimsley, 2014).

Hopelessness was measured with a single item, “Feeling hopeless about the future during the past 7 days.” Response options include (0) Not at all, (1) A little bit, (2) Moderately, (3) Quite a bit, and (4) Extremely.

The covariates include biological sex (0 = Male, 1 = Female), age (in years), and receipt of government assistance: “Are you receiving free or reduced lunch and/or Supplemental Nutrition Assistance program (SNAP) benefits?” (0 = No, 1 = Yes).

### **Analyses**

Descriptive statistics, Pearson’s coefficient correlations, and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) were conducted with Mplus7.0 (Muthén & Muthén, 2012). Controlling for biological sex, age, and government assistance, the SEM included (a) the direct effect among major variables

(hypothesis 1), and (b) the indirect effect of bullying victimization on suicidal thought through the proposed mediators (hypothesis 2).

This study used multiple indices to assess the model fit, including the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), Standardized Root Square Mean Residual (SRMR), and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA). In the current data, the suicidal thought variable was not normally distributed (skewness = 2.54, Kurtosis = 5.68), so the maximum likelihood (ML) and Bootstrapping method were used to estimate the indirect effect for the specific paths. RMSEA and SRMR values of less than .05, and CFI and TLI values greater than or equal to .90 indicate a good model fit (Bentler & Bonett, 1980; Hu & Bentler, 1999).

## Results

Table 2 shows Pearson's coefficient correlations. Suicidal thoughts was correlated with bullying victimization ( $r = .248, p < .001$ ), female sex ( $r = .096, p < .05$ ), hopelessness ( $r = .533, p < .001$ ), low self-esteem ( $r = .303, p < .001$ ), and depression ( $r = .348, p < .001$ ).

The goodness-of-fit-indices for the path model estimated CFI = .927, TLI = .905, RMSEA = .058 (90% confidence intervals [CI] = .051 ~ .065, SRMR = .053). These estimated fit indices indicated an acceptable model fit. Table 3 shows the results of the direct effects and covariances among the study variables, and Figure 1 shows the direct effects among the study variables.

Adjusting for the covariates, bullying victimization was not found to be directly associated with suicidal thoughts ( $\beta = .091, p = .139$ ). However, bullying victimization was positively associated with low self-esteem ( $\beta = .016, p = .000$ ) and depression ( $\beta = .239, p = .000$ ). Also, low self-esteem ( $\beta = .159, p = .021$ ), depression ( $\beta = .344, p = .041$ ), and hopelessness ( $\beta = .031,$

Table 2. *Correlations among the Study Variables*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Suicidal thoughts	-							
2. Bully victimization	.248***	-						
3. Biological sex (ref. female)	.096*	.007	-					
4. Age	-.042	-.133**	-.142***	-				
5. Government assistance (ref. yes)	-.007	-.028	.024	.101*	-			
6. Hopelessness	.481***	.186***	.041	.067	.009	-		
7. Low Self-esteem	.303***	.133**	-.006	.091*	-.027	.361***	-	
8. Depression	.384***	.311***	.148**	-.016	.031	.447***	.272***	-

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$

Table 3. *Estimated Direct Effects and Covariances*

	Estimate	SE	CR	p-value		Estimate	SE	CR	p-value
Regression					Regression				
Weights					Weights				
S←BV	.091	.062	1.480	.139	HO←BV	-.039	.070	-.557	.577
←LSE	.159	.069	2.316	.021	←LSE	.296	.088	3.356	.001
←DE	.344	.168	2.044	.041	←DE	.986	.157	6.290	.000
←HO	.031	.084	3.744	.000	←Gender	-.112	.072	-1.560	.119
←Gender	.064	.062	1.024	.306	←Age	.048	.026	1.867	.062
←Age	-.028	.022	-1.288	.198	←SES	-.004	.078	-.056	.955
←SES	-.008	.060	-.132	.895					
					Covariances				
LSE←BV	.016	.045	3.532	.000	Gender↔BV	.005	.017	.275	.784
←Gender	-.015	.059	-.268	.789	Age↔BV	-.166	.046	-3.632	.000
←Age	.042	.019	2.187	.029	SES↔BV	-.009	.014	-.650	.516
←SES	-.070	.061	-1.151	.250					
DE←BV	.239	.060	4.018	.000					
←LSE	.243	.064	3.787	.000					
←Gender	.215	.057	3.768	.000					
←Age	.010	.020	.486	.627					
←SES	.048	.060	.810	.418					

Note. SE = Standard error, CR = Critical ratio, S = Suicidal thoughts, BV= Bully victimization, LSE = Low self-esteem, DE = Depression, HO = Hopelessness. A reference of variables as following: Gender is female and SES (socioeconomic status; government assistance) is yes.

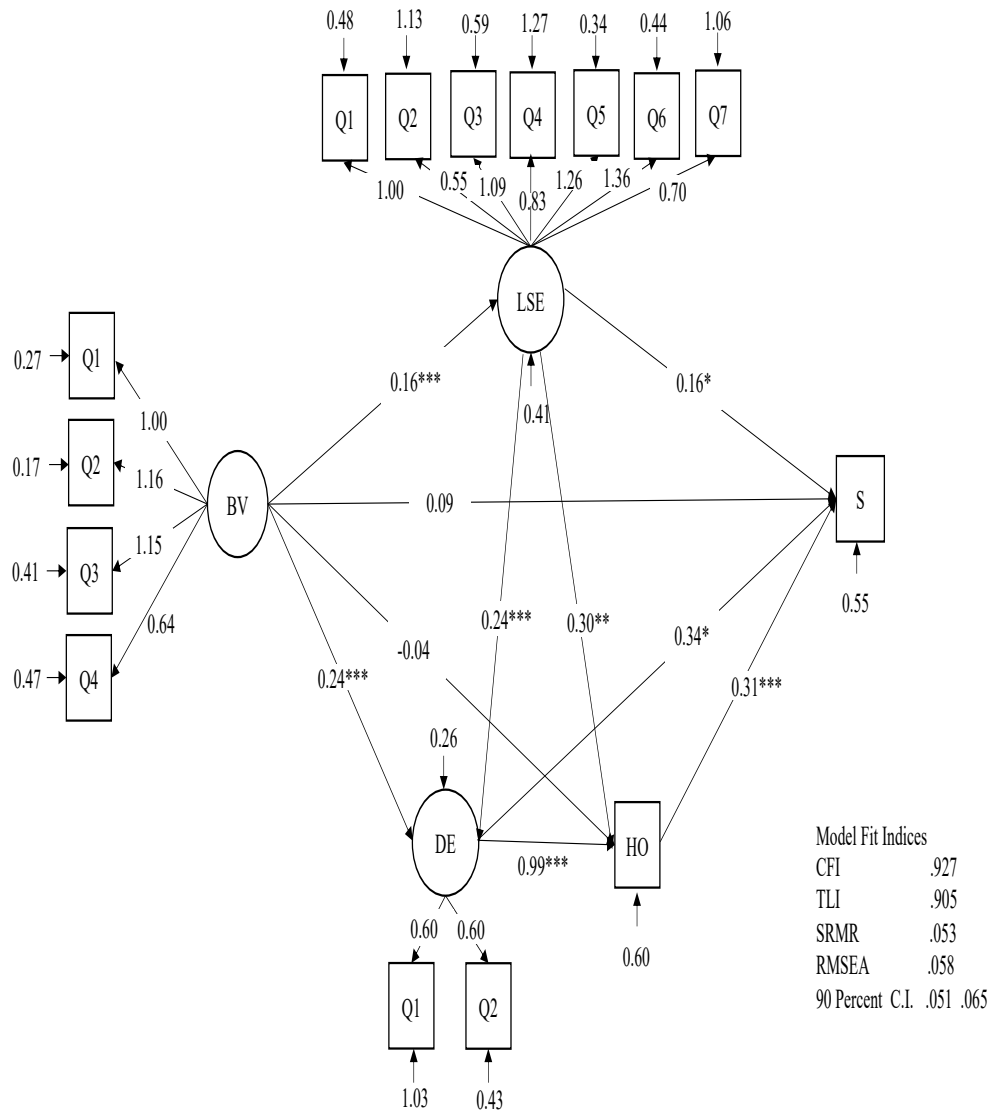


Figure 1. Estimates of the Pathways from Bully Victimization to Suicidal Thoughts

Note. BV = Bully Victimization, LSE = Low Self-Esteem, DE = Depression, HO = Hopelessness, and S = Suicidal Thoughts. (a) The asterisk mark is only displayed on the pathway between the study variables, and (b) the effect of control variables on the study variables is omitted in the figure. Refer to the Measures section for indicators (Q1~Q7) of latent variables.

\* p < .05; \*\* p < .01, \*\*\* p < .001



$p = .000$ ) were positively associated with suicidal thoughts. These findings indicate that victims of bullying have an increased likelihood of low self-esteem and depression. Adolescents who have low self-esteem, depression, and hopelessness are more likely to have suicidal thoughts.

Moreover, low self-esteem was positively associated with depression ( $\beta = .243, p = .000$ ) and hopelessness ( $\beta = .296, p = .001$ ), and depression was positively associated with hopelessness ( $\beta = .986, p = .000$ ). This finding suggests that youth with low self-esteem are more likely to exhibit depressive symptoms and hopelessness, and those with depressive symptoms are likely to display hopelessness.

Regarding the covariates, only age was found to be significantly related to bullying victimization ( $\beta = -.166, p = .000$ ). Age was negatively associated with bullying victimization.

The estimated indirect effects of bullying victimization on suicidal thoughts through the mediators are shown in Table 4. The total indirect effect of bullying victimization through the mediators was significantly associated with suicidal thoughts ( $\beta = .179, 95\% \text{ CI} = .080 \sim .279$ ). One significant indirect path was indicated—bullying victimization  $\rightarrow$  depression  $\rightarrow$  hopelessness  $\rightarrow$  suicidal thoughts ( $\beta = .063, \text{ CI} = .004 \sim .123$ ). Depression and hopelessness mediated the association between bullying victimization and suicidal thoughts.

## Discussion

By using Interpersonal-Psychological Theory, the current study explored pathways from bullying victimization to suicidal thoughts via mediating roles of low self-esteem, depression, and hopelessness from a sample of African American youth in Chicago's Southside, controlling for biological sex, age, and government assistance. In terms of the direct effects, the study findings indicated that bullying victimization was not associated with youth's suicidal thoughts. However,

Table 4. *Direct and Specific Indirect Effects of Bully Victimization on Suicidal Thoughts*

	Direct	Indirect						Total indirect	Total	
		→HO	→LSE	→DE	→HO →LSE	→HO →DE	→DE →LSE			
Estimates	.091	-.010	.022	.070	.013	.063	.011	.010	.179	.257
Lower bounds	-.056	-.060	-.029	-.029	-.004	.004	-.007	-.001	.080	.123
Upper bounds	.211	.040	.169	.169	.030	.123	.030	.022	.279	.391

*Note:* HO = Hopelessness, LSE = Low Self-Esteem, De = Depression. Lower and upper bounds are based on bias-corrected confidence intervals (95%).

bullying victimization was positively associated with low self-esteem, which supports the study's hypothesis and is similar to the findings of previous studies (see Feng et al., 2016; Jones et al., 2014), which have suggested that youth who are victimized by their peers can develop negative emotions and attitudes that can contribute to negative self-concepts such as low self-esteem.

Another finding is that bullying victimization is positively associated with depression, which is similar to many other studies (see Barzilay et al., 2017; Brunstein Klomek et al., 2017; Taylor et al., 2013; Tunnard et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2011). Studies have found that bullied adolescents might have negative evaluations of self, such as blaming themselves instead of solving their problems, which can lead them to be vulnerable to feelings of depression. Thus, low self-esteem and depression are common psychosocial problems among bullying victims.

In addition, low self-esteem is found to be positively associated with depression and hopelessness, and depression is found to be associated with hopelessness. These findings reveal that the elements of psychosocial distress are interrelated (see Abela, 2002; Metalsky, Joiner,

Hardin, & Abramson, 1993). For instance, according to Abela's (2002) study, which included 136 senior students, stressful events (i.e., a negative admission outcome) induced depressive symptoms and low levels of self-esteem, and feelings of hopelessness. Due to adolescents' adverse outcomes from critical events, they might undergo stress and criticize themselves, which might lead them to exhibit psychological and emotional vulnerability, such as depression or low self-esteem and which, in turn, generate hopelessness.

Moreover, another finding indicates that these psychosocial distresses (i.e., low self-esteem, depression, and hopelessness) are positively related to suicidal thoughts (Bhar, Ghahramanlou-Holloway, Brown, & Beck, 2008; Dori & Overholser, 1999; Marciano, & Kazdin, 1994; McGee, Williams, & Nada-Raja, 2001). For example, McGee et al.'s (2001) longitudinal study found that psychological symptoms of hopelessness and low self-esteem in early childhood are positively related to suicidal thoughts in early adulthood. According to that study, hopelessness and low self-esteem were identified as "generative mechanisms" because individuals' hopelessness and low self-esteem developed during childhood might generate the risk of suicidal behaviors in their early adulthood. Also, Cash and Bridge's (2009) review of research literature suggests that among adolescents who attempted suicide, 40% to 80% showed symptoms of depression. The current study implies that low self-esteem, depression, and hopelessness are interrelated, and these psychological problems can generate adolescents' level of vulnerability, which can contribute to suicidal thoughts.

Furthermore, in the current study, bullied adolescents who frequently experienced depression were more likely to report experiencing hopelessness, which, in turn, might increase their likelihood of having suicidal thoughts. Adverse bullying experiences can elevate adolescents' depressive symptoms, which might contribute to feelings of hopelessness, elevating their risk of

suicidal thoughts. This finding is in line with several study findings on depression (Barzilay et al., 2017; Bauman et al., 2013; Kim & Leventhal, 2008; Sampasa-Kanyinga et al., 2014) and hopelessness (see Bonanno & Hymel, 2010, 2013; Hamilton et al., 2015) and how they are related to suicidal thoughts of bullying victims.

Applying the Interpersonal-Psychological Theory can explain how victims of bullying's psychosocial distress facilitate urban African American adolescents' suicidal thoughts. For example, urban African American adolescents' lack of connectedness with peers in their school and negative self-concepts (a sense of being a burden) lead them to generate emotional and psychological vulnerability, which can possibly trigger suicidal thoughts.

### **Limitations and Implications for Research**

There are several limitations that need to be acknowledged, which have implications for future research. This study used a cross-sectional research design; thus, causality cannot be inferred. Future studies need to utilize a longitudinal research design to estimate sequential time changes from bullying victims' psychological distress to suicidal thoughts. Also, the variables relied on self-report which might have introduced self-reporting bias and social desirability bias. A future study might consider multiple informants, including parents, peers, and teachers in the survey. Moreover, the hopelessness ("Feeling hopeless about the future during the past 7 days") and suicidal thoughts ("Thoughts of ending your life during the past 7 days") measure relied on a single item, which might not have fully captured a range of behaviors that indicate hopelessness and suicidal thoughts. Thus, future studies should include additional items to accurately measure these constructs. In addition, the depression variable has two scales with five items each, so there are 10 items. Generally, Cronbach's alpha value higher than 0.70 would be considered satisfactory; however, in cases where there are fewer than 20 items, a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.50 is

considered to be adequate (see Dall'Oglio et al., 2010). Although the current study has several limitations, this study has some strengths. It is the first empirical study to examine three psychosocial problems as mediators (i.e., low self-esteem, depression, and hopelessness), which are linked between bullying victimization and suicidal thoughts among African American adolescents who live in low resourced urban areas. This study found that bullied African American adolescents in urban areas are likely to generate high levels of depression, which might lead to the development of a negative cognitive schema of their future. Therefore, future research might consider examining protective factors for depression to minimize bullied urban African American adolescents' depression, which could inhibit the development of hopelessness. Also, identifying specific depressive symptoms of African American adolescents will contribute to providing effective treatments for them.

### **Implications for Practice**

In addition to the research implications, the current study has implications for practice. School practitioners working with bully victims need to consider intervention programs that reduce emotional vulnerability. To do so, effective therapy programs are essential to treat the depressive symptoms and hopelessness experienced by victims of bullying. Also, for urban schools in low-resource communities, programs need to be cost-effective and must be culturally relevant. Hawton and James (2005) suggested that cognitive behavior therapy is an effective treatment for victims of bullying. Moreover, possible programs that practitioners might consider are Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT) and Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), which have been found to be effective for racially and ethnically diverse students in school settings (see Kim & Franklin, 2009; Smith & Low, 2013). SFBT is a strength-based intervention that through a conversation between a therapist and client, the client can find their own strengths rather than a specific problem, and

then they can build the power to be able to solve their problems (Miller & de Shazer, 2000). Applying SFBT to bullying victimization can develop their strengths, such as self-belief or optimism, which contribute to solving bullying problems. SEL is another effective program to prevent bullying, which trains students' social-emotional learning skills (i.e., empathy, emotion regulation, assertiveness, and friendship skills) (Espelage, Low, Polanin, & Brown, 2013; Espelage, Rose, & Polanin, 2015). SEL can help to reduce self-blame from bullied experiences and help victims respond effectively to bullying, such as talking with others or asking others for help regarding bullying (Smith & Low, 2013).

### **Conclusion**

In summary, this study examined how bullied urban African American adolescents' psychosocial problems (i.e., low self-esteem, depression, and hopelessness) might be linked to their suicidal thoughts by applying the Interpersonal-Psychological Theory. This study provides a great understanding of the development of bullied African American adolescents' psychosocial distress, and how these problematic psychological factors escalate their suicidal thoughts. Working with bullied African American adolescents' emotional vulnerability and psychological maladjustment is an essential strategy to prevent their suicidal risks in urban schools.

## CHAPTER 3 EXPLORING THE PATHWAYS FROM COMMUNITY VIOLENCE EXPOSURE TO BULLYING PERPETRATION AMONG URBAN AFRICAN AMERICAN ADOLESCENTS IN CHICAGO'S SOUTHSIDE

### Introduction

Children and adolescents, particularly African Americans who live in poor inner-city neighborhoods frequently witness violence in their community (Hammack, Richards, Luo, Edlynn, & Roy, 2004; Jenkins, 2001; Lauritsen, 2003). For several decades, researchers have studied the effects of community violence on children's and adolescents' development and outcomes in inner cities in the United States. *Community violence* is defined as "incidents of interpersonal violence including homicide, nonfatal shootings, physical assaults, rapes, and robberies with physical assaults that occur in the neighborhoods of children living in the inner city" (Hill & Madhere, 1996, p. 27). According to the National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence, 46% of youth nationwide reported physical assault in their neighborhood and 19% reported witnessing an assault (Sickmund & Puzzanchera, 2014). African American youth reported the highest exposure to victimization in their community (Sickmund & Puzzanchera, 2014). Children's and adolescents' chronic exposure to community violence is significantly related to lower academic performance, drug use, antisocial behavior, school disengagement, negative social relationships (e.g., a deviant peer affiliation), psychological distress, and emotional maladjustment (Cooley-Strickland et al., 2009; Hammack et al., 2004; Lepore & Kliewer, 2013; Low & Espelage, 2014; Patton, Woolley, & Hong, 2012; Paxton, Robinson, Shah, & Schoeny, 2004; Schwartz & Gorman, 2003; Turner, Shattuck, Finkelhor, & Hamby, 2016).

A large body of bullying research has focused on individual and contextual risk/protective factors for adolescent bullying behaviors (Low & Espelage, 2013; Luk, Wang, & Simons-Morton, 2012; Shetgiri, Lin, Avila, & Flores, 2012). Despite a large body of research on community

violence exposure and bullying behavior, a limited number of studies have examined (Foster & Brooks-Gunn, 2013; Khoury-Kassabri, Benbenishty, Avi Astor, & Zeira, 2004; Khoury-Kassabri, Mishna, & Massarwi, 2016; Low & Espelage, 2014; Martin et al., 2011) how youth's exposure to community violence might be related to bullying behaviors. Previous studies consistently suggested that youth who live in unsafe neighborhoods are likely to experience bullying involvement, and parental monitoring can reduce the effect of exposure to community violence on bullying victimization and perpetration.

Urban African Americans are likely to reside in neighborhoods that are characterized by violence and poverty. According to Reardon et al. (2015), urban African Americans are significantly more likely to reside in poorer communities and have lower than average income relative to Whites. Examining the pathways from urban African American youth who are exposed to community violence to problematic behaviors is important to understand the development of urban African American youth's negative behaviors. The Problem-Behavior Theory can explain how their unsafe and violent neighborhoods affect their behavioral problems, and how their developed negative behaviors have interacted with each other. The aim of the present study is to explore possible pathways from exposure to community violence to bullying perpetration through the mediating influences of exposure to delinquent peers, drug use, and antisocial behaviors from a sample of African American children and adolescents from Chicago's Southside.

### **The Problem-Behavior Theory**

Developed and proposed by Jessor and Jessor (1977), the Problem-Behavior Theory explicates how an adolescent's risk factors might be linked to their behavioral problems (e.g., maladaptive and dysfunctional behaviors). The Problem-Behavior Theory is a social-psychological framework rather than biological or genetic, which can help to explain the variation



in problem behaviors. The theory consists of three systems as psychosocial risk factors: the perceived-environmental system (e.g., low parental controls and support and lower parent-friend compatibility); the personality system (e.g., low value on academic achievement, higher value on independence, and low self-esteem); and the behavior system (e.g., drug use, alcohol use, and deviant behavior) (Jessor, 1987). According to the Problem-Behavior Theory, human behaviors are the by-product of the interactions an individual has with his or her environment.

Urban African American youth's problematical behaviors are shaped not by only a single psychosocial risk factor but by multiple, interrelated psychosocial risk factors. African American youth who reside in low-resourced communities tend to engage in violent and antisocial behaviors due to a lack of adult supervision, lack of parental support, and vulnerable neighborhoods, which negatively affect their behaviors. This theory might explain how exposure to community violence can reinforce youth problematical behaviors (i.e., bullying, substance use and antisocial behaviors), and how problematical behaviors and the perceived-environmental system (i.e., exposure to peer delinquency) are interrelated with each other.

### **Exposure to Community Violence and Bullying Perpetration**

African American youth are most frequently exposed to community violence, which can trigger aggressive behavior, such as bullying. Despite the possible association, there are few studies on community violence exposure and bullying behaviors, particularly among African American youth in impoverished neighborhoods (Elsaesser, Hong, & Voisin, 2016; Low & Espelage, 2014). A recent longitudinal study found that if middle school students had experienced parental violence and community violence, they have a greater risk of becoming bullying victims and bullying perpetrators in their high school (Davis, Ingram, Merrin, & Espelage, 2018).

## **Mediators of the Association between Exposure to Community Violence and Bullying Perpetration**

### *Antisocial Behavior*

A large body of research has documented a positive relationship between exposure to community violence and antisocial behavior in adolescents (Bacchini, Concetta Miranda, & Affuso, 2011; Eitle & Turner, 2002; Gorman-Smith, Henry, & Tolan, 2004). Witnessing community violence is a stressful life event that can contribute to psychological distress (e.g., post-traumatic stress disorder; Paxton et al., 2004), reinforce aggressive behavior, and exacerbate youth's maladaptive behaviors, such as antisocial behaviors (Bacchini et al., 2011; Chen, Voisin, & Jacobson, 2016; McMahon, Felix, Halpert, & Petropoulos, 2009). For example, McMahon et al.'s (2009) study tested the pathways from community violence exposure to aggressive behaviors (e.g., verbal aggression, physical aggression, and anger) among youth aged 10–15 in Chicago with a cross-sectional study (118 African American and 8 mixed-race) and a longitudinal study (78 African American and 3 mixed-race). The results of both studies showed that African American youth who had more exposure to community violence had more retaliatory beliefs, which led them to have less self-efficacy to control aggression, which, in turn, made them more likely to display aggressive behaviors.

### *Exposure to Peer Delinquency*

Exposure to peer delinquency is another possibly relevant mechanism that amplifies the link between exposure to community violence and bullying perpetration (Halliday-Boykins & Graham, 2001; Stewart & Simons, 2009). Adolescent peer groups that are aggressive might bully others in order to maintain their peer group status (see Espelage, Holt, & Henkel, 2003). Likewise, a peer group is regarded as a primary social support group for adolescents, and their interactions

significantly influence all members of the group. To illustrate, according to Luk et al.'s (2012) findings, adolescents who spend many hours with their peers in the evening were more likely to engage in bullying. According to one longitudinal study, consistent exposure to delinquent peers can reinforce delinquent behaviors in adolescents (Negriff, Ji, & Trickett, 2011). This study recognized the importance of peer influence in their early puberty period; thus, non-maltreated adolescents who are exposed to delinquent peers in their early puberty can increase their delinquent behavior in their late puberty.

### *Substance Use*

Exposure to community violence increases the risk of substance use (Barkin, Kreiter, & DuRant, 2001; Cooley-Strickland et al., 2009; Wallace, Neilands, & Sanders Phillips, 2017). According to one study (Wallace et al., 2017), African American high school students who were victims of violence, exposed to violence, and experienced urban hassles were likely to consume alcohol and marijuana use because of hopelessness and lower self-efficacy. Exposure to community violence was correlated with various types of drug use (e.g., cigarettes, crack, and other hard drugs) in another study, which comprised a sample of 702 middle school students (Barkin et al., 2001). Several empirical studies found a positive link between drug use and bullying involvement (e.g., Luk et al., 2012; Niemela et al., 2011; Radliff, Wheaton, Robinson, & Morris, 2012; Simons-Morton, 2007). Luk et al. (2012) examined the occurrence of substance use and bullying behaviors among adolescents in grades 6–10 and found that African American adolescents were more likely to be bullies than were Caucasian and Hispanic adolescents, and males were at significant risk of becoming bullies and substance-using bullies.

## **The Present Study**

Previous studies found that African American youth who live in poor inner cities have a high risk of exposure to community violence, which can contribute to the development of aggressive behaviors for the purpose of surviving in a dangerous neighborhood. Accordingly, unsafe neighborhood environments might lead African American youth to increase their antisocial behaviors, associate with more delinquent peers, and use various types of drugs, all of which might promote bullying behaviors. A better understanding of complex mechanisms that link African American youth's exposure to community violence and bullying perpetration is crucial because identifying potential mechanisms as risk factors can contribute to the development of the anti-bullying intervention program for these adolescents. Interactions between exposure to community violence and potential mechanisms as psychosocial risks (i.e., antisocial behaviors, exposure to delinquent peers, and substance use) can explain how African American adolescents reinforce their bullying behaviors. Applying the Problem-Behavior Theory, this study will examine how African American youth's exposure to community violence is linked to bullying perpetration through mediating influences of exposure to delinquent peer, drug use, and antisocial behaviors. The following hypotheses are proposed and addressed: (1) exposure to community violence will be associated with an increase in the risk of bullying perpetration (direct effect), and (2) antisocial behaviors, exposure to peer delinquency, and substance use will mediate the association between exposure to community violence and bullying perpetration (indirect effects).

## **Method**

### **Sample and Procedure**

The present study used data collected from 638 African American adolescents, ages 12 to 22, from August 2013 to January 2014. Data were collected from three high schools; one church

youth group; two community youth programs; and four public sites, including parks, fast food outlets, malls, and movie theaters in low-income communities in Chicago's Southside. Among the study samples, 476 (74.6%) received government assistance, 45.5% were male, 54.2% were female, and their mean age was 15.84 ( $SD = 1.41$ ) (see Table 1). Flyers providing specific explanations of this study were posted at high schools, churches, youth community centers, and public sites (i.e., parks, fast food outlets, malls, and movie theaters). Also, research assistants provided information about the study to the potential participants. Upon receiving permission from high school principals and leaders of a church youth group and community youth programs, research assistants provided consent letters to the potential participants and their parents. The participants and their parents returned the signed consent letters. Research assistants also recruited adolescents who were with their parents at public sites and provided them with consent letters. While participants completed the survey, trained research assistants supervised them to minimize interruptions and ensure confidentiality. The survey took 45 minutes to finish, and the participants were compensated \$10.

### **Measures**

The dependent variable for this study is bullying perpetration. Bullying perpetration included four items adapted from the University of Illinois Bullying Scale (UIBS; Espelage & Holt, 2001). The University of Illinois Bullying Scale includes the following items: (a) I teased other students, (b) I threatened to hurt or hit other students, (c) I spread rumors about other students, and (d) I excluded other students from my clique of friends. Response options include: (0) Never, (1) 1 or 2 times, (2) 3 or 4 times, (3) 5 or 6 times, and (4) 7 or more times during the past 30 days. The internal reliability score for the items was  $\alpha = .77$ . The UIBS has been widely used to measure

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics of the Study Variables (N = 638)*

Variable	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Min	Max
Biological sex					
female	346 (54.2%)				
male	290 (45.5%)				
Age		15.84	1.41	12	22
Government assistance					
no	153 (24%)				
yes	476 (74.6%)				
Bully perpetration		1.73	2.74	0	16
Antisocial behaviors		1.30	2.60	0	17
Exposure to peer delinquency		3.73	3.92	0	20
Exposure to community violence		5.50	5.58	0	24
Drug use		1.21	2.07	0	12

bullying among U.S. adolescents and has good validity and high internal consistency with U.S. samples (Chui & Chan, 2015; Espelage et al., 2018; Rose & Espelage, 2012). Alpha values ranged from .84 to .90 in previous studies.

The independent variables of this study are exposure to community violence, antisocial behavior, exposure to delinquent peer, and substance use. Measures for exposure to community violence consisted of four items from the Exposure to Violence Probe (Stein, Walker, Hazen, & Forde, 1997). Items include: During your lifetime, how often have the following events occurred: (a) Has a close relative or friend been robbed or attacked? (b) Have you seen someone being beaten? (c) Have you been a victim of violence? and (d) Have you witnessed a gun-related incident? Response options are a seven-point scale ranging from 0 times to 6 times. The internal reliability score for the items was  $\alpha = .81$ . The measure has been shown to have strong construct validity in African American youth samples.

Measures for antisocial behavior variable consisted of four items from Agnew's (1985) Seriousness of Delinquency Scale. The measure asks: In the past 12 months, how often have you done the following: (a) Taken something not belonging to you worth under \$50, (b) Hurt someone badly enough for them to need bandages or a doctor, (c) Used a knife or gun or some other thing (such as a bat, pipe, razor, taser, mace) to get something from a person, and (d) Taken something not belonging to you worth over \$50. Response options include six categories: (0) 0 times, (1) 1–2 times, (2) 3–5 times, (3) 6–8 times, (4) 9–11 times, and (5) 12 or more times. The internal reliability score for the items was  $\alpha = .78$ . The scale has shown adequate reliability with adolescent samples.

Measures for exposure to delinquent peer comprised five items from the Adolescent Delinquency Questionnaire (Huizinga & Elliott, 1986). These items include: (a) How many of

your ten closest friends drink alcohol? (b) How many of your ten closest friends skip school or class? (c) How many of your ten closest friends have used drugs? (d) How many of your ten closest friends smoke cigarettes? and (e) How many of your ten closest friends carry guns? Response options are (0) None, (1) A few, (2) About half, (3) Many, and (4) Most. The internal reliability score for the items was  $\alpha = .80$ . This questionnaire showed good validity and high internal consistency with U.S. samples.

The drug use variable is measured using two following items: During the past 30 days, on how many days did you (a) Use Lean or Krokodil (cough syrup, codeine) and (b) Use marijuana (blunts, pot, weed)? Response options include seven categories: (0) 0 days, (1) 1 day, (2) 3–5 days, (3) 6–9 days, (4) 10–19 days, (5) 20–29 days, and (6) All 30 days. The internal reliability score for the items was  $\alpha = .52$ . This variable is derived from two scales with 7 items each and Cronbach's alpha values need to be higher than .70, but if the variable has fewer than 20 items, a Cronbach's alpha value of .50 is considered to be adequate (Dall'Oglio et al., 2010).

Covariates for the study are as follows: biological sex (0 = male, 1 = female), age (continuous), and government assistance (Are you receiving free or reduced lunch and/or Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program [SNAP] benefit? [0 = no, 1 = yes]).

### **Analyses**

Descriptive statistics, Pearson's coefficient correlations, and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was conducted with Mplus7.0 (Muthén & Muthén, 2012). The hypotheses are tested, controlling for biological sex, age, and government assistance. The path model consisted of (a) direct effect (hypothesis 1) and (b) indirect effect (hypothesis 2).

The multiple indices—the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), Standardized Root Square Mean Residual (SRMR), and Root Mean Square Error of



Approximation (RMSEA)—were used to assess the model fit. From the data, exposure to community violence (skewness = 3.01, Kurtosis = 10.01), bullying perpetration (skewness = 2.05, Kurtosis = 4.38), drug use (skewness = 2.06, Kurtosis = 9.64), and antisocial behaviors (skewness = 2.90, Kurtosis = 9.64) were not normally distributed. Therefore, the maximum likelihood (ML) and Bootstrapping method were used in the path model to estimate the indirect effect for the specific paths. For a good model fit test, RMSEA, SRMR, CFI, and TLI values are examined (see Bentler & Bonett, 1980; Hu & Bentler, 1999).

## Results

Table 2 displays results from the Pearson's coefficient correlation analysis. Exposure to community violence was found to be related to bullying perpetration ( $r = .324, p < .001$ ), exposure to peer delinquency ( $r = .269, p < .001$ ), drug use ( $r = .256, p < .001$ ), and antisocial behaviors ( $r = .433, p < .001$ ).

The goodness-of-fit indices for the path model estimated CFI = .923, TLI = .904, and RMSEA = .052 (90% confidence intervals [CI] = .046 ~ .057, SRMR = .043), which indicated that the path model represented an acceptable model fit. Table 3 shows the results of the estimated direct effects and covariances among the study variables, and Figure 1 shows the direct effects among the study variables which were latent variables.

Exposure to community violence was not directly associated with bully perpetration ( $\beta = .074, p = .120$ ) or drug use ( $\beta = .057, p = .206$ ). However, exposure to community violence was positively associated with exposure to peer delinquency ( $\beta = .341, p = .000$ ) and antisocial behaviors ( $\beta = .211, p = .000$ ). Also, antisocial behaviors were positively associated with bully perpetration ( $\beta = .430, p = .005$ ). Moreover, exposure to delinquent peers was positively associated with drug use ( $\beta = .216, p = .010$ ). These findings suggest that adolescents who experienced exposure to

Table 2. *Correlations among the Study Variables*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Bully Perpetration	-							
2. Exposure to community violence	.324***	-						
3. Biological sex (ref. female)	-.068	-.171***	-					
4. Age	-.004	.163***	-.142***	-				
5. Government assistance (ref. yes)	-.018	.082*	.024	.101*	-			
6. Exposure to peer delinquency	.269***	.486***	-.220***	.299***	.011	-		
7. Drug use	.256***	.341***	-.184***	.197***	.034	.411***	-	
8. Antisocial behaviors	.433***	.415***	-.184***	.020	-.045	.349***	.321***	-

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$

Table 3. *Estimated Direct Effects and Covariances*

	Estimate	SE	CR	p-value		Estimate	SE	CR	p-value
Regression					Regression				
Weights					Weights				
BP←ECV	.074	.048	1.553	.120	DRU←ECV	.057	.045	1.265	.206
←ANTI	.430	.155	2.780	.005	←ANTI	.284	.165	1.718	.086
←EPD	.079	.082	.963	.336	←EPD	.216	.084	2.570	.010
←DRU	.098	.148	.662	.508	←Gender	.027	.047	.569	.569
←Gender	-.020	.050	-.402	.688	←Age	.022	.017	1.335	.182
←Age	-.039	.020	-1.927	.054	←SES	-.068	.049	-1.385	.166
←SES	.050	.055	.913	.361					
EPD←ECV	.341	.044	7.746	.000	Covariances				
←Gender	-.072	.064	-1.114	.265	Gender↔ECV	.043	.020	2.183	.029
←Age	.116	.025	4.695	.000	Age↔ECV	.277	.071	3.883	.000
←SES	-.128	.057	-2.232	.026	SES↔ECV	-.117	.025	-4.720	.000
ANTI←ECV	.211	.047	4.481	.000					
←EPD	.137	.089	1.549	.121					
←Gender	-.097	.042	-2.280	.023					
←Age	-.040	.017	-2.283	.022					
←SES	-.097	.043	-2.258	.024					

Note. SE = Standard error, CR = Critical ratio, BP = Bully perpetration, ECV= Exposure to community violence, EPD = Exposure to peer delinquency, ANTI = Antisocial behaviors, DRU = Drug use. A reference of variables as following: Gender is female and SES (socioeconomic status; government assistance) is yes.

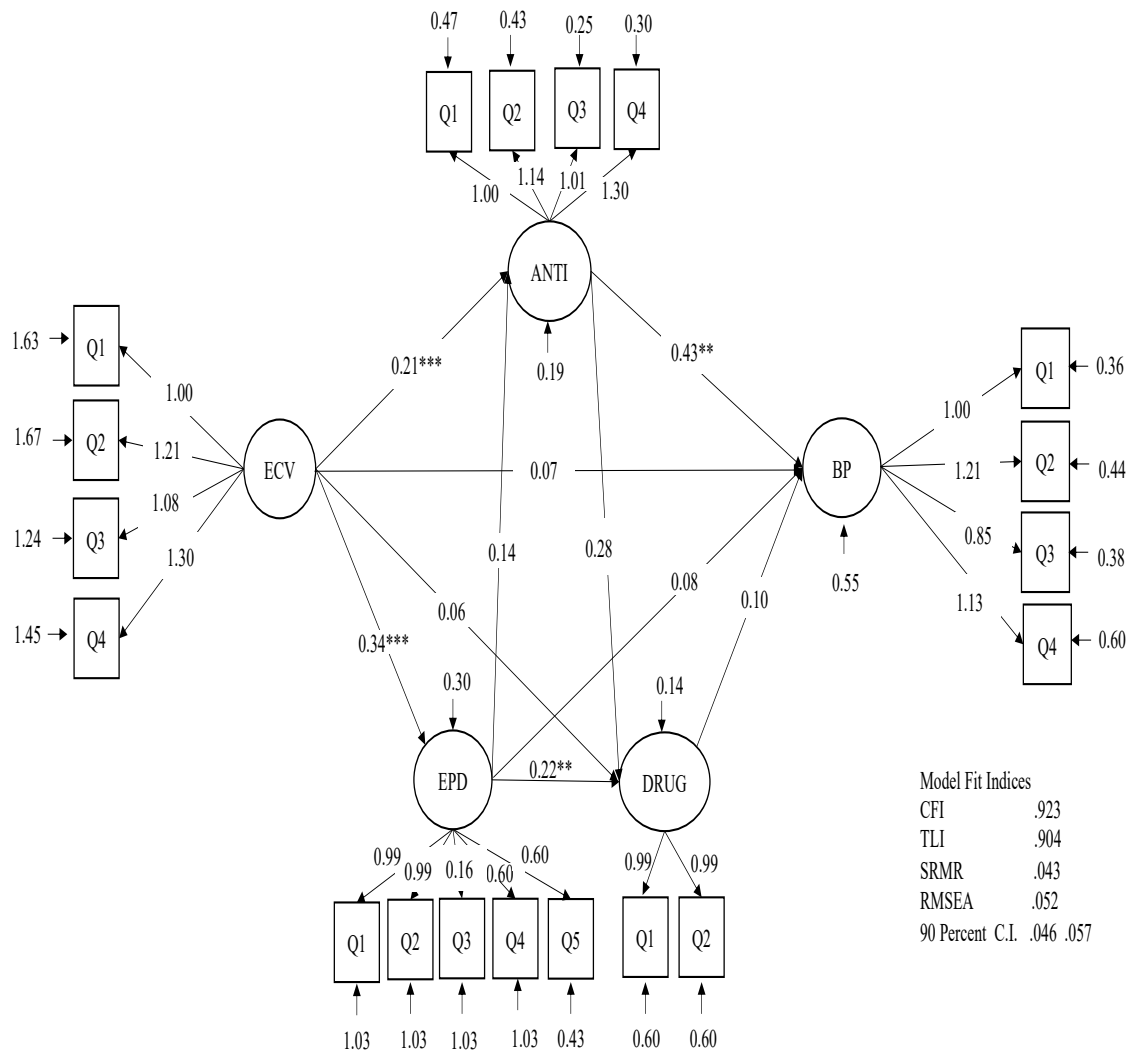


Figure 1. Estimates of the Pathway from Exposure to Community Violence to Bully Perpetration

Note. ECV = Exposure to Community Violence, ANTI = Antisocial Behaviors, EPD = Exposure to Peer Delinquency, DRUG = Drug Use, and BP = Bullying Perpetration.

For the readability of the figure, (a) The asterisk mark is only displayed on the pathway between the study variables, and (b) the effect of control variables on the study variables is omitted in the figure. Refer to the Measures section for indicators (Q1~Q5) of latent variables.

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

community violence have an increased likelihood of antisocial behaviors and exposure to delinquent peers. Also, adolescents with antisocial behavioral tendencies are likely to engage in bullying perpetration, and adolescents who experience exposure to delinquent peers are more likely to use drugs.

Regarding covariates, age ( $\beta = .043$ ,  $p = .029$ ) and gender ( $\beta = .277$ ,  $p = .000$ ) were positively related to exposure to community violence, but government assistance ( $\beta = -.117$ ,  $p = .000$ ) ( $\beta = .074$ ,  $p = .120$ ) was negatively related to exposure to community violence.

The estimated indirect effects of exposure to community violence on bullying perpetration through antisocial behaviors, exposure to peer delinquency, and drug use as mediators are shown in Table 4. The total indirect effect of exposure to community violence through the mediators was significantly associated with bully perpetration ( $\beta = .302$ , 95% CI = .129 ~ .475). One significant indirect path was indicated: exposure to community violence  $\rightarrow$  antisocial behaviors  $\rightarrow$  bully perpetration ( $\beta = .174$ , CI = .011 ~ .336). In other words, antisocial behaviors mediated the link between exposure to community violence and bully perpetration.

## Discussion

The aim of this study was to propose and explore potential pathways from exposure to community violence to bullying perpetration among urban African American adolescents. Applying the Problem-Behavior Theory, the study examined whether antisocial behaviors, exposure to delinquent peers, and drug use mediated the association between exposure to community violence and bullying perpetration, controlling for biological sex, age, and government assistance. The study findings supported the Problem-Behavior Theory and found that African American adolescents' bullying behavior is developed through interrelated multiple risk factors.

Table 4. *Direct and Specific Indirect Effects of Exposure to Community Violence on Bully Perpetration*

	Direct	Indirect							Total indirect	Total
		→EPD	→DRU	→ANTI	→DRU	→DRU	→ANTI	→DRUG		
Estimates	.142	.052	.001	.174	.002	.001	.039	.002	.302	.445
Lower Bounds	-.089	-.084	-.043	.011	-.053	-.045	-.032	-.089	.129	.297
Upper Bounds	.374	.188	.064	.336	.057	.068	.109	.014	.475	.593

*Note.* EPD = Exposure to Peer Delinquency, DRU= Drug Use, ANTI = Antisocial Behaviors. Lower and Upper bounds are based on Bias-corrected Confidence intervals (95%).

For the direct effects, the study findings showed that exposure to community violence (i.e., perceived-environmental system) among African American adolescents was positively associated with exposure to peer delinquency as a social risk factor (i.e., perceived-environmental system) and antisocial behaviors (i.e., behavior system). This finding is consistent with previous studies and supports the current study's hypothesis.

In addition, a positive association has been found between exposure to community violence and antisocial behaviors, which is similar to findings of previous studies (see Bacchini et al., 2011; Chen et al., 2016; Maschi, Bradley, & Morgen, 2008; McMahon et al., 2009). For example, Fowler et al.'s (2009) meta-analysis of 114 studies found that witnessing community violence was significantly and positively related to adolescents' externalizing problems, including antisocial behaviors, which might be due to a self-defense mechanism (Voisin, Bird, Hardestry, & Shiu, 2011) that youth may engage in, which may subsequently lead to antisocial behaviors. Another

significant finding is that African American adolescents' exposure to delinquent peers can elevate their risk of drug use (i.e., behavior system), which is consistent with other study findings (Brook et al., 2011; Haller, Handley, Chassin, & Bountress, 2010).

A significant finding with regards to the second hypothesis is that African American adolescents who were exposed to community violence were more likely to exhibit antisocial behaviors, which, in turn, might increase their risk of becoming bullies. According to the Problem-Behavior Theory, African American adolescents' chronic exposure to community violence (i.e., perceived-environmental system) can reinforce antisocial behaviors (i.e., behavior system), which can increase the probability of another problem behavior (bullying perpetration). The finding, as mentioned above, is that exposure community violence was not directly associated with bullying perpetration; however, there was an association between exposure to community violence and bullying perpetration via antisocial behaviors. African American adolescents who live in a low resourced community might have undergone more violence than bullying, consequently, they might develop self-mechanisms such as depression, aggression, and antisocial behaviors (see Hong, Huang, Golden, Upton Patton, & Washington, 2014 for a review; Overstreet, 2000). According to this finding, antisocial behaviors are a potential mediator. Antisocial behavior correlates positively with aggressive behaviors (Brook et al., 2011; Dodge, Coie, & Lynam, 2006), including bullying (Nansel et al., 2001), so antisocial behavior can facilitate them to be bullying perpetration. However, to date, there is no study on the pathways from exposure to community violence and bullying among adolescents in urban areas. The understanding of potential mechanisms that associate African American youth's exposure to community violence and bullying perpetration is essential because potential mechanisms as risk factors can contribute to the development of an anti-bullying intervention program for these adolescents.

### **Limitations and Implications for Research**

Several limitations of this study must be mentioned. This study utilizes a cross-sectional research design, so causal inferences cannot be made. A longitudinal research design is needed to estimate time-order effects in order to explore developmental pathways from community violence exposure to bullying perpetration. Also, self-reported measures were used, which might have introduced self-reporting bias. Future research might include reports from parents, peers, and teachers, which can increase the validity of the findings. Moreover, substance use measures relied on only two items, which cannot represent various types of illicit drugs. Thus, future studies might include additional items to accurately measure substance use. In addition, this study's sample was derived from the Southside of Chicago, which is one of the most dangerous areas in the U.S. Because cultural contexts and characteristics vary in different urban areas, the sample of African American adolescents in the Southside of Chicago is a limitation in that it is difficult to generalize these findings to African American youth in other areas. Future research needs to include participants from various urban areas in the U.S.

### **Implications for Practice**

Findings from this study can provide potential strategies for preventing bullying. To develop anti-bullying programs, researchers, practitioners, and educators need to consider African American adolescents' culturally relevant contexts (e.g., socioeconomic status, students' characteristics and behaviors, and community resources) to provide needed services. The present study findings suggest that anti-bullying programs in urban communities need to consider adolescents' problem behaviors. As a result, due to poverty, African American parents might have limited monitoring of their children's behaviors, and children and adolescents have more opportunities to engage in criminal activities; thus, it is important for social workers or



practitioners to monitor adolescents' problematic behaviors and peer relationships. Also, active partnerships between schools and communities (e.g., a partnership between schools and youth centers) could be an effective strategy that might inhibit antisocial behaviors of African American adolescents who are chronically exposed to violence in their community (Berkowitz, 2003). Moreover, practitioners working with adolescents in low-resourced communities need to consider cost-effective and culturally relevant contexts in their treatment plan. Satisfying all these criteria, one possible program might be solution-focused brief therapy (SFBT). SFBT is a strength-based intervention for all age groups, and it is focused on a client's identifying solutions by answering from a therapist's questions, and then the client can develop plans for change (Miller & de Shazer, 2000). Applying SFBT to adolescents who are exposed to community violence with antisocial behaviors can build their strengths and power to solve their problems, which will help them prevent further development of aggressive behaviors, such as bullying perpetration. Sequenced, Active, Focused and Explicit (SAFE) approaches are suggested, which fosters youth's social and emotional development (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). When researchers, practitioners, and educators develop an anti-bullying intervention program, they need to consider SAFE practices' criteria: (1) Sequenced: does the anti-bullying program use connected and coordinated activities to facilitate youths' skills development?; (2) Active: does the anti-bullying program use active forms of learning to help them learn new skills?; (3) Focused: does the anti-bullying intervention program have at least one component devoted to developing personal or social skills?; and (4) does the anti-bullying intervention program target personal or social skills? (Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010). SAFE approaches provide effective skill training practices among diverse students (Durlak et al., 2010).

## Conclusion

In summary, this study applied the Problem-Behavior Theory to examine how African American adolescents who are exposed to community violence might engage with antisocial behaviors, drug use, and exposure to delinquent peers, which may be linked to bullying perpetration. This study contributes to the understanding of how African American adolescents' unsafe neighborhood environments influence their antisocial behavior and peer relationship negatively, and their antisocial behavior escalates their bullying behaviors. Partnerships with community providers would prevent further behavioral problems (e.g., antisocial behaviors); also, conducting individual or group clinical interventions and developing anti-bullying interventions with a whole-school approach are pivotal strategies to prevent bullying perpetration in urban areas.

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**ABSTRACT****EXPLORING BULLYING AND PEER VICTIMIZATION AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN ADOLESCENTS IN CHICAGO'S SOUTHSIDE**

by

**JEOUNG MIN LEE****May 2020****Advisor:** Dr. Jun Sung Hong**Major:** Social Work**Degree:** Doctor of Philosophy in Social Work

Adolescent bullying is a serious concern for adolescents, parents, teachers, school officials, and the public. While many studies have explored serious forms of violence (e.g., gang violence and homicide) among urban adolescents, relatively few studies have examined “less serious forms of violence,” such as bullying among these adolescents. This dissertation research, which is divided into three studies, aims to examine antecedents of bullying and peer victimization as well as psychosocial outcomes of peer victimization from a sample of 639 urban African American adolescents in Chicago’s Southside. The first study applies Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems perspective and explores factors that are correlated with bullying perpetration and victimization. The study findings emphasize the importance of school-based intervention, especially teacher support, which appears to be the most significant protective factor for the study sample. In terms of the psychosocial outcomes associated with bullying and victimization, the second study examined the association between peer victimization and suicidal thoughts and behaviors. Although bullying and suicide are major public health problems, studies have not fully explored the relationship between peer victimization and suicidal behavior, particularly among urban

African American youth. Applying Joiner's (2005) Interpersonal-Psychological Theory of Suicide, the second study employed a path model using the Structural Equation Model (SEM) to examine the pathways from peer victimization to suicidal thoughts through internalizing behaviors (low self-esteem, depression, and hopelessness). Victims of bullying were found to develop low self-esteem and depression, and depression can contribute to feelings of hopelessness, thereby increasing suicidal risks. Urban African American adolescents who reside in disorganized neighborhoods are at a heightened risk of exposure to deviant peers, which can increase their odds of bullying. A high percentage of African American children and adolescents in poor inner-cities are likely to be exposed to community violence, which can increase their risk of aggressive behaviors, such as bullying. However, only a limited number of studies have examined how youths' exposure to community violence is related to bullying behaviors. Applying Jessor et al.'s (1968) Problem-Behavior Theory, the third study proposes and examines the pathways from community violence exposure to bullying perpetration through behavioral problems (i.e., antisocial behaviors, exposure to peer delinquency, and drug use). African American adolescents who were exposed to community violence were found to display antisocial behaviors and exposure to peer delinquency. Further, antisocial behaviors can elevate bullying behaviors.

Overall, findings from these have major implications for social work practice and future research.

## AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

Jeoung Min Lee is currently a doctoral candidate in the School of Social Work at Wayne State University. She received a Bachelor's of Arts degree in German Language and Literature from ChungJu University in South Korea; a Master of Social Work from SoongSil University in South Korea; a Master of Science in Human Development of Family Studies from Michigan State University; and will receive a Doctor of Philosophy in Social Work from Wayne State University. She also received the first level (highest) license in social work and art therapy in South Korea. For her post MSW practice, she worked as a counselor for adolescents with behavioral programs at the government-operated Korea Metropolitan Youth Center in Seoul, Korea. As a counselor, she utilized both solution-focused brief therapy and art therapy. She joined the doctoral program in social work at Wayne State University in the fall semester of 2014. While in the doctoral program, she was a pre-doctoral fellow at the Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute (MPSI) at Wayne State University, and she received the Broadening Experiences in Scientific Training (BEST) Award by Wayne State University, which was granted from the National Institutes of Health (NIH). In 2018, she received the Outstanding Dissertation Proposal Award from the Korean American Social Work Educators Association. Most recently, she is an adjunct lecturer at Wayne State University. She taught SW 3510 Human Behavior in Social Environment during the fall semester of 2019 and is currently teaching SW 3810 Research Methods, Data Analysis, and Practice Evaluation. She recently accepted a faculty position at Wichita State University, School of Social Work, where she will begin tenure-track assistant professorship in the fall semester of 2020.