



J. Robert Flores, Administrator

November 2003

## J U V E N I L E J U S T I C E B U L L E T I N

# How Families and Communities Influence Youth Victimization

**Janet L. Lauritsen**

Until recently, researchers studying how family and community factors influence violent victimization among youth<sup>1</sup> faced a significant hurdle: insufficient data. As a result, the link between these factors and violent victimization remained largely unexamined. Now, however, because of a special release of National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) data from the U.S. Census Bureau and the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), researchers can explore this important issue in a new light. For the first time, factors associated with violent victimization are receiving the same critical attention that has been focused on violent offending. Drawing on newly available NCVS data, this Bulletin offers a unique analysis of how family and community characteristics affect violent victimization among U.S. youth ages 12–17.

<sup>1</sup> In this Bulletin, the phrase “violent victimization among youth” refers to nonlethal acts of violence committed against youth ages 12–17.

## Past Approaches To Studying Youth Victimization

To understand how the risk for violent victimization varies among adolescents, researchers have typically relied on two resources: (1) interview data from self-report surveys and (2) information from official records maintained by police departments and child welfare organizations. Official records provide important information about the victims who come to the attention of these agencies (e.g., age, sex, race, and circumstances of the event). For some types of violence, such as homicide, police data are highly reliable for estimating risk. In fact, for crimes such as homicide, risk estimates for victimization can only be determined by using official records.

Fortunately, most violent acts are not lethal. Unfortunately, about half of serious violent incidents involving juvenile victimization are not reported to the police or other officials. This lack of information presents a serious challenge for determining who is at greatest risk for nonlethal violence and why (Snyder and Sickmund, 1999; Finkelhor and Ormrod, 1999). Because of the limitations of official data, self-report

## A Message From OJJDP

When youth are victimized, they suffer physical, psychological, and emotional injuries that may take considerable time to heal. The repercussions of youth victimization also affect their families and communities. Each victimization represents a tear in the social fabric that is supposed to protect children.

With limited data, past research focused on violent offenders rather than their victims. As a result of recently available data from the National Crime Victimization Survey, however, researchers can explore violent victimization in a new light.

Drawing on that data, this Bulletin explores how individual, family, and community factors influence the risk for nonlethal violence among U.S. youth ages 12–17. By examining the connection between such factors and the risk for violent victimization, the Bulletin shows that disadvantaged communities with high proportions of young people and single-parent families experience the greatest difficulty in protecting youth from victimization.

Understanding how individual, family, and community factors influence violent victimization is the first step toward preventing it. With this knowledge, community leaders and policymakers can make sound decisions and implement effective programs that prevent youth from becoming victims.

surveys based on large random samples have been especially useful sources for studying violent victimization. Earlier research using self-reports has generated important information about how violence varies among youth. For instance, self-report surveys show that black youth experience greater risks for being victims of serious violent crime than white youth (Perkins, 1997) and American Indian youth face the highest risk overall (Snyder and Sickmund, 1999).

Interpreting these findings, however, can be problematic. Some researchers will assume that the risk patterns reflect individual differences in lifestyle activities or friendships and associations, whereas others will assume that the patterns result from differences in social, economic, or family characteristics. Unless research simultaneously examines individual, family, and community factors, the relative contribution of each set of characteristics cannot be isolated, nor can the differences in risk be fully understood.

This Bulletin describes how individual, family, and community characteristics influence the risk for nonlethal violence among youth. Until now, determining the relative importance of these factors has been hampered by a lack of sufficient data. To facilitate research on this topic and others, the U.S. Census Bureau and BJS have made available “area-identified” NCVS data. These data differ from the public NCVS files in that they include state, county, and census tract codes for each household in the sample. These data make it possible to link the NCVS victimization information for each household and person in the sample to other sources of community-related data available from the U.S. Census Bureau.

The area-identified NCVS data are used here to address several important but previously unexamined issues associated with the risk for nonlethal violence among U.S. youth. The Bulletin examines the following issues:

- ◆ The relationship between the types of families in which adolescents live and their risk for violent victimization.
- ◆ The relationship between the types of communities in which adolescents live and their risk for violent victimization.
- ◆ Whether family circumstances are more important in some kinds of communities than others.

- ◆ How risk factors vary among youth of different racial and ethnic groups.
- ◆ Which risk factors are the most significant for understanding violent victimization among youth.

## Using NCVS To Study Youth Victimization

Before addressing these issues, it is important to describe the advantages and disadvantages of using NCVS data to study youth victimization. NCVS is a large sample survey designed to be representative of persons and households in the United States. In 1995 (the year used for this analysis), approximately 100,000 persons in 50,000 households were interviewed every 6 months about their victimization experiences. Interviews were conducted with each person age 12 and older in the household, and participants were asked whether they had been the victim of an attempted or completed violent or personal theft crime.<sup>2</sup>

Because violence is a relatively rare event in random samples of the population, the large sample size of NCVS is useful. Equally important, the sample is designed to be nationally representative; households are chosen on the basis of census information rather than published telephone numbers or random dialing procedures, which often produce biased samples. Participation is voluntary, yet more than 90 percent of households surveyed in 1995 agreed to participate in NCVS, making it one of the most representative social surveys in the country. This Bulletin is based on approximately 19,000 interviews with youth ages 12–17.

NCVS data contain family details that are difficult to find in other surveys of youth. For example, NCVS captures information on family income, size, length of residence, and configuration. Because the area-identified NCVS data contain census tract codes for each household or family, numerous indicators about a community (such as neighborhood poverty rates) can be linked to each household and youth in the survey. This wealth of information makes it possible to study how individual, family, and community characteristics are related to violent victimization among youth and

whether these patterns are similar for youth living in different types of families.

For this Bulletin, a person is considered to have been the victim of violence if he or she reported at least one incident of attempted or completed assault, robbery, sexual assault, or rape during a 6-month period in 1995.<sup>3</sup> Simple assault includes attempted or completed attacks without a weapon; aggravated assault includes attempted or completed attacks with a weapon and completed attacks with serious injury. Robbery includes attempted or completed thefts by force or threat of force. Sexual assault and rape include attempted or completed attacks involving unwanted sexual contact, verbal threats, or forced intercourse.

Most violent crimes involving youth are simple assaults (approximately 72 percent), followed by aggravated assaults (17 percent), robberies (8 percent), and sexual assaults and rapes (3 percent). The majority of these crimes (about 68 percent) are attempted rather than completed incidents of violence (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2000).

No data can address all of the questions raised by a phenomenon as complex as violent victimization, and NCVS is no exception. Although NCVS has many strengths, its findings have been criticized in the past for underestimating rape and sexual assault, nonstranger assaults, and, more generally, crimes against females (see Bachman and Saltzman, 1995, and Kindermann, Lynch, and Cantor, 1997, for a discussion of these issues). In response to these criticisms, the survey instrument was redesigned, and the new measures have shown estimates of female assaults that are comparable to the estimates provided by the National Violence Against Women Survey (Tjaden and Thoennes, 2000). This Bulletin draws on data from 1995 because that was the year when the redesigned survey was first fully implemented.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> NCVS measures attempted and completed violent victimization using a series of survey questions. For questionnaire details, see Bureau of Justice Statistics (2000).

<sup>4</sup> Information from the decennial census is used to describe the social and economic characteristics of communities throughout the United States. The research described in this Bulletin began before the release of data from the 2000 census. Although the data for each community were collected 5 years before the victimization interviews, they are highly reliable indicators of area characteristics because communities change slowly in most places (for more detail on the area measures, see Lauritsen, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> A designated household respondent reports on household experiences with crimes such as burglary, vandalism, and theft from the property.

Several limitations of the data should be noted. First, although the sample is much more representative than most youth surveys, it does not include youth living in institutional settings, such as a juvenile detention facility, or homeless youth. Second, children younger than 12 years old were not interviewed because of their perceived inability to provide valid and reliable responses to the standard NCVS questions. The victimization of children younger than 12 appears to differ from that of older youth: crimes against young children are much more likely to involve family members, whereas crimes against adolescents are more likely to involve acquaintances (Finkelhor and Ormrod, 2000). Thus, although the data reveal a great deal about stranger and acquaintance violence among the majority of adolescents, it is difficult to determine whether the patterns reported here apply to children younger than age 12 or to crimes such as family violence or child abuse (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2000).

## Measuring Family Characteristics

As described above, NCVS is a household-based sample that contains important details about individual families (e.g., family income, size, and length of residence in the neighborhood). The overall configuration of each household or family is coded according to 32 different categories. The main elements of these original categories delineate whether a family is headed by a husband and wife or by a single female or male and whether any children, other relatives, or nonrelatives reside in the household. The relationship between each youth and the primary adult in the household is also coded. By combining these three measures, researchers can distinguish families in numerous ways. Preliminary analyses of the statistical validity of the survey's family categories, however, indicated that youth could be combined into two major family types. Initial analyses also showed that this could be done without masking important distinctions in either victimization risks or individual and community characteristics.

The first family type consists of youth living with two married parents. According to NCVS sample information, nearly 71 percent of youth ages 12–17 live with two married parents, and the vast majority of those youth (97 percent) are the children of the adults. The remaining 3 percent of youth in this group are typically relatives

of the married couple. Among all youth living with two married parents, few differences were found between youth living in households with parents and children and youth living in households with parents, children, and others (such as grandparents). Consequently, additional distinctions among families composed of married couples were not made.

The second family type consists of youth living in a single-parent or other family arrangement. According to NCVS sample information, about 25 percent of youth live in single-parent families; most of these youth (91 percent) are the children of the unmarried adult. Approximately 20 percent of children in these single-parent families live with their father, whereas nearly 80 percent live with their mother. It is important to note that no significant differences in victimization were found between youth living with single mothers and those living with single fathers. Therefore, single-mother and single-father families are combined in these analyses.

Also included in this second category are the 4 percent of all youth who live in other family arrangements, including those living with a grandparent, adult brother or sister, aunt, uncle, cousin, or nonrelative. No significant differences in victimization risk were found between youth living in single-parent and these other types of families. Because the relatively small number of youth in this “other” category does not allow for statistically reliable assessments of risk, youth in single-parent and other types of families were combined into one category. Using the categories described above, NCVS data indicate that approximately 71 percent of youth ages 12–17 live with two married parents and 29 percent live in a single-parent or other family arrangement.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> The “relatives and nonrelatives” of the adult head of household include a wide variety of persons, such as brothers, sisters, parents, and boyfriends and girlfriends. Moreover, in many of the families with children and other relatives or nonrelatives, the youth was that relative or nonrelative (e.g., a youth living with an aunt and cousins or a youth living with another family). Unfortunately, it is not possible to use these data to make finer distinctions about various family types because information about the relationship of each child to each member of the household is not available. For instance, it is impossible to determine whether children living with their mother and grandmother are at lower risk for violence than children living with their mother and her sister. Also, children living with their mother and her boyfriend cannot be compared with those living with their mother and some other nonrelative because this information is not available. Although the data cannot address these

## Measuring Community Characteristics

Communities are complex places that can be described in numerous ways. This Bulletin presents two strategies to describe them. The first strategy relies on a commonly used summary index known as “community disadvantage” (see Lauritsen, 2001; Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls, 1997). This index was created by using factor analysis, a statistical technique that helps researchers create summary indexes. The results of factor analysis led to the creation of a single reliable index based on five census tract attributes: (1) the percentage of persons living in poverty, (2) the percentage of female-headed families with children, (3) the percentage of persons unemployed, (4) the percentage of households receiving public assistance, and (5) the percentage of the population that is black.<sup>6</sup> By using a single summary index, it is possible to understand how violence is generally associated with area characteristics.

The second research strategy is to study the relative influence of specific aspects of community disadvantage, such as poverty, family composition, and racial and ethnic composition. This strategy is used to determine which aspects of community disadvantage might be most strongly associated with the risk of violence. Both of these strategies were used, and the findings are discussed below.

## Findings

Total violence and stranger and nonstranger violence are examined to assess whether the sources of risk correlate with certain types of events. Adolescents are classified as victims of nonstranger violence if they experienced at least one incident of attempted or completed violence at the hands of an offender who was a friend, acquaintance, or family member.<sup>7</sup> Adolescents are classified as victims of stranger violence if the offender was someone with whom they had no prior relationship.

important questions, they do permit a more detailed analysis of youth victimization than has been possible in the past.

<sup>6</sup> The overall reliability of this factor is very high ( $\alpha = .92$ ). See Lauritsen (2001) for additional details on the results of this factor analysis and for information about the process of merging the area-identified NCVS data with census tract data.

<sup>7</sup> Because of the small number of cases, conducting reliable analyses of more specific kinds of nonstranger violence (e.g., friends versus family members) is not possible.

To assess how community characteristics are related to violent victimization, events that occurred within a youth's residential community are examined separately from those that occurred elsewhere. This distinction is made because NCVS data contain location information on the residential communities of each youth, but not all incidents of violence take place within an adolescent's neighborhood. Although the majority of violent events occur within a youth's neighborhood (defined here as within 1 mile of his or her home), a substantial minority of violent events (47.0 percent) occur more than 1 mile from home (see table 1). Therefore, the analyses of how community factors are related to risk will focus primarily on events that occur near the victim's home.

### Relationship Between Risk Factors and Family Types

The risks for total, stranger, and nonstranger violence among youth living in single-parent/other and two-parent families are presented in table 2. Youth in single-parent families experience significantly higher risks for violence than youth in two-parent families. Approximately 60 out of every 1,000 children in single-parent families reported at least one violent victimization during a 6-month period, whereas approximately 40 out of every 1,000 children in two-parent families were victimized. In other words, the overall risk for violence is about 50 percent higher among youth living in single-parent families than among youth living in two-parent families. The difference in risks for neighborhood

violence is even more pronounced: youth in single-parent families are about twice as likely as youth in two-parent families to become a victim of violence in their own neighborhood (40.8 versus 19.9 per 1,000).

Moreover, these levels of risk are significantly higher than those found for most Americans. In 1995, the 6-month risk for violence among all Americans (ages 12 and older) was approximately 18 per 1,000 and the risk for neighborhood violence was roughly 9 per 1,000 (Lauritsen, 2001). Thus, children living in single-parent families have an overall risk for violent victimization that is about three times higher than the average American (60 versus 18 per 1,000).

The same differences are found when stranger and nonstranger violence are examined separately. For youth in single-parent families, the risks for stranger and nonstranger violence are about 50 percent greater than for youth in two-parent families, and the differences in risk for these events in their own neighborhood are about twice as great. Similarly, adolescents in

**Table 1: Violent Events Involving Youth Ages 12–17, by Proximity to the Victim's Home**

Distance From Victim's Home	Incidents (%)
In or near the victim's home	15.9
Not at home, but not more than 1 mile	36.6
More than 1 mile, but not more than 5 miles	31.2
More than 5 miles, but not more than 50 miles	14.4
50 miles or more	1.3
Unknown	0.6
All incidents	100.0

Note: Interviewers marked the first category identified by respondents.

Source: Author's own data file combining information from the 1995 Area-Identified National Crime Victimization Survey with census tract information from the 1990 decennial census. Original data collected by the U.S. Census Bureau.

**Table 2: Rate of Risk for Victimization Among Youth Ages 12–17, by Type of Violence and Type of Family**

Family Type	Total		Stranger		Nonstranger	
	All Violence	Neighborhood Violence	All Violence	Neighborhood Violence	All Violence	Neighborhood Violence
Single-parent/other	60.5	40.8	36.4	23.6	31.6	22.4
Two-parent*	40.4	19.9	24.0	12.0	21.1	10.2

Note: The rates presented here are 6-month prevalence rates, representing the number of youth (per 1,000) who experienced at least one incidence of violence (stranger or nonstranger) during the 6-month period.

\*All differences in risk between youth in the two family types are statistically significant at  $p < .05$ .

Source: Author's own data file combining information from the 1995 area-identified National Crime Victimization Survey with census tract information from the 1990 decennial census. Original data collected by the U.S. Census Bureau.

### Describing Risk

The risk for victimization can be described in various ways. Prevalence rates (such as those used here) describe the probability that a youth will become a victim of violence during a 6-month period. These rates are calculated by taking the total number of young victims of violence and dividing that number by the total number of youth. Victimization rates—the measure used by the Bureau of Justice Statistics—reveal the number of victimizations experienced by a population. Victimization rates differ from prevalence rates because some victims of violence experience more than one event in a 6-month period and because a single incident of crime can have multiple victims. BJS reports use victimization rates covering a 1-year period to measure the total volume of crime. Prevalence rates are used here because most victims of violence experience only a single incident in a 6-month period and because these numbers provide a more intuitive understanding of the likelihood that a youth will become a victim of violence.

single-parent families are about three times more likely to experience stranger violence and three times more likely to experience nonstranger violence than the average American.

To understand why youth in single-parent families experience greater risk for violence than youth in two-parent families, it is important to consider how family circumstances determine other factors in the lives of youth. Because NCVS data are representative of U.S. adolescents and have been linked to census information, the data reveal a great deal about the differences in the family and community resources available to these two groups of children. Table 3 shows how various factors differ according to family type.

Many factors are related to the types of families in which youth live. For instance, adolescents in single-parent families tend to live in households that have significantly less income than two-parent families. The typical income of single-parent families is roughly half that of two-parent families.<sup>8</sup> Single-parent families also tend to have less residential stability—that is, they are more likely to have moved recently and have lived in their current home for significantly shorter periods of time than two-parent families. Research shows that the length of time individuals have resided in their home is related to the risk for victimization (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2000; Lauritsen, 2001). (See below for a discussion of how family residential stability is also an important predictor of the risk for youth victimization.)

Because residential housing often is economically segregated, communities surrounding single-parent families tend to be more economically disadvantaged than those surrounding two-parent families. On average, youth in single-parent families live in areas with significantly higher rates of poverty and a greater proportion of other single-parent families. Compared with youth living in two-parent families, youth in single-parent families live in areas where the proportion of persons living

below the poverty line is about 56 percent greater (18.1 percent versus 11.6 percent) and the proportion of female-headed families is about 58 percent higher (27.4 percent versus 17.3 percent). Compared with youth living in two-parent families, youth in single-parent families are nearly twice as likely to be living in central-city areas (39.7 percent versus 21.7 percent) and in places with a greater percentage of black residents (24.0 percent versus 10.6 percent). These patterns emphasize the importance of considering community characteristics as a potential explanation for why children in different types of families experience varying levels of violence.

### Relationship Between Risk Factors and Community Types

Figure 1 (page 6) illustrates how adolescents' risk for neighborhood violence is related to the overall level of socioeconomic disadvantage in their community. At the 50th percentile, approximately 26 of every 1,000 youth were victimized by violence. The shape of the curve in figure 1 is

essentially the same when stranger and nonstranger violence are examined separately. The community type in which the average white, Latino, and black youth live is also noted in the figure and demonstrates, for example, that black youth tend to live in areas that are more disadvantaged than Latino and white youth.

Figure 1 shows that community disadvantage does not have a substantial influence on violence risk until the 80th percentile. For most youth (about 80 percent of the adolescent population), community characteristics are unlikely to account for the differences in their risk for violence. However, for the 20 percent of youth in the least advantaged communities, the risk for violence is much higher. In these areas, the likelihood that an adolescent will become a victim of violence is significantly higher than for youth living outside these communities.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> The upturn shown in figure 1 (between community disadvantage and youth victimization) is similar to that found in analyses of adults (Lauritsen and White, 2001).

**Table 3: Family and Community Characteristics for Youth in Single- and Two-Parent Families**

Characteristic	Single-Parent/Other (n = 5,460)	Two-Parent (n = 14,338)
<b>Family</b>		
Estimated household income (in thousands)	19.8	33.0*
Household size (number of persons)	3.7	4.6*
Length of residence (in years)	6.2	8.6*
<b>Community</b>		
Central-city residence (%)	39.7	21.7*
Below poverty level (%)	18.1	11.6*
Population less than 18 years old (%)	26.2	25.9
Black (%)	24.0	10.6*
Latino (%)	12.6	9.4
White (%)	60.8	77.2*
Female-headed households with children (%)	27.4	17.3*
Community disadvantage score <sup>†</sup>	.35	-.23*

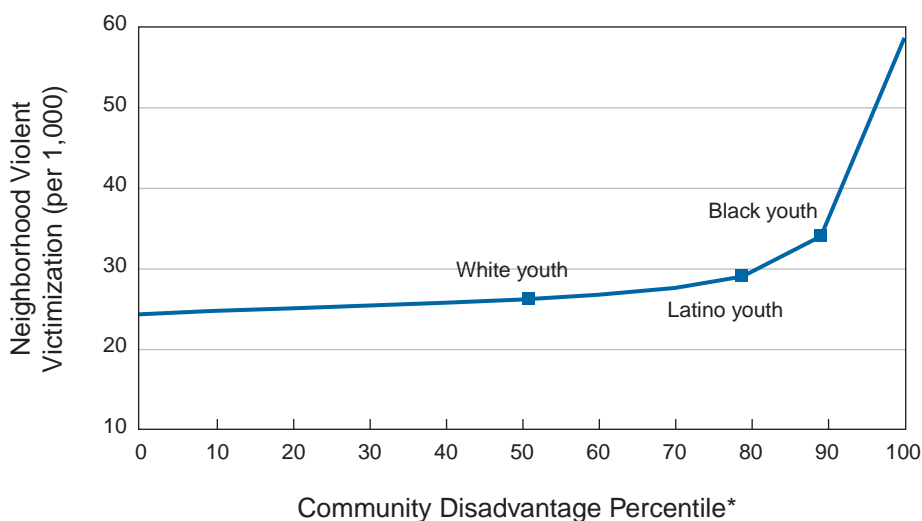
\* Indicates that the differences between youth in the two family types are statistically significant at  $p < .05$ .

<sup>†</sup> Community disadvantage is a standardized index; therefore, a score of "0" represents the average level of disadvantage in the United States. For 95 percent of the youth population, the values range from -1 to +2, with higher values indicating greater levels of disadvantage. The remaining 5 percent live in areas that score between +2 and +3.

Source: Author's own data file combining information from the 1995 area-identified National Crime Victimization Survey with census tract information from the 1990 decennial census. Original data collected by the U.S. Census Bureau.

<sup>8</sup> NCVS uses 14 categories of nonequal income brackets to measure household income. For this reason, household income and group differences in household income can only be estimated. On the 14-point scale, the average single-parent household income is 6.9 (where 6=\$17,500 and 7=\$20,000), whereas the average two-parent household income is 10.6 (where 10=\$30,000 and 11=\$35,000).

**Figure 1: Risk of Youth Victimization, by Level of Community Disadvantage**



\* Community disadvantage is measured by a summary index that describes the relative level of socioeconomic disadvantage in an area. The numbers on this scale represent the percentile or ranking of the community according to this index for all census tracts in the nation.

Source: Author's own data file combining information from the 1995 area-identified National Crime Victimization Survey with census tract information from the 1990 decennial census. Original data collected by the U.S. Census Bureau.

The 10 percent of youth who live in the most disadvantaged communities experience the highest risks of neighborhood violence in the country. In these areas, nearly 58 of every 1,000 youth reported at least one incident of violence during a 6-month period—a level that is almost twice as high as that for adults living in the same areas (Lauritsen, 2001) and approximately 6 times greater than the risk for neighborhood violence among all Americans (58 versus 9 per 1,000). Although age is a well-known correlate of risk, the combination of age and community disadvantage is associated with some of the highest levels of nonlethal violent victimization in the country.

As noted earlier, the general index of community disadvantage is one way of describing the economic and social composition of a neighborhood, but what components of this disadvantage index are most responsible for the higher levels of risk? Ascertaining a clear answer to this question is difficult because most components of disadvantage are interrelated. For example, areas with high proportions of female-headed households with children tend to have higher rates of poverty. Nonetheless, statistical techniques provide some insight into this important issue.

To determine which components of the disadvantage index are most responsible for higher levels of risk, the relationships between victimization and each of the components of disadvantage (i.e., poverty, unemployment, public assistance, race, ethnicity, and family composition) were examined in a series of analyses. Of these factors, poverty, family composition (i.e., female-headed households with children), and race (e.g., the percent of persons who are black) were most strongly associated with an adolescent's risk for violent victimization. In urban samples, these characteristics tend to be extremely difficult to separate because many U.S. cities are segregated along economic and racial lines (see, for example, Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls, 1997). NCVS, however, includes a representative sample of persons and places outside central cities where the statistical problems associated with separating these aspects of communities are reduced. In this sample, poverty, family composition, and race were examined simultaneously. The results of these analyses are presented in table 4.

These analyses reveal that one of the most important community predictors of youth risk for violence is the proportion of female-headed households with children.

Results show that the other important correlates of risk (i.e., levels of poverty and race) are not statistically significant when family composition is taken into account. Moreover, the results show that the effect of the family composition coefficient does not change significantly once racial composition and poverty levels are included in the analysis. This evidence suggests that youth face a higher risk for victimization in disadvantaged areas because these places contain greater proportions of children living in single-parent families—not because they tend to be poorer or have larger percentages of racial and ethnic minorities.<sup>10</sup>

The patterns described above show that an adolescent's family type is related to risk and that certain characteristics of the community also are associated with victimization. Figure 2 examines whether community disadvantage has a similar influence on victimization among youth in single- and two-parent families.

Figure 2 reveals an important connection between families and communities that is not apparent when these factors are examined individually. When community factors become increasingly important, they do so primarily for youth living in single-parent families. Compared with youth who live in single-parent families, adolescents in two-parent families appear to be much better protected from the consequences of living in the most disadvantaged areas of the United States, approximately 66 percent of youth live in single-parent/other families, compared with about 28 percent in the rest of the country. In areas characterized by the highest socioeconomic disadvantage, the ability of families to monitor and supervise children's activities is particularly important. Under conditions of serious community disadvantage, youth in single-parent families experience much greater levels of victimization risk than youth living in single-parent families in more advantaged places or youth in two-parent families, regardless of area of residence.

<sup>10</sup> Additional analyses found that residential stability (an index representing the percent of persons who have lived in their home for more than 5 years and the percent of housing units that are occupied) is unrelated to youth victimization once disadvantage is taken into account. Similarly, no significant relationship was found between the percent of foreign-born persons or the percent of Latino residents and victimization risk (see Lauritsen, 2001).

**Table 4: Key Components of Community Disadvantage, by Type of Victimization**

Component of Disadvantage	Type of Victimization		
	Total	Stranger	Nonstranger
Female-headed households	.017* (.007)	.023* (.008)	.014* (.008)
Racial composition	.000 (.003)	.000 (.004)	-.003 (.004)
Poverty	.001 (.008)	-.007 (.010)	.009 (.009)
Constant	-3.940* (.107)	-4.499* (.133)	-4.603* (.140)

Note: These logistic regression coefficients are provided for researchers interested in the technical aspects of these analyses.

\*Statistically significant at  $p < .05$ .

Source: Author's own data file combining information from the 1995 area-identified National Crime Victimization Survey with census tract information from the 1990 decennial census. Original data collected by the U.S. Census Bureau.

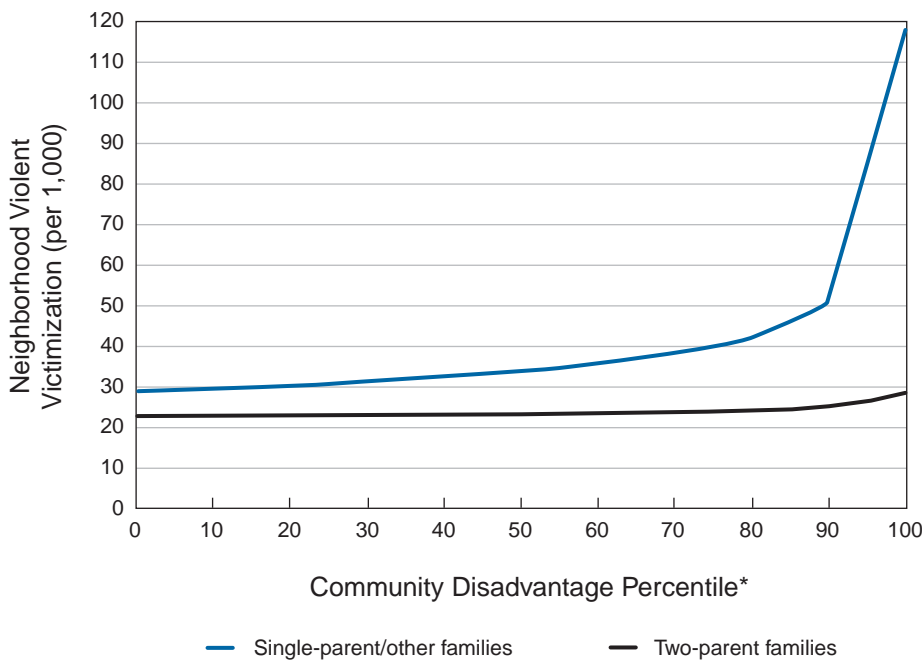
### How the Data Are Analyzed

The study of community influences on victimization risk involves a statistical technique known as survey-weighted logistic regression analysis. By conducting a series of analyses, it is possible to assess the relative contribution of a variety of neighborhood conditions. Because many community characteristics are highly correlated, researchers must carefully examine the statistical properties of their analyses.

The results in table 4 indicate that when the family, economic, and racial characteristics of a community are considered simultaneously, the area of disadvantage that has the most direct relationship with victimization risk is the percent of households headed by females with children. As discussed in this report, poverty and racial composition are related to victimization. However, when all three factors are considered simultaneously, poverty and racial composition appear to be less important than family composition. These findings support the notion that communities with relatively fewer adults in children's homes have greater difficulty minimizing adolescents' risk for violence.

For those interested in the technical details of these analyses, table 4 presents survey-weighted logistic regression coefficients and standard errors. In bivariate regression models, each of the three measures was significantly related to victimization. Robustness testing of the multivariate findings was determined by running a series of models and comparing the stability of the coefficients. The coefficients for family composition in the bivariate models were .017, .020, and .015 for total, stranger, and nonstranger violence, respectively. The coefficients for racial composition and poverty varied widely, depending on model specification. Variance inflation factor (VIF) tests revealed no serious multicollinearity problems among the three factors (average VIF = 2.89), despite bivariate correlations ranging from .51 to .74. Moreover, the family composition coefficients were not significantly affected by controls for individual factors.

**Figure 2: Risk of Youth Victimization, by Level of Community Disadvantage and Family Type**



\* Community disadvantage is measured by a summary index that describes the relative level of socioeconomic disadvantage in an area. The numbers on this scale represent the percentile or ranking of the community according to this index for all census tracts in the nation.

Source: Author's own data file combining information from the 1995 area-identified National Crime Victimization Survey with census tract information from the 1990 decennial census. Original data collected by the U.S. Census Bureau.

### Relationship Between Risk Factors and Racial and Ethnic Groups

Because family and community characteristics vary among racial and ethnic groups in the United States, it is important

to consider differences in victimization risk across racial and ethnic groups. With this in mind, NCVS race and ethnicity items were combined to create three major racial and ethnic groups. Table 5 (page 8) presents the risks for adolescent

victimization for black, white, and Latino youth by gender and type of violence.

In this Bulletin, “black” refers to non-Latino blacks, “white” refers to non-Latino whites, and “Latino” refers to respondents who identify themselves as Hispanic regardless of race. Although Hispanics may be of any race, in 1995 approximately 90 percent of Hispanics reported that they were white, 6 percent reported that they were black, and 4 percent reported that they were another racial category (primarily American Indian). Youth were classified into these three groups (black, white, and Latino) for two reasons. First, these designations represent popular understandings of the nation’s major racial and ethnic groups. Second, without this classification, traditional “white versus black” comparisons result in overestimated risks among whites because Hispanics are most often classified as white. Similarly, the traditional “Hispanic versus non-Hispanic” comparison underestimates group differences because non-Hispanic whites and blacks are combined in the “non-Hispanic” category. Using the classification described here, approximately 16 percent of youth are black, 13 percent are Latino, and 71 percent are white.

Table 5 shows that the risk for total, stranger, and nonstranger violence is significantly higher among young males than it is among young females. Beyond this broad statement, however, the data show a rather complex pattern of differences among youth according to race, ethnicity, and gender. Black, white, and Latino youth, regardless of sex, show roughly equal risks for nonstranger violence. Differences emerge primarily in the category of stranger violence. Compared with black and Latino adolescents, white youth face a lower risk of stranger violence in their own neighborhood or community. (Racial and ethnic differences are explored further in the remaining analyses of individual, family, and community risk factors.)

### Individual, Family, and Community Risk Factors

Research has shown that several factors are related to the risk for violent victimization among youth. Because some of these factors are interrelated, it is important to study them simultaneously to determine which are most strongly associated with violence and which are associated with violence only because they are related to other, more important factors. This type of analysis has been difficult

**Table 5: Risk for Stranger and Nonstranger Violence (per 1,000 youth ages 12–17), by Gender and Race and Ethnicity**

Gender	Total		Stranger		Nonstranger	
	All Violence	Neighborhood Violence	All Violence	Neighborhood Violence	All Violence	Neighborhood Violence
<b>Male</b>	53.5	30.8	34.9	20.2	25.0	14.4
Black	53.6	39.9	35.8	27.1	25.5	17.1
Latino	65.2	42.6	43.4	31.2	24.4	13.1
White	51.4	26.6	33.2	16.6	25.0	14.0
<b>Female</b>	38.4	20.6	19.8	10.1	23.1	12.8
Black	50.9	34.2	24.3	14.2	30.1	22.7
Latino	32.3	20.3	22.7	14.1	16.3	10.3
White	36.6	17.5	18.2	8.5	22.7	11.0

Note: The rates presented here are 6-month prevalence rates, representing the number of youth (per 1,000) who experienced at least one incidence of violence (stranger or nonstranger) during the 6-month period.

Source: Author’s own data file combining information from the 1995 area-identified National Crime Victimization Survey with census tract information from the 1990 decennial census. Original data collected by the U.S. Census Bureau.

because data on individual, family, and community factors are rare. This study’s final set of results describes how these factors are related to the risk for victimization among U.S. youth when the factors are examined simultaneously. Separate findings are reported for total violence and for stranger and nonstranger violence because somewhat different patterns were found, depending on the victim-offender relationship. A summary of the findings appears in table 6.

**Individual risk factors.** The individual factors examined include age, sex, race and ethnicity, and time spent at home in an average week. Data show that violent victimization in general and violent victimization in one’s neighborhood are significantly related to age, sex, and time spent at home. In general, older adolescents face a lower risk for victimization than younger adolescents, and males report more violence than females. In addition, the more evenings that adolescents spend at home in a typical week, the less violence they are likely to experience. However, violence risk is unrelated to race or ethnicity once family and community factors are controlled.

Individual risk factors vary somewhat if prediction is focused on stranger versus nonstranger events. Age is significantly associated with nonstranger violence but not with stranger violence. That is, younger and older adolescents experience similar levels of stranger violence, but older youth

suffer less nonstranger violence. Findings show important declines in nonstranger violence for the 12–17 age range, which suggests that physical, cognitive, and emotional maturation help to make youth less vulnerable to violence by nonstrangers. Likewise, the persistent level of stranger violence risk may simply reflect the fact that contact with strangers increases during adolescence. It may also indicate that developmental processes do not offer increased protection for this type of event.<sup>11</sup>

Gender differences associated with violence risk exist, but they depend on the type of violence. Male youth experience significantly higher levels of stranger violence, whereas male and female adolescents report similar levels of nonstranger violence. Time spent at home in the evenings—a commonly used indicator of a person’s lifestyle—is generally associated with lower levels of all forms of youth violence, except for nonstranger events in the neighborhood. This exception is likely a consequence of the fact that a larger proportion of nonstranger victimization takes place in or near the home. Overall, this behavioral measure had one of the strongest relationships to violence risk: youth who spent more evenings at home in a typical week were least likely to be victims of stranger and nonstranger violence.

<sup>11</sup> See Finkelhor (1997) for a discussion of developmental processes and youth victimization.



Although white youth generally experience lower levels of nonlethal violence than minority youth, these differences disappear once family and community factors are taken into account. This result mirrors findings from recent analyses of adults (Lauritsen and White, 2001) and is important because it shows that racial and ethnic differences in nonlethal violence among youth are primarily a reflection of community and family differences, rather than the result of being part of a particular racial or ethnic group. The lack of significant differences across groups also is important because it suggests that the sources of risk are similar for all adolescents, regardless of their race or ethnicity. In additional analyses (not shown), black, white, and Latino youth were examined separately to assess potential differences and similarities. These results found no significant variation in the individual, family, and community risk factors for violent victimization across the three groups.

In other words, family and community characteristics serve as important sources of risk and protection, and none of the three groups exhibited unique risk factors for violent victimization.

**Family risk factors.** Variations in household income and size and length of residence in the current home were examined alongside family type to determine their possible influence on violence. Of these factors, neither income nor size was associated with risk once other individual, family, and community factors were considered. The fact that household income does not have a direct association with risk suggests that youth in single-parent families are not at higher risk because their own families are poor. Rather, they are at higher risk because they are more likely to be living in areas of greater socioeconomic disadvantage—areas with higher concentrations of single-parent families and young persons.

Earlier it was noted that youth in single-parent families are at higher risk for stranger and nonstranger violence and that these differences are especially pronounced in the most disadvantaged communities. However, when other individual and community factors are taken into account, a noteworthy distinction emerges between stranger and nonstranger victimization risk patterns. Differences in nonstranger violence across family types remain associated with the level of disadvantage in an area, but differences in stranger violence do not appear to be contingent on the characteristics of the community. Similar research using additional years of data is necessary to determine whether family type is consistently related to violence risk or whether stranger and nonstranger violence pose unique challenges, depending on family type.

Although family type remains related to violence risk when other factors are

**Table 6: Individual, Family, and Community Predictors of Violence Among Youth**

	Total		Stranger		Nonstranger	
	All Violence	Neighborhood Violence	All Violence	Neighborhood Violence	All Violence	Neighborhood Violence
<b>Individual Factor</b>						
Age	*(-)	*(-)	ns	ns	*(-)	*(-)
Male	*(+)	*(+)	*(+)	*(+)	ns	ns
Black	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns
Latino	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns
Time spent at home	*(-)	*(-)	*(-)	*(-)	*(-)	ns
<b>Family Factor</b>						
Household income	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns
Household size	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns
Length of residence in current home	*(-)	*(-)	*(-)	*(-)	*(-)	*(-)
Single-parent family	*/(+)	*/(+)	*(+)	*(+)	*/(+)	*/(+)
<b>Community Factor</b>						
Central-city resident	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns
Below poverty level	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns
Population less than 18 years old	*(+)	*(+)	ns	*(+)	*(+)	*(+)
Black	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns
Latino	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns
Female-headed households with children	*/(+)	*/(+)	*(+)	*(+)	*/(+)	*/(+)

\*(-) indicates a significant negative effect.

\*(+ ) indicates a significant positive effect.

\*/(+ ) indicates a significant interaction effect (i.e., youth in single-parent families have significantly greater risk, especially in highly disadvantaged areas).

ns = not significant.

Source: Author's own data file combining information from the 1995 area-identified National Crime Victimization Survey with census tract information from the 1990 decennial census. Original data collected by the U.S. Census Bureau.

considered, the family characteristic found to have the strongest influence on risk was length of residence in the current home. Length of residence is related to stranger and nonstranger victimization risk, even among adults.<sup>12</sup> Youth who have been living in their current home for longer periods of time are less likely to be victimized by stranger or nonstranger violence. One interpretation of this finding is that children who have lived in their homes longer are more likely to be familiar with their communities and are better able to know whether certain locations or persons in the area are safe or dangerous. It is also possible that youth whose families often move have other risk factors not considered here (e.g., recent school or family disruptions and involvement in delinquency). Additionally, this finding may reflect the fact that it takes time for children and their families to develop ties and make friends in new neighborhoods, and that without established neighborhood ties, these “new kids on the block” are less likely to be protected by others.

**Community risk factors.** In general, youth living in the most disadvantaged areas experience the highest risks for violence, and the most important element of community disadvantage is the percent of female-headed households with children. This statement is true even when other individual, family, and community factors are controlled. However, another community characteristic has a consistent and independent effect on the risk for youth victimization: the percentage of persons in the area who are younger than 18 years old. Adolescents who live in areas with high proportions of young people are more likely to be victimized by violence—especially nonstranger violence. This relationship may not be surprising because violent offending is more prevalent among adolescents than adults and persons tend to associate with others of similar age. However, the proportion of youth in an area does not affect the risk for violent victimization among adults (Lauritsen, 2001). Rather than simply reflecting the

<sup>12</sup> The 1995 NCVS data show that victimization rates vary considerably with length of time in the current home. Among all respondents, victimization rates were 113.6 (per 1,000) for persons in the home 6 months or less, 72.8 for 6 months to 1 year, 57.9 for 1–2 years, 46.5 for 2–3 years, 41.9 for 3–4 years, 44.5 for 4–5 years, and 29.1 for 5 years or more. Rates for the period 6 months or less are believed to be overestimates because many of those interviews are unbounded (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2000). Nonetheless, for length of residence beyond 6 months, the declines persist.

number of potential offenders, the proportion of youth in an area is likely to represent the challenges that families and communities face when relatively few adults are available to supervise and protect large numbers of youth.

## Conclusion

Social scientists have a long tradition of studying how communities can be important sources of protection from violence and disorder. Similarly, many community-based programs have been designed to prevent violence among youth (Osofsky, 2001). Most research and practice emphasize increasing levels of informal social control (e.g., adult monitoring of children’s playgroups and residents’ willingness to intervene in youth disturbances) rather than promoting more formal social control (e.g., increased policing).

Community-based research shows that levels of informal social control are important factors in reducing adult victimization in a community (Sampson and Groves, 1989; Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls, 1997). Informal social control takes advantage of both natural surveillance and residents’ local networks to help maintain peace and order in a community. Communities tend to have less capacity for informal social control when they lack economic and political resources and the kind of stability that permits the development of strong ties to the local area. The research in this Bulletin shows that communities will have the most difficulty protecting youth from victimization if they are highly disadvantaged and, more specifically, if they have high proportions of young people and single-parent families. These conditions make preventing violence difficult because fewer adults are available to monitor youth activities. In addition, those adults who are available are more economically distressed and have less time and incentive to develop strong community networks. These findings suggest that youth victimization prevention programs and postvictimization services should be allocated according to an area’s family and age composition rather than economic and racial or ethnic factors.

This research also suggests that youth victimization prevention and services should place more emphasis on youth in single-parent families. Earlier research has not paid sufficient attention to how families help reduce violence risk among adolescents. This study suggests that family type and length of residence are associated

with risk, even when household economic resources and community factors are controlled. Additional research is needed to determine what accounts for the remaining differences in risk across youth in single- and two-parent families.

The finding that children in single-parent families are at higher risk for victimization than children in two-parent families may reflect the influence of recent disruptions in the youth’s lives. To assess the impact of recent family and/or school disruption on youth victimization requires the use of prospective longitudinal data that contain information on individuals, their families, and communities over time.

Nonetheless, it appears that youth are at the greatest risk for stranger and nonstranger victimization when they spend less time at home and when they have lived in their homes for shorter periods of time. Although being away from parental surveillance and in less familiar environments may seem like obvious risk factors to many parents and adolescents, the magnitude of their importance has probably been underestimated. This research shows that these two factors are the strongest and most consistent of all the characteristics examined above. Although communities can serve as important sources of informal social control and help guard against youth victimization, parents can help reduce their children’s risk by recognizing the special difficulties they face due to residential changes and by closely monitoring children’s activities when they are away from home.

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*The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Assistance, the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, and the Office for Victims of Crime.*

This Bulletin was prepared under grant number 1999-JN-FK-K002 from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice.

## Acknowledgments

This Bulletin was prepared by Janet L. Lauritsen, Ph.D., Professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice, University of Missouri-St. Louis, and Visiting Research Fellow at the Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Support for this research was provided by OJJDP and the American Statistical Association Committee on Law and Justice Statistics. Data for the analyses were made available through the National Consortium on Violence Research (National Science Foundation #SBR 9513040) under the supervision of the U.S. Census Bureau and in cooperation with the Bureau of Justice Statistics.

The author thanks Alfred Blumstein, Ph.D., Dave Merrell, Ph.D., and Renee Fields, Ph.D., for their assistance in accessing the data. The author also thanks Brian Wiersema for sharing his NCVS expertise and Howard N. Snyder, Ph.D., for his helpful comments on this report. None of the above agencies or persons bears any responsibility for the findings presented here.

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