

Explanation—What Factors Are Related to Youth Delinquency and Violence?

Many people consider explanation to be the premier goal of any science. **Explanatory research** seeks to identify causes and effects of social phenomena, to predict how one phenomenon will change or vary in response to variation in some other phenomenon. Researchers adopted explanation as a principal goal when they began to ask such questions as “Why do people become offenders?” and “Does the unemployment rate influence the frequency of youth crime?” Methods with which to identify causes and effects are the focus of Chapter 6.

When we move from description to exploration and finally to explanatory research, we want to understand the direct relationship between two or more things. Does *X* explain *Y*? Or if *X* happens, is *Y* also likely to occur? What are some of the factors related to youth violence? Sarah Koon-Magnin and her colleagues (2016) were interested in understanding whether differences in parenting, delinquent peers, and self-control could help explain why male adolescents were more likely to engage in violent delinquency compared to female adolescents. They collected surveys from a sample of 833 high school and middle school students. To measure violent offending, the survey asked students whether they had engaged in several behaviors in the past year, including carrying a hidden weapon, hitting someone with the idea of hurting him or her, attacking someone with a weapon, using force to get something from someone, being in a gang fight, or shooting someone when someone told them to do so.

Parental supervision was measured with several variables including questions like “When you are away from home, do your parents know where you are and who you are with?” To measure peer influence, students were asked to respond to several questions about whether they went along with peers who encouraged vandalism, drinking, skipping school, and so on. Students’ self-control was measured by their agreement to several questions including “Sometimes you have to physically fight to get what you want.” In addition to these questions, other factors were also controlled in the models predicting violent behavior, including whether the student participated in a gang, whether one or both of their parents had been “in trouble with the police,” and other demographic controls. Results indicated that males reported engaging in a greater variety of violent offending than females, but females had higher levels of self-control and were more heavily monitored by their parents than males. When predicting violent offending, however, males appeared to be more influenced by their peers than females. However, males were still more likely to engage in violence even after controlling for their self-control, parental supervision, and peer influence. The authors concluded, “This study suggests that gender remains a critical consideration in studies of delinquent behavior” (2016, p. 834).
