1 Introduction

Schools are supposed to be safe places for children. The problem, however, is that their safety is often compromised in ways that seem to have gotten worse over the last several decades. High-profile incidents of lethal violence in American schools, for example, are not in short supply. Indeed, mass school shootings have established names like Columbine High School, Sandy Hook Elementary School, and Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School as permanent parts of the American violence landscape (Cullen, 2009; Fridel, 2021; Jonson, 2017). And as tragic as these events were, they represent only a portion of the several hundred deadly shootings that have occurred in schools in the United States since 1970 (CHDS K-12 School Shooting Database, 2020).

Still, school shootings are just one part of a much broader problem of school violence in general (Finkelhor et al., 2016; Myers et al., 2020; Rose, 2018). Stacked upon the fear of lethal violence that students have to contend with are the more frequent occurrences of school-based bullying, harassment, aggression, and intimidation faced on a daily basis (Chouhy et al., 2017; Fisher et al., 2017; Kelly & McBride, 2020). Recent national estimates reveal that over 800,000 instances of victimization at school (including theft and nonfatal violent victimization) occur each year among students aged 12–18 years (Wang et al., 2020). The simple truth, then, is that victimization in school affects a lot of kids.

This fact is critically important since school victimization – just like victimization that occurs in other situational and social contexts – has been linked to a wide array of problematic outcomes in both the short- and long-term (Polanin et al., 2021). Research has shown that youths who are victimized at school have a greater likelihood of experiencing a variety of mental health problems, such as anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation (Duru & Balkis, 2018; Hatchel et al., 2019; Hinduja & Patchin, 2019), and increased risks of behavioral problems, such as engaging in substance abuse and other forms of delinquency (Connell et al., 2017; Deryol & Wilcox, 2020; Sullivan et al., 2006). Research also reveals that victimized students tend to have weakened school attachments and demonstrate poorer levels of academic performance (Fite et al., 2014; Randa et al., 2019), that they are more likely to be rejected by their peers (Faris & Felmlee, 2014; Turanovic & Young, 2016; Zimmer-Gembeck, 2016), and that they score lower on general indicators of well-being (Varela et al., 2019). These consequences may extend well into the life course, as victimization during childhood and adolescence has been linked to a range of social, health, and emotional problems in adulthood, including criminal offending (Arseneault et al., 2010; Turanovic & Pratt, 2015; Wright et al., 2019).

It is this wide array of negative consequences that has raised the public profile of school violence in recent years and solidified it as a significant social problem (Forster et al., 2020). As a result, there is arguably more political pressure now to "do something" about the problem of school violence than there ever has been before (Lee et al., 2020). And in response, dozens of new school-based violence interventions have been developed and implemented, ranging from antibullying educational campaigns, to the development of "threat assessment" models for at-risk students (Borum et al., 2010; Cornell, 2020; Jiménez-Barbero et al., 2020), to legislation that criminalizes bullying behavior (Brank et al., 2012; Cosgrove & Nickerson, 2017; Hatzenbuehler et al., 2017). Schools around the United States have also placed police officers on site (Counts et al., 2018), implemented a host of "get-tough" policies for violent behavior (Collier et al., 2019; Gottfredson, 2017), adopted a wide range of security measures for reducing potential opportunities for violence (e.g., cameras, metal detectors, transparent backpacks; Tanner-Smith et al., 2018), and even developed policies and practices intended to reduce the death toll should extreme violence occur (e.g., lock down and active shooter drills; Jonson et al., 2020; Schildkraut & Nickerson, 2020).

But successfully addressing a problem like school violence – just like trying to solve any other problem for that matter – assumes that we have a good understanding of what influences the problem in the first place. Yet we do not currently have a firm handle on which factors are most strongly associated with school violence and victimization that might be targeted for interventions (Bushman et al., 2016). And the absence of such knowledge is not the result of the absence of research – there are hundreds of studies on school violence, conducted by scholars working in a variety of academic disciplines (including criminology, sociology, education, social work, public health, and psychology), dating back over the last six decades (Benbenishty et al., 2005; Brank et al., 2012; Olweus, 2013). Instead, what is holding us back is the relative dearth of efforts to systematically organize what these studies collectively tell us about the nature and sources of violence at school. Without such an effort, we are left with a disjointed way of thinking about the problem, with different explanations of school violence and victimization spread across several academic fields, and with such scholarly work rarely crossing disciplinary boundaries. This lack of consensus is consequential because how we think about the sources of a problem inevitably has implications for how we think about its potential solution.

In this context, the current project attempts to discern what the existing literature – contributed over the past six decades – tells us about the sources of school violence and victimization by undertaking a comprehensive

meta-analysis of research studies. In what follows, we review how scholars from diverse academic fields have approached the investigation of school violence and victimization theoretically and empirically. Building on this thinking and the large body of research it has yielded, we then explain the research strategy informing the current project. Following that, we describe the results of the meta-analysis, and then discuss the implications for theory, research, and policy.

1.1 Thinking about School Violence

No academic discipline "owns" the study of violence. To be sure, violent behavior and its consequences have been studied by scholars in many fields – ranging from sociology to psychology (Laub, 2004; West & Farrington, 1973), from political science to economics (Donohue & Levitt, 2001; Wilson & Herrnstein, 1985), to myriad others in between (Jeffrey, 1978; Walsh & Ellis, 2007) – and all of them have something important to say about why such behavior occurs. Yet it is criminology, an admittedly interdisciplinary field, that is fully devoted to problems like identifying the sources and consequences of criminal violence. As a result, there is a substantively useful demarcation to explore with respect to how scholars think about the nature of school violence and victimization across disciplines, specifically with respect to the major theoretical perspectives that are often used. And it may come as a bit of a surprise that there is not always overlap between them.

For example, traditional criminological perspectives have a long history of being applied to violent behavior generally. Early sociological models saw violence through the lens of community dynamics that facilitated juvenile delinquency (e.g., a breakdown in sources of social control and the transmission of attitudes supportive of crime and violence; Shaw & McKay, 1942), through peer interactions and the competition of criminal and noncriminal value systems (Sutherland, 1924), and through the strains induced by the American brand of coupling economic stratification with the cultural goal of achieving economic success (Merton, 1938; see also Cloward & Ohlin, 1960; Cohen, 1955). These explanations were largely replaced in the 1960s with those that focused on how criminal behavior – including violent behavior – is learned through a process of modeling and reinforcement (Burgess & Akers, 1966), as well as how such behavior could be the product of weakened social bonds to prosocial people and institutions (Hirschi, 1969). More contemporary perspectives have revived the rational choice tradition – the idea that crime and violence happen because people are not sufficiently afraid of punishment (see Becker, 1968; Gibbs, 1975) – and others that have emphasized the

importance of individuals' levels of self-control (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990).[1]

All of these ideas have influenced mainstream criminological research on the sources of school violence (Gottfredson, 2001). In this way, it is common within criminology to approach the study of "street crime" and "school crime" in similar ways – where school violence and bullying are viewed, to some extent, as "a microcosm of offending in the community" (Farrington, 1993, p. 383). Scholars have, for instance, assessed the relationships between offending at school and measures of school and community context (e.g., indicators of economic deprivation, community crime rates, and violent school context; see Baker, 1998; Wilcox, Augustine et al., 2006; Wilcox Rountree, 2000), deviant peer associations and antisocial attitudes (Ousey & Wilcox, 2005; Pratt et al., 2010), various forms of emotional affect and strain (James et al., 2015; Lee & Cohen, 2008), bonds to school and to parents (Georgiou, 2009; Peguero & Jiang, 2014; Savage, 2014), and levels of self-control (Chui & Chan, 2015; Moon & Alarid, 2015). And the results of this work largely mirror those associated with offending in general – that support is found for each of these sets of variables, at least under some circumstances, but that much of the variation in offending at school is left unexplained.

Other disciplines – from education, to developmental and school psychology – tend to draw more heavily from social and developmental perspectives that center on status enhancement (Aizpitarte et al., 2019; Dahlberg & Potter, 2001; Herrenkohl et al., 2000) and social adjustment (Crick & Dodge, 1994; Dodge et al., 2008; Estévez et al., 2009). Peer relationships are a fundamental part of the lives of school-aged children, and a core component of those relationships is the status hierarchy that youths inevitably have to navigate (Destin et al., 2012; Fournier, 2009; Juvonen & Graham, 2001). In the 1950s, psychology research emerged linking various forms of aggression to status and popularity within peer groups. Some of this early work found that certain forms of aggression among schoolboys – such as provoked aggression versus unprovoked outbursts – were met with approval by peers (Lesser, 1959). Seminal research on school bullying by Olewus (1978) also found that boys who bullied

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[1] Other criminological perspectives, of course, exist that attempt to explain violent behavior. These range from conflict/Marxian and relative deprivation theories (Blau & Blau, 1982; Chambliss & Seidman, 1971), to feminist and critical perspectives (Renzetti, 2013; Young, 1999), to integrated perspectives that attempt to draw various ideas together under a common framework (Braithwaite, 1989; Colvin, 2000; Unnever & Gabbidon, 2011). Nevertheless, perspectives like social disorganization, differential association/social learning, strain, rational choice/deterrence, and social (and self-) control have arguably formed the "core" of criminology for nearly a century (Cullen et al., 2006).

other students were relatively popular and often had the support of two or three other boys in the classroom.

A large literature in developmental psychology has since developed that considers factors such as popularity, social preference, and peer acceptance in relation to school aggression (de Bruyn et al., 2010; Olweus, 1977; Postigo et al., 2012; Pouwels et al., 2018). Victimizing others – whether through aggression, bullying, or outright violence – is perceived by some youths as a viable strategy for establishing themselves higher up on the social ladder (Faris et al., 2020; Forsberg & Thornberg, 2016; Lantos & Halpern, 2015; Salmivalli, 2010). School aggression is therefore considered within some developmental frameworks to be a strategic, instrumental behavior that enables youths to gain and maintain a dominant social position (Faris & Felmlee, 2011; Hawley, 1999; Rodkin et al., 2006). This view is in contrast to some mainstream criminological perspectives that explain aggression primarily as the product of impulsivity, poor emotion regulation, or peer rejection (Garofalo & Velotti, 2017; Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Hirschi, 1969). Indeed, psychological and developmental research on bullying suggests that bullies are calculating in their aggression and that they "score high when asked how important it is to be visible, influential, and admired" (Juvonen & Graham, 2014, p. 164). Consequently, much of this work focuses on how social and interpersonal skills (like social competence) can help youths mitigate the negative aspects of social relationships and peer rejection, and cope with the stressors associated with surviving the social hierarchy minefield in nonviolent ways (Arsenio & Lemerise, 2001; Camodeca et al., 2015).

Of course, disciplinary boundaries are not impermeable, and perspectives on developmental criminology have proliferated over the past several decades as well, integrating explanations from psychology (Farrington et al., 2018; Loeber & Le Blanc, 1990; Tremblay & Craig, 1995). And there are some factors – such as childhood trauma and victimization – that are central to the study of school violence across multiple fields (DeCamp & Newby, 2015; Forster et al., 2020; Olweus, 1978). A large body of interdisciplinary scholarship also emphasizes ecological factors (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), such as school climate, that shape the norms, values, rules, and structure of a school (Espelage & Swearer, 2004; Gage et al., 2014; Steffgen et al., 2013). Schools with a positive climate are typically those where students feel safe (emotionally and physically), and where collaboration, respect, and positive social relationships exist among students and teachers (National School Climate Council, 2007). A positive school climate is thought to improve status struggles – and, by extension, the perpetration of bullying, aggression, and violence – by improving peer support,

lessening peer rejection, and fostering caring and supportive peer relationships (Espelage et al., 2014).

But, broadly speaking, just like with the study of aggression and violence in general, different disciplines tend to favor their own theoretical perspectives (Dooley, 2021) – and by extension, different sets of predictors – when it comes to the study of school violence. Within criminology, the focus is often placed on traditional correlates, such as self-control, social bond, strain, social learning, social disorganization, and rational choice constructs (Moon & Alarid, 2015; Ousey & Wilcox, 2005; Unnever & Cornell, 2003; Walters, 2018; Wilcox & Clayton, 2001). In other fields, the focus is more commonly placed on social-interactional and parenting skills (Patterson, 1986), social information processing (Dodge & Coie, 1987), social dominance (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), social cognition (Swearer et al., 2014), social exclusion anxiety (Schott & Søndergaard, 2014), and diathesis–stress (Swearer & Hymel, 2015). So, while interdisciplinary scholarship certainly exists, there is a tendency for research on school violence to be produced within academic disciplines that is siloed from the others. Synthesizing this work – and assessing it as a whole – is critical to transcend disciplinary boundaries, and to determine what are the most important correlates of school violence.

1.2 Thinking about School Victimization

Similar to the study of violence, the study of victimization is markedly inter-disciplinary. Research on childhood victimization in particular has origins in medicine, social work, and psychology (Kempe et al., 1962; Olweus, 1978; Zalba, 1966), and is today one of the most widely studied phenomena within the social sciences (Finkelhor, 2008; Hymel & Swearer, 2015; Metzler et al., 2017). There is no shortage of perspectives that have attempted to identify the complex sources of bullying, harassment, and violent victimization that can significantly impact the lives of youths. But, just like with the study of violence, there are differences between the main theoretical perspectives used to explain victimization within the field of criminology versus other academic disciplines.

Within criminology, for example, opportunity perspectives are favored (Wilcox & Cullen, 2018). And, for the past several decades, lifestyle (Hindelang et al., 1978) and routine activity (Cohen & Felson, 1979) theories have dominated the study of victimization. Although these two perspectives differ in their emphasis on risky behaviors (Pratt & Turanovic, 2016), they are similar in that they both view victimization in terms of the convergence in time and space of a motivated offender, a suitable target/victim, and the absence of capable guardianship. Specifically, Hindelang and colleagues (1978) observed

that people who share certain demographic characteristics (e.g., age, sex, or race) are either more or less likely to be victimized. These differences in victimization risk were viewed as a function of the lifestyles that different demographic groups engaged in. Individuals who engaged in lifestyles that were *risky* – those that routinely exposed them to "high risk times, places, and people" – were more likely to experience victimization (Hindelang et al., 1978, p. 245). These lifestyle patterns were also viewed as being shaped by "structural constraints," or social forces stemming from inequalities in the social structure, such as economic deprivation and racial segregation (South & Deane, 1993).

On the other hand, Cohen and Felson's (1979) routine activity theory emphasized that people do not need to be doing risky things to be victimized. Routine activity theory was instead used to explain how victimization could still occur even in the absence of traditional criminogenic social conditions such as poverty (Felson & Cohen, 1980). Crime and victimization were seen as rooted in the routines of "everyday life" that put people in the presence of others, such as leaving the home and going to work (Felson & Boba, 2010) – the sorts of daily activities that "separate many people from those they trust and the property they value" (Cohen & Felson, 1979, p. 591).

In recent years, lifestyle and routine activity theories have been extended in a few key ways. For instance, risky lifestyle and self-control theories have been coupled together in an integrated perspective on victimization (Pratt et al., 2014; Turanovic & Pratt, 2014; Turanovic et al., 2015). This perspective recognizes that individuals with poor self-control are more likely to engage in risky behaviors that bring them into proximity to dangerous places and people (e.g., partying late at night or engaging in criminal activities) where the opportunity for victimization is high (Schreck, 1999). Additionally, routine activity theory – which was originally put forth as a macro-level explanation of changes in crime rate trends – has been further extended to individuals. An expansive array of routine activities has been linked to victimization, including unstructured socializing with friends, going to the library, and hanging out in public spaces, such as in gardens, cafés, coffee shops, and stores (Bunch et al., 2014; Felson et al., 2013; Tanner et al., 2015).

So, when it comes to victimization at school, for the most part, criminological research tends to approach the problem in the same way as the study of victimization more generally: from the opportunity perspectives of lifestyle and routine activity theories. As such, much of the school victimization research produced in mainstream criminology focuses heavily on students' behavioral routines. These include behaviors that are risky (e.g., consuming drugs and alcohol, engaging in various antisocial behavior, or hanging out with delinquent peers) – especially when they occur in high-risk contexts (e.g., in schools

characterized by a culture of violence, or in schools located in disadvantaged and violent communities) – which seem to be important predictors of school victimization, at least some of the time (Astor et al., 2002; Khanhkham et al., 2020; Zaykowski & Gunter, 2012). Criminological research has also focused on behaviors that are more mundane, such as participating in extracurricular activities (e.g., sports, spirit groups, and academic clubs), which seem to generate more inconsistent findings (Cecen-Celik & Keith, 2019; Popp & Peguero, 2011). Some research has also revealed that youths' levels of self-control can influence their risks of victimization at school, net of their risky behaviors (Deryol et al., 2017; Kulig et al., 2019; Tillyer et al., 2018; Wilcox et al., 2009). But, these findings, too, are mixed. Some studies suggest that low self-control – the relevance of which hinges on the assumption that youths have autonomy to choose what they want to do and when or where they want to do it – is not a strong or consistent predictor of victimization at school, which is a relatively structured environment (Kulig et al., 2017; Unnever & Cornell, 2003). It therefore seems that traditional criminological perspectives, when applied to the study of victimization at school, are leaving some significant gaps unfilled.

Some of those gaps might be addressed by perspectives that are more central within other disciplines. In fields such as education and developmental psychology, the problem of victimization at school is often seen as less of the product of risky or unstructured activities and more of the product of "vulnerability" that stems from deviating from group norms (Blake et al., 2016; Eisenberg et al., 2016; Juvonen & Graham, 2001). Personal characteristics or attributes that are outside of a child's control can thus contribute to the risk of victimization (Finkelhor & Asdigian, 1996; Olweus, 1978). For example, children with physical or cognitive disabilities (Christensen et al., 2012; Son et al., 2012) and LGBT youths (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) are at higher risk of being bullied and victimized at school (Myers et al., 2020). Any nonnormative characteristics that make youths stand out from their peers – whether it be related to their race or ethnicity, appearance, or identity – place them at risk of being shunned, stigmatized, or viewed as a "social misfit" (Wright et al., 1986). Children who occupy a marginal social status are at risk for victimization because they are unlikely to be supported or defended by peer group members (Juvonen & Graham, 2014; Troop-Gordon, 2017).

These "in-group" versus "out-group" dynamics are also viewed as being shaped by various school-level factors (Thomas et al., 2018). Victimization is more common in schools and classrooms characterized by peer norms that support bullying and aggression, peer conflict, and where there is an imbalance of power that is tipped in favor of a few students (Garandeau et al., 2014; Hymel

& Swearer, 2015). Alternatively, in schools with increased social capital and a positive school climate – such as where there are clear rules that govern student conduct, there are more equitable peer dynamics, and teachers have more disapproving views toward aggression and bullying – students tend to have lower risks of victimization (Saarento et al., 2013). Of course, just as with the study of violent behavior and offending at school, there is interdisciplinary overlap between criminological research and scholarship produced in other fields (Beelmann & Lösel, 2021; Gottfredson & DiPietro, 2011). However, the predominant perspectives that are used within criminology to study victimization at school tend to be somewhat unique from other disciplines (Deryol et al., 2017; Wilcox et al., 2009).

1.3 The Current Project

These considerations make it clear that school violence is a multifaceted problem. Drawing from different theoretical perspectives, across a wide range of disciplines, scholars have identified a lengthy roster of characteristics – at the individual, school, and community levels – that can potentially influence violence and victimization at school (Thomas et al., 2018). At the individual level, these have included student demographic characteristics (e.g., age, sex, race, socioeconomic status), traditional criminological risk factors (e.g., self-control, deviant peers, antisocial attitudes, substance use) and protective factors (e.g., bonds to parents, bonds to school), school activities and indicators of school success (e.g., extracurricular activities, school avoidance, academic achievement), factors related to peer relationships and social dynamics (e.g., peer rejection, popularity, social competence), and markers of vulnerability, such as LGBT identification, or having a physical or learning disability. At the school level, the focus has been placed on school climate, school disorder, school size, urbanicity, and the use of visible school security devices (like metal detectors and cameras). Even characteristics of the communities in which schools are embedded have been examined, where factors such as economic deprivation, community crime, and community disorder have been linked to school violence and victimization.

With so many factors being examined across different academic disciplines, it is difficult to determine what are the most important correlates of school violence. Evidently, there are a number of individual, institutional, and community factors that all seem to play at least some role in explaining why some youths are more at risk to either engage in violence or to be victimized at school. But because of this embarrassment of riches – so many studies from so many diverse sources – we really do not have a clear picture as to which factors are

more important than others, which factors have general effects (versus those that make a difference for particular forms of violence and not for others), or which factors make the best candidates to target for change with policy interventions. What is needed now is a systematic effort to take stock of this literature – to organize it in a way that would be most useful for guiding future research and informing interventions to combat violence in schools. The purpose of this Element is to accomplish that very task.

Accordingly, we present the results of a comprehensive meta-analysis of the quantitative literature on school violence that has been produced over the past six decades. We identify the relative impacts of various individual, school, and community factors in order to determine the strongest (and weakest) correlates of school violence and victimization. Although several reviews and smaller meta-analyses of this literature have been undertaken – including those that focus on a specific set of risk factors, or on a specific outcome, such as bullying – there have not yet been efforts to make sense of the broader spectrum of research produced on the sources of school violence in the form of a large-scale meta-analysis.

The Element proceeds as follows. In Section 2, we present an overview of the methods used in our study. Meta-analytic methods are described in terms of their key advantages, and we detail the processes used to generate our sample of 8,790 effect size estimates that are drawn from 761 studies – making it one of the largest meta-analyses to ever be conducted in the social sciences. We also describe in this section the full roster of thirty different individual, school, and community correlates of school violence and victimization that we assess, as well as the statistical strategies that we employ to estimate their relative effects. Given that problems of school violence fall on the same spectrum as other harmful behaviors – ranging from bullying, to delinquency, to bringing weapons to school – we conceptualize the perpetration and victimization of school violence broadly to also include various forms of interpersonal aggression and delinquency at school.

The results of our analyses are presented in two sections – one for the perpetration of school violence, aggression, and delinquency (Section 3), and another for victimization at school (Section 4). There is a well-documented relationship between offending and victimization, where offenders and victims often seem to be drawn from the same pool of people (Gottfredson, 1981). This pattern is so consistent empirically that the "victim–offender overlap" is one of the most well-known findings in the criminological literature (Berg & Mulford, 2020; Lauritsen & Laub, 2007). Even so, the act of inflicting harm on others – particularly when it comes to violence – is not the same thing as being on the receiving end of it. Thus, analyzing perpetration and victimization at school