Effects of School-Based Risk and Protective Factors

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The research on youth with sexually harmful behaviors spanning the past three decades has predominately focused on identifying both risk factors for future re-offense, as well as investigating how various social and ecological frameworks explain the onset of sexually problematic behaviors. It is without question that these important advancements have vastly contributed to the field’s knowledge. Yet, more recently, the influence of protective factors on desistence has been underscored.

The interplay between risk and protection may be a better indicator of the likelihood for initiating and continuing sexual abuse. A socioecological framework posits that various ecological systems can influence youth outcomes. Such systems and embedded dynamics have even emerged as drivers to sexually harmful behaviors among youth. While there has been increased recognition of the impact of these multiple systems, including the family, one ecological system that has been overlooked in field research is the school system. Multiple risk and protective factors are nested in the education system. Broader delinquency scholarship has revealed risk factors such as associations with delinquent peer networks, youths’ individualized education plan, failing “pipeline” grade levels, or moving between schools. Protective factors have also been identified including regular attendance, having inter-system collaborations and supports, and being involved in extra-curricular activities. Research with youth with sexually harmful behaviors can be improved through inquiry into such processes.

Addressing the gaps in research on the education system’s risk and protection interface, this study aimed to quantitatively model risk and protective factors for treatment success among youth with sexually harmful behaviors. Overall, this paper sought to understand if the presence of school-based protective factors buffered against risk factors in explaining treatment success among youth adjudicated of a sexual crime. The primary research question was, “When controlling for school-based risk factors, are school-based protective factors associated with treatment success among adjudicated sexually abusive youth?”

Upon receiving Department of Public Safety Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval in a western state and in collaboration with the state sex offender management board, probation files of youth adjudicated of a sexual crime (N=85) were reviewed by a research team. Measures were formulated from operationally defined constructs present in the state mandated standards and guidelines for treatment. Data on education system risk and protective factors, demographics, and other pertinent covariates were collected. Risk and protective variables were aggregated to create two independent continuous variables. Chi-square and t-tests determined significant bivariate relationships among covariates of
interest. A sequential logistic regression model was run, modeling risk factors, significant covariates, and demographics in the first block and protective factors in the second block. Findings revealed that youth with school-based protective factors were three times more likely to successfully complete treatment than youth without protective factors (OR = 3.2, \( p < .01 \)), controlling for the significant influence of school-based risk factors (OR = .41; \( p < .05 \)). This study informs services and risk assessment protocols to reduce primary emphasis on risk and adhere to the risk-protection interface present in all ecological systems. Inherent implications suggest cross system service coordination and knowledge transfer.

Goals of the Poster Presentation

1. Revealing research that advances the strength-based movement.
2. Disseminate information on risk and resiliency interface.
3. Proposing strategies for effective cross-system collaboration.