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To Tell or Not to Tell:
Lifestyle Impacts on Whether
Adolescents Tell About Violent
Victimization

Stacey Nofziger, PhD Rachel E. Stein, MA

University of Akron, Ohio

Adolescent sexual and physical victimization is an issue of serious social concern in our society. This study examines the predictors of whether juveniles tell about these experiences. We specifically question whether the adolescents' lifestyles inhibit victims from telling anyone about the assault and determine if such predictors vary by sex. Using data from the National Survey of Adolescents, we find that the victims' lifestyles do predict help-seeking but that the importance of these measures varies by the type of victimization and the sex of the adolescent. Lifestyles influence reporting the event more consistently for victims of sexual assaults than physical assaults. In addition, while several lifestyle measures are significant for sexually victimized girls, the context of the event is more important for boys who are sexually victimized. Aspects of the adolescents' lifestyles are not as important for telling about physical victimization.

Keywords: victims; routines; sexual assault; physical assault

he experiences of physical and sexual violence can be very traumatic for adolescents, leading to a variety of developmental, psychological, and behavioral problems. Adolescent victims often suffer symptoms of depression or anxiety (Cooley-Quille, Boyd, Frantz, & Walsh, 2001; Ezzell, Swenson, & Brondino, 2000; Kendall-Tackett, Williams, & Finkelhor, 1993; Morrison & Clavenna-Valleroy, 1998; Wilson & Rosenthal, 2003), and experience psychological trauma or posttraumatic stress disorder (Briere & Elliott, 1994; Flannery, Singer, & Wester, 2003; Kilpatrick et al., 2000; Terr, 1991). Juvenile victims are also at greater risk for suicide (Berenson, Wiemann, & McCombs, 2001; Vermeiren, Ruchkin, Leckman, Deboutte, & Schwab-Stone, 2002), and engage in risky sexual behaviors (Berenson et al., 2001). Victims also have increased drug and alcohol problems, both in adolescence and into adulthood (Berenson et al., 2001; Caetano, Field, & Nelson, 2003; Kaplan, Pelcovitz, Salzinger, Weiner, & Mandel, 1998; Vermeiren et al., 2003). In addition, adolescent victims are often offenders in acts of violence. They are more likely to start fights or bully other kids (Schwartz & Proctor, 2000), and report higher participation in violent crimes and other forms of delinquency (Fagan, 2003; Herrera & McCloskey, 2003; Nofziger & Kurtz, 2005). To minimize these negative outcomes, it is crucial to get help and needed services to adolescent victims.

While schools attempt to prevent victimization of their students by providing programs to teach students how to avoid and respond to abuse (Dake, Price, & Murnan, 2003; Finkelhor, Asdigian, & Dziuba-Leatherman, 1995; Rispens, Aleman, & Goudena, 1997), getting help after an assault is still dependent on the victim bringing the incident to light. Studies of mandated reporters such as physicians indicate that these reporters only account for a very small percentage of cases of suspected abuse (American Academy of Family Physicians, 1989). Therefore, many cases of abuse or other assaults are not discovered unless the juvenile tells someone. Unfortunately, many adolescent victims never tell anyone (Bolen, 2001; Cermak & Molidor, 1996; Finkelhor, Wolak, & Berliner, 2001). Better understanding what leads juveniles to tell about their victimization can assist programs to better reach juveniles who may have suffered such an experience.

This study presents a model for understanding why juveniles may not report their victimization by focusing on the adolescent victim's own involvement in deviant activities. We propose that participation in deviant lifestyles will decrease the likelihood of reporting victimization. Juveniles who routinely encounter crime and violence in their lives may come to accept this as normal or may believe that they are in some measure to blame for their own victimization. This proposed model is grounded within lifestyle (Hindelang, Gottfredson, & Garofalo, 1978) and routine activities (Cohen & Felson, 1979) theories.

Theories about victimization have proposed that the individual's lifestyle or routine differentially exposes them as a target of crime. Generally, those who regularly engage in high-risk or deviant lifestyles are more likely to be victimized by crime (Halliday-Boykins & Graham, 2001; Hindelang et al., 1978; Mustaine & Tewksbury, 1998a, 1998b; Zhang, Welte, & Wiexzorek, 2001). Two important lifestyle elements that can lead to victimization are association with deviant peers and participating in a variety of deviant or criminal acts (Bjarnason, Sigurdardottir, & Thorlindsson, 1999; George & Thomas, 2000; Leone, Mayer, Malmgren, & Meisel, 2000). Not only is being a direct victim associated with deviant lifestyles, but so is indirect victimization in the form of witnessing violence (Nofziger & Kurtz, 2005). Therefore, deviant lifestyles create more frequent opportunities for the individual to be involved in crime, either as an offender, witness, or victim.

The current study uses data from the National Survey of Adolescents (NSA) to forward understanding of juvenile victimization and what influences a juvenile victim's decision to tell someone in three distinct ways. First, unlike most past studies that are limited to examinations of sexual victimization (Cermak & Molidor, 1996; King & Woollett, 1997; Thomas, Nelson, & Summers, 1994), we compare experiences of sexual and physical assaults. Second, predictors of telling anyone about victimization are compared for boys and girls to determine if there are significant sex differences in predictors of reporting abuse. Third, whether participation in a deviant lifestyle inhibits reporting victimization is examined. We hypothesize that deviant lifestyle, indicated by association with deviant peers, experiences of witnessing violence, and participation in delinquency will decrease the likelihood of disclosing victimization. Further, we hypothesize that this effect will be consistent across types of assaults and for both sexes.

# DATA AND METHODS

The NSA is a national probability telephone sample of 4,023 juveniles between the ages of 12 and 17, with some oversampling of central city areas to include significant numbers of racial minorities. In order to ensure that the sample is representative of the juvenile

population, data are weighted by age, race, and sex to be consistent with 1995 U.S. Census estimates (Kilpatrick et al., 2000). The full weighted sample consists of 51% males, 71% Whites, 15% African Americans, and 8% Hispanics and is fairly evenly distributed across the included ages. A breakdown of the full NSA sample by age, sex, and race is presented in Table 1. This survey included extensive information about a range of victimization experiences and whether or not the respondent ever told anyone about the incident. It also includes measures of peer deviance, witnessed violent events, and the respondents' own delinquent activities. Although a potential criticism of the NSA is that it relies on juvenile self-reports of very serious experiences and behaviors, self-report data have long been established as reliable and valid (Hindelang, Hirschi, & Weis, 1979, 1981).

The initial stage of analysis determines how common experiences of victimization are for the U.S. juvenile population and whether victims vary in substantial ways from non-victims. The second part of this study examines predictors of whether or not the victim tells anyone about the assaults. Using logistic regression analysis, a series of models are run on whether the juvenile told anyone about their victimization. Separate models are run for sexual assaults and physical assaults and for boys and girls. Particular attention is given to the juveniles' involvement in deviant lifestyles.

### **Measures**

**Dependent Variable.** The dependent variable in this study is whether the adolescents tell anyone about their experiences of physical or sexual violence. In the NSA, one item in the follow-up series about sexual and physical violence asks the respondent, "Did you ever tell anyone about this incident?" If respondents reported they had told someone, "telling" is coded as 1, otherwise as 0.

Victimization. Two types of victimization are examined in this study: physical assault and sexual assault. Respondents were asked whether they had ever experienced a number of specific forms of assaults (specific items listed in Table 2). Due to the relatively rare nature of these events, two dichotomous measures were created to indicate whether the respondent had ever been the victim of a sexual assault or a physical assault (coded 0 for never and 1 if reported any specific incident within each form of assault).

Lifestyles. The main predictors of interest in the multivariate analysis indicate the respondent's level of participation in a deviant lifestyle. The appendix lists all the variables and scale statistics for the three measures of deviant lifestyle. Since one of the most consistent findings in studies of victimization is the importance of association with deviant peers, the first measure in this study is of peer deviance. This is an additive scale of 13 items assessing the diversity of deviance engaged in by the respondent's friends. Another indicator of deviant lifestyles is witnessing violence (Copping, 1996; Feigelman, Howard, Li, & Cross, 2000), measured in this study by how many of six different types of violence the juvenile has witnessed. The final indicator is the number of different types of deviant acts engaged in by the respondent. These measures have alpha reliabilities ranging from a low of .64 for witnessing violence to a high of .86 for peer deviance.

Context of Victimization. In addition to measures of deviant lifestyles, variables related to the context of the victimization event are examined. Where the victimization occurred is coded as dummy variables representing at home, at school, in the neighborhood, or somewhere else. In addition, whether the respondent was afraid of being "seriously injured or even killed" during the event (coded 1 for yes and 0 for no), or if they suffered an injury (coded 1 for yes and 0 for no) are included in the models. These three contextual

factors may all influence whether the juvenile tells anyone about their experience. Being afraid or actually injured may lead the juvenile to classify the event as serious enough to tell someone about. Where the event occurred may be indicative of the juvenile's own culpability in the event. For example, victimization that occurs in locations where the juvenile is unsupervised may be indicative of the respondent's lifestyle.

A final event control is the age of the juvenile at the time of her or his first experience of victimization. Some respondents indicated that their first physical or sexual assaults occurred in infancy or as toddlers, while others did not have such experiences until they were in their teens. Since past research indicates that older juveniles are less likely to be believed (Pintello & Zuravin, 2001; Salt, Myer, Coleman, & Sauzier, 1990), they may be less willing to report their victimization if they were older at the time of their assault.

### **RESULTS**

As demonstrated on Table 1, juveniles who are victims differ in important ways from the rest of the sample. Victims are older than nonvictims, and for several of the racial groups, significant differences exist. Specifically, Whites are significantly less likely to be victims while African Americans and Native Americans are more likely to be victims. The racial group with the highest percentage of victims is Native Americans, with 35% experiencing a sexual or physical assault. A close second are African Americans (32%), followed by 26% of Hispanics, 19% of Caucasians, 18% of "other race" and 13% of Asians.

Table 2 lists the specific forms of victimization and the number of respondents reporting each type of event. The most common type of sexual assault for girls and boys is unwanted touching. A physical attack without a weapon is the most common type of physical victimization for both sexes. Sexual assault was experienced by 325 respondents, with 78% of these victims being girls. Physical victimization is substantially more common, with 701 respondents, 17% of the NSA sample, reporting a physical assault. In contrast to sexual assaults, boys are almost twice as likely as girls to report this form of victimization (63% of physical assaults). Most respondents reported either sexual assault or physical assault but 145 reported experiencing both of these forms of victimization. A grand total of 881 respondents, 22% of the NSA sample, are classified as victims in this study.

In contrast to concerns that juveniles do not tell anyone about victimization, a very high percentage in this study did tell someone about their experiences. However, both sexes are much more likely to tell someone about their experience with physical victimization. The victim told someone of their experience for a total of 84% of the girls' cases and 78% of the boys' cases involving physical assault. Although slightly less willing to tell someone about sexual victimization, 76% of the girls and 48% of the boys did report telling someone about this form of assault.

In order to determine what might predict whether a juvenile tells anyone about victimization, separate logistic regression models were run for physical and sexual victimization. Tables 3 and 4 provide the results of these analyses.

### **Sexual Victimization**

The first model in Table 3 examines predictors of whether the victim tells someone about their experience of sexual assault. While this analysis does find that both peer deviance and witnessing violence significantly decrease the likelihood of telling anyone about the

TABLE 1. Comparison of Demographic Characteristics of NSA, Victims, and Non-victims

	Entire NSA		Victims		Nonvictims			
	N	%	N	%	N	%	Chi-Square <sup>a</sup>	
Sex								
Female	1,958	49	416	47	1,542	49	0.95	
Male	2,065	51	465	53	1,600	51		
Age								
12	682	17	88	10	595	19	75.74***	
13	685	17	127	14	558	18		
14	673	17	137	16	536	17		
15	682	17	155	18	527	17		
16	652	16	183	21	469	15		
17	641	16	191	22	451	14		
Race								
White	2,825	71	540	62	2,285	74	50.00***	
African American	590	15	189	22	401	13	40.10***	
Hispanic	314	8	81	9	232	8	2.90	
Native American	139	4	48	5	91	1	13.44***	
Asian	46	1	6	1	40	1	2.13	
Other	28	1	5	1	23	1	0.27	

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>a</sup>Chi-square figures are a comparison of victims and nonvictims.

assault, the victim's own deviance increases the likelihood of telling. The odds of reporting sexual assault to someone increase 49% for each increase in the respondent's deviance. In contrast, the odds of telling decrease by 16% and 22% respectively for each increase in peer deviance and witnessing violence.

In addition to the lifestyle measures, three of the contextual variables predict whether the juvenile tells anyone about sexual assault. Compared to sexual assaults that occur in the respondent's home, assaults that occurred in other locations, which could include areas such as a friend's house, a relative's home, or outside the neighborhood, are much more likely to be reported (OR 2.33). In addition, being afraid of injury or death increases the odds of reporting by 167%. As expected from past research, the age of the victim at the time of the assault is a significant predictor of whether they tell anyone. The older the juvenile is at the time of the event, the less likely they are to tell anyone (OR 0.88).

Finally, being female is clearly a very strong predictor of whether or not the juvenile tells anyone about their sexual victimization. Being a girl increases the odds of telling by over 450%, indicating that girls are much more willing to talk about sexual victimization than boys. Since many more girls than boys in the sample were victims of a sexual assault, what may be driving the results in the first model are the experiences of girls. The next two models in Table 3 separate the sexes to determine if boys and girls have different predictors of help-seeking behavior after sexual victimization.

For girls, lifestyles play an important role in determining whether juveniles tell anyone about their victimization. Each increase in peer deviance decreases the odds of reporting

<sup>\*\*\*</sup>p < .001.

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TABLE 2. Distribution of Victimization by Form of Violence and Sex of Respondents

Female	Male	Total
Telliale	Iviaie	10141
	4.4	
64	. 11	75
52	13	65
26	20	46
193	58	251
68	14	82
0	17	17
67	123	190
132	175	307
85	164	249
68	121	189
100	153	253
155	26	181
162	393	555
	45	145
	64 52 26 193 68 0 67 132 85 68 100 155	64 11  52 13  26 20  193 58  68 14  0 17  67 123  132 175  85 164  68 121  100 153  155 26 162 393

by 15%, and witnessing each additional act of violence decreases the odds of telling anyone by 24%. Similar to the model with both sexes, each increase in the respondent's own deviance increases the odds of telling someone by 34%. The only other two variables that are significant in the model are fearing death or injury at the time of the assault (OR = 2.70), and the respondent's age at the time of the event (OR = 0.90).

In contrast to the findings for girls, the only variable included in these analyses that predicts whether boys will tell anyone about a sexual assault is their age at the time of the event. Each increase in age decreases the odds of a male victim of sexual assault telling anyone by 27%. As an example of the importance of increased age, the odds of a victim

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TABLE 3. Results From Logistic Regression on First Experience of Sexual Victimization

	Both Sexes		Girls		Boys		
	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	
Female	5.54***	0.39					
Respondent deviance	1.49***	0.12	1.34*	0.15	1.70	0.27	
Peer deviance	0.84**	0.06	0.85**	0.06	0.84	0.20	
Witness violence	0.78*	0.12	0.76*	0.14	1.14	0.31	
In school	0.98	0.42	1.31	0.49	0.42	1.10	
In neighborhood	0.80	0.41	0.67	0.45	1.43	1.21	
Other location	2.33*	0.41	1.95	0.44	5.38	1.16	
Injured	0.98	0.50	1.11	0.54	0.19	1.64	
Fear	2.67**	0.38	2.70*	0.43	4.62	1.26	
Age occurred	0.88***	0.04	0.90*	0.05	0.73**	0.12	
N	283		233		50		
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>	0.29		0.18		0.51		
Chi-square	65.41***		29.46***		26.28**		

<sup>\*</sup>p < .05. \*\*p < .01. \*\*\*p < .001.

**TABLE 4. Results From Logistic Regression on First Experience of Physical Victimization** 

	Both Sexes		Girls		Boys		
	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	
Female	1.91**	0.24				,	
Respondent deviance	1.11	0.07	1.15	0.15	1.15	0.08	
Peer deviance	0.91**	0.04	0.90	0.07	0.90*	0.05	
Witness violence	0.89	0.09	1.16	0.16	0.79*	0.11	
In school	1.39	0.30	1.06	0.51	1.71	0.39	
In neighborhood	1.72*	0.28	1.06	0.50	2.15*	0.35	
Other location	1.05	0.33	1.16	0.56	1.02	0.42	
Injured	1.46	0.21	2.00	0.39	1.16	0.26	
Fear	1.46	0.21	1.17	0.38	1.64	0.26	
Age occurred	1.02	0.03	1.04	0.06	1.02	0.04	
N	626		264		362		
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>	0.06		0.04		0.08		
Chi-square	24.51**		5.75		20.34*		

<sup>\*</sup>p < .05. \*\*p < .01.

who was age 15 at the time of assault telling anyone about the event are 96% lower than those of a victim who was only 5.

## **Physical Victimization**

Whether adolescents tell someone of a physical assault they have suffered also depends on aspects of their lifestyle, but to a lesser extent than sexual assault. The first combined model in Table 4 indicates that the odds of reporting decrease by 9% for each increase in peer deviance. However, the respondent's own deviance and witnessing violence are not significant in this model. The only contextual variable that is significant is whether the victimization occurred in the neighborhood (OR = 1.72). Being female increases the likelihood of reporting by 91%, indicating that girls' and boys' experiences with reporting may differ.

Even though the model with both sexes shows that girls are more likely to tell someone of their victimization, we did not find any predictors to be significant in the model that examines only female adolescents who have suffered from physical assault. This finding indicates that factors other than lifestyle and the context of the event are important to consider in understanding girls' motivation for reporting physical victimization.

Several lifestyle measures were significant in the model examining male victims of physical assault, with each increase in peer deviance decreasing the odds of reporting by 10% and an increase in witnessing violence decreasing reporting by 21%. Finally, boys are more likely to tell someone of their victimization if it occurred in the neighborhood rather than at home (OR = 2.15).

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study attempted to determine the impact of deviant lifestyles on the likelihood of juvenile victims telling someone about experiences of sexual and physical assaults. This analysis provides evidence that deviant lifestyles do inhibit juveniles from telling someone about victimization. However, these results are not entirely consistent across sexes and types of assault.

Girls are more likely than boys to report victimization overall. This may indicate gender differences with expectations of femininity focused on turning to others for support, in comparison to masculine expectations that require "being a man" and dealing with problems alone. Regardless of gender expectations, lifestyle measures play an important role in telling someone about victimization for both boys and girls but in almost exactly opposite situations. Associating with deviant peers and witnessing violence prevent girls from telling about sexual assaults they have suffered, but have no impact on telling about physical victimization. For boys, lifestyle measures inhibit telling about physical victimization but are not significant in predicting telling about sexual victimization.

One indicator of deviant lifestyles, the respondent's own participation in delinquency, was not consistent in this pattern of findings. This measure actually increases the likelihood of girls telling someone about sexual victimization and fails to reach significance in all other models. It is possible that girls who engage in deviant lifestyles may not think of their own activities as being extremely deviant, or at least less problematic than violent victimization, and believe strongly in their entitlement to personal safety. Another possiFι

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bility is that this is a directional issue. If the victim told no one and received no help, she may have turned to deviant activities as a measure of acting out.

Although the juvenile's own delinquent involvement does not appear to consistently predict telling, other measures of a deviant lifestyle do inhibit adolescents from telling about victimization. Therefore, this study has shown that lifestyle measures are important to include when examining the experiences of adolescent victims of violence. If victims associate with deviant peers, and regularly witness violence, they may view victimization as an expected outcome of their lifestyle and be less likely to think they need or deserve help or sympathy. Such victims may not ever tell anyone about their experience and fail to seek any form of help.

Although this provides important findings about the relationship of lifestyles and reporting victimization, this study has several limitations. The most important is due to the nature of cross-sectional data. It is not possible to determine the casual order between victimization, reporting, and lifestyles. It is possible that lifestyles developed after the experiences of sexual or physical assault. The negative repercussions of victimization may have contributed substantially to the formation of a deviant lifestyle. Therefore, it is possible that not telling is actually a cause of deviant lifestyles instead of deviant lifestyles inhibiting the juvenile from seeking help.

Future work should analyze in more depth the experiences of juveniles who do tell someone about their experiences. For example, if it is known whom adolescents are most likely to ask for help, programs designed to offer support to adolescent victims can better involve the individuals the adolescents seek out first. In addition to whom the juvenile tells, it is also important to determine if telling someone actually served to assist the juvenile in some way. If the experiences of the juvenile after telling were negative, such as having to testify in court or not being believed, they are less likely to speak up if this type of victimization occurs again. Such a negative experience may also contribute to a more deviant lifestyle, thus further increasing the possibility of future victimization.

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## **APPENDIX. Deviant Lifestyles Scales**

Scale/Items Scale/Items	Mean	Min	Max	Alpha
Peer deviance	0.32	0	13	0.86
Purposely damaged or destroyed property that did not				
belong to them				
Used marijuana or hashish				
Stolen something worth less than \$5				
Hit or threatened to hit someone without any reason				
Used alcohol				
Broken into a vehicle or building to steal something				
Sold hard drugs such as heroin, cocaine, and LSD				
Stolen something worth more than \$50				
Suggested you do something that was against the law				
Gotten drunk once in a while				
Used prescription drugs such as amphetamines or barbi-				
turates when there was no medical need for them				
Sold or given alcohol to kids under 18				
Pressured or forced someone to do more sexually than				
s/he wanted to do				
Witnessed violence: Have you ever seen someone	1.29	0	6	0.64
actually shoot someone else with a gun				
actually cut or stab someone else with a knife				
being sexually assaulted or raped				
being mugged or robbed				
threaten someone else with a knife, a gun, or some other				
weapon				
beaten up, hit, punched, or kicked such that they were				
hurt pretty badly				
Respondent's deviance	0.4	0	9	0.74
Stolen or tried to steal something worth more than \$100				
Stolen or tried to steal a motor vehicle				
Broken or tried to break into a building or vehicle to				
steal something or just look around				
Been involved in gang fights				
Used force or strong-arm methods to get money or				
things from people				
Had or tried to have sexual relations with someone				
against their will				
Attacked someone with the idea of seriously hurting or				
killing that person				•
Binge drinking (5 or more drinks at least once per				
month)				
Non-experimental marijuana use				
Hard illicit drug use				

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