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**School Bullying and Victimization among African American Youth: An Examination of the Risk and Protective Factors within Multiple Contexts**

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| Corresponding Author: | Desmond Upton Patton, PhD, MSW  
University of Michigan  
Ann Arbor, UNITED STATES |
| Corresponding Author Secondary Information: |  |
| Corresponding Author's Institution: | University of Michigan |
| Corresponding Author's Secondary Institution: |  |
| First Author:      | Desmond Upton Patton, PhD, MSW |
| First Author Secondary Information: |  |
| Order of Authors:  | Desmond Upton Patton, PhD, MSW  
Abigail Williams, MSW  
Jun Sung Hong, MA, MSW  
Paula Allen-Meares, PhD, MSW |
| Order of Authors Secondary Information: |  |

**Abstract:** Bullying and peer victimization are social problems for affecting African American youth in school. Research has consistently pointed out that the prevalence of bullying and peer victimization is reportedly high among African Americans, although findings have been inconsistent. Regrettably, much of the empirical studies have examined individual and direct level influences in silos rather than constellation of factors within multiple settings, such as home, school, and neighborhood. We utilize Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1977, 1979) social-ecological framework as a springboard for investigating the accumulation of risk contributors and the presences of protective factors in relation to school bullying and peer victimization of African American children and adolescents. Considering that there are relatively few studies that have considered protective factors in comparison to risk factors, we examined research findings on protective factors, which can buffer the incidence of bullying and peer victimization of African American youth. More specifically, we examine the risk and protective factors occurring in the micro- (e.g., parenting, peer relations, school, and community), exo- (e.g., parental stress), and macrosystem levels (e.g., hyper-masculinity and normative beliefs about aggression). We then discuss implications for research and school-based practice.
REVIEW PAPER

School Bullying and Victimization among African American Youth: An Examination of the Risk and Protective Factors within Multiple Contexts

Desmond Upton Patton • Abigail B. Williams • Jun Sung Hong • Paula Allen-Meares

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D.U. Patton ☑️ A.B. Williams
School of Social Work, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109 USA
e-mail: dupatton@umich.edu

J. S. Hong
School of Social Work, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Urbana, IL

P. Allen-Meares
Office of the Chancellor, University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, IL
School Bullying and Victimization among African American Youth

An Examination of the Risk and Protective Factors within Multiple Contexts
Abstract

Bullying and peer victimization are social problems for affecting African American youth in school. Research has consistently pointed out that the prevalence of bullying and peer victimization is reportedly high among African Americans, although findings have been inconsistent. Regrettably, much of the empirical studies have examined individual and direct level influences in silos rather than constellation of factors within multiple settings, such as home, school, and neighborhood. We utilize Urie Bronfenbrenner’s (1977, 1979) social-ecological framework as a springboard for investigating the accumulation of risk contributors and the presences of protective factors in relation to school bullying and peer victimization of African American children and adolescents. Considering that there are relatively few studies that have considered protective factors in comparison to risk factors, we examined research findings on protective factors, which can buffer the incidence of bullying and peer victimization of African American youth. More specifically, we examine the risk and protective factors occurring in the micro- (e.g., parenting, peer relations, school, and community), exo- (e.g., parental stress), and macrosystem levels (e.g., hyper-masculinity and normative beliefs about aggression). We then discuss implications for research and school-based practice.

Keywords: African Americans; bullying; peer victimization; school; youth
Introduction

School bullying and peer victimization are major concerns for students, parents, teachers, and school officials. Although a number of definitions exist, bullying is commonly identified as physical, verbal, or social forms of aggression perpetrated by an individual or a group of individuals against a particular individual (Espelage and Swearer 2003; Espelage and Horne 2008). Bullying directed against racial/ethnic minority children and adolescents is also a growing problem in a multicultural society such as the United States (Hanish and Guerra 2000).

Prevalence of bullying and peer victimization has been reported to be high among African American youth (Belgrave 2009; Peskin et al. 2006), although findings have been inconsistent. For instance, Wang and colleagues (2009) reported that compared with White and Hispanic/Latino youth, African American youth were more frequently involved in perpetration (physical, verbal, and cyber), but less likely to be victimized by their peers. Findings by Nansel and colleagues (2001) from a nationally representative sample of youth on the other hand indicate that African Americans reported higher rate of peer victimization than did Hispanic/Latino and Whites. Likewise, a more recent research by Koo and colleagues (2012) found that African American girls are at a higher risk of peer victimization than Asian and Latina girls. Interestingly, African American students are more likely than White and Hispanic/Latino students to be nominated by their peers and teachers as displaying aggressive behavior (Graham and Juvonen 2002). Current research suggests that African American youth are prone to bullying and peer victimization, however, there is a major dearth of research of research that contextualizes the experiences of these youth.

What factors trigger or inhibit bullying and peer victimization among African American children and adolescents? And more specifically, how might conditions at home, school, and in
the neighborhood influence or mitigate bullying behavior among these youth? This question is particularly important for researchers and practitioners to address, considering that higher rates of violence victimization and exposure to violence are reported among racial and ethnic minority youth, many of whom also reported bullying and victimization at an early age (Fitzpatrick et al. 2007). Despite the significant advances made in research on school bullying and peer victimization, little is known about the integration of multiple level factors that foster or mitigate this behavior among African American youth.

Understanding the constellation of factors occurring at multiple levels of the social- ecology is particularly important, considering that African American youth involved in bullying situations are at heightened risk of poor mental health outcomes (Cassidy and Stevenson, Jr. 2005; Fitzpatrick et al. 2010; Gomes et al. 2009; Peskin et al. 2007). For instance, a study conducted by Fitzpatrick and colleagues (2010) found from a sample of 1,542 African American students in grades 5-12 that those self-identifying as bullies, victims, or bully-victims reported higher levels of depressive symptoms compared to their non-bullied/non-victimized counterparts. A longitudinal research by Gomes and colleagues (2009), which consisted of 241 college-age African American adolescent females, also reported that prior experiences in peer relational aggression during childhood was significantly correlated with depressive symptoms during college years. Considering that psychosocial and behavioral outcomes of bullying and peer victimization are serious among African Americans, it is imperative that researchers identify risk and protective factors that are relevant to these youth. Examining the risk and protective factors at multiple levels is a critical first step for developing and implementing culturally relevant school violence prevention strategies (Belgrave et al. 2004; Leff et al. 2009).
The focus of this article is to enhance our understanding of the etiology of peer aggression and victimization among African American children and adolescents at multiple levels. However, it is also important to examine protective factors, which can facilitate the development of culturally relevant intervention strategies and prevention measures that effectively decrease aggressive behavior. Considering that much of the research on African American youth have focused more on deficits and problems and less on strengths (Belgrave and Allison 2010), identifying protective factors is critical. Thus, our goal is to examine risk and protective factors within the social-ecological context, from which we draw implications for practice and policy.

Social-Ecological Framework

In the following sections, we enumerate a variety of factors that influence or inhibit school bullying and peer victimization among African American children and adolescents. Researchers have proposed several different variables to explain the sources of bullying and victimization, such as parenting practices, family characteristics, peer relations involving relational aggression among African American girls, community environment, and societal perceptions of hypermasculinity among African American boys. We argue that all these findings are additive contributors to bullying and peer victimization among African American youth. It is not any one of these factors that affect peer relations in particular, but their accumulation in the life of the individual youth.

Using a social-ecological model (Bronfenbrenner 1977, 1979), we investigate the complex interplay between immediate (e.g., parenting, peer relations, school, and community) and distal (e.g., parental stress, hyper-masculinity, and normative beliefs about aggression) influences. A series of concentric structures—micro-, exo-, and macrosystems—directly and
indirectly affect the development, with the individual youth situated as the focal point of influence (Bruyere and Garbarino 2009; Garbarino 1992). Only by understanding the complex interplay of influences will the development of effective violence prevention and intervention strategies for African American youth follow.

<<Insert Figure 1 about here>>

**Microsystem**

As Bronfenbrenner’s (1977, 1979) social-ecological framework suggests microsystem is the environment, which can directly influence individual child development and interpersonal relationships. Many of the influences that foster or impede bullying are found within the home, as youth spend a great deal of their time with their family. Research examining the relevance of family system on bullying and peer victimization among African Americans has focused on parents, and more specifically, parenting practices (Curtner-Smith et al. 2006; Griffin et al. 1999), parental support (Benhorin and McMahon 2008), and parental abuse (Fitzpatrick et al. 2007). Whether parental abuse is associated with African American children’s aggressive behavior remains uncertain, as evident in previous findings. A number of studies have explored racial/ethnic minority children’s aggressive behavior as an outcome of parental abuse (see Gershoff 2002, for a meta-analytic review). Findings from several studies indicate that parental abuse (i.e., corporal punishment) is positively associated with aggressive behavior among White youth, but negatively or not significantly correlated with aggression among African American youth (Gershoff 2002). More recent research (Fitzpatrick et al. 2007), however, has found that parental abuse (i.e., parents hit and beat routinely) is significant predictor of bullying behavior among African American youth.
Other researchers also identified important family-level protective factors, such as perceived parental monitoring and support, which reportedly lowered the risk of bullying among African American youth. Parental support is associated with positive outcomes in children and adolescents, such as higher likelihood of prosocial behavior (Bean et al. 2003; Carlson et al. 2000) and better school performances (Bean et al. 2003), as well as lower likelihood of psychological distress (Bean et al. 2006; Gray and Steinberg 1999), substance use (Parker and Benson 2004; Willis et al. 2004), and bullying behavior (Grant et al. 2000; Holt and Espelage 2007; Wang et al. 2009). Family-based support sources are especially important for racial and ethnic minority children in coping with daily life struggles (Maton et al. 1996). More specifically, connectedness to family and family support are resources that have traditionally helped African American youth cope with living in a society often perceived as hostile (Maton et al. 1996). A study by Benhorin and McMahon (2008) found from a sample of 127 African American adolescents (ages 10-15) residing in urban areas that perceived parental support was related to lower level of teacher-reported bullying and aggressive behaviors in school. However, the researchers did not find any significant main effects for parental support in relation to self- and peer-reported aggressive behaviors, which implies that these youth may display aggression in certain settings (e.g., home, neighborhood), but not in others (e.g., school).

The quality of peer relationship represents another important microsystem, which may influence or inhibit bullying and peer victimization. Given that social skills are learned in the home, it is likely that these behaviors will be displayed to peers and teachers in the school setting (Espelage and Swearer 2003). Peer relationships are important part of youth’s microsystem, which involves youth interacting with, influencing, and socializing with each other (Rodkin and Hodges 2003). Furthermore, a correlative pattern between the quality of peer relations and
bullying and peer victimization has been observed among several researchers (see Hong and Espelage 2012, for a review). Researchers investigating the association between quality of peer relationship and bullying and peer victimization among African American adolescents report that the frequency of bullying behavior was high among adolescents under negative peer influence (Farrar 2006; Fitzpatrick et al. 2007; Griffin et al. 1999).

Other researchers have also investigated social relations and peer networks of African American adolescents who were identified as aggressive (Estell et al. 2007; Farmer et al. 2003; Xie et al. 2003). Although peer acceptance, popularity, and social networks are important for most adolescents (Espelage 2002), research findings on social relations of bullying involved youth have been mixed. A study conducted by Farmer and colleagues (2003), which includes a subtypes of rural African American early adolescents (161 boys and 258 girls), found that bullies identified as tough boys and popular girls were rated higher by their peers on social prominence (e.g., cool, popular), compared to troubled boys and girls, although these youth were disliked by their peers. Moreover, bullies showed higher levels of social network centrality than youth identified as non-aggressive (Xie et al. 2003), although they associated with aggressive and non-aggressive as well as popular and unpopular peer groups (Estell et al. 2007).

Relatively few researchers also identified protective factors within peer level contexts, such as peer support (Benhorin and McMahon 2008) and prosocial behavior from peers (Storch et al. 2003). For instance, Storch and colleagues’ (2003) research investigated the association between peer victimization (overt and relational) and internalizing behaviors (i.e., depressive symptoms, fear of negative evaluation, social avoidance, and loneliness) in a sample of 190 Hispanic/Latino and African American children (5th-7th grades). The researchers found that although overt and relational victimization were both correlated with all types of internalizing
behaviors, prosocial support from peers buffered the effects of peer victimization on loneliness for children with high levels of peer support.

In sum, it is evident that risk and protective factors for bullying and peer victimization depend largely on the quality of peer relationships. Current research findings suggest that the likelihood of bullying and peer victimization is strong for youth with negative peer relations (e.g., negative peer influence). However, the findings also support the view that peer affiliation and social network of bullies vary, and some bullies are socially skilled and can have relatively high social status. Nevertheless, a limited number of researchers also found that prosocial behavior from peers and peer support could mitigate bullying behavior and negative outcomes associated with experiences in peer victimization.

Certain aspects of the school condition might facilitate or impede bullying behavior (Baker 1998; Espelage and Swearer 2003). Thus, school environment, in relation to bullying and peer victimization have received substantial amount of research attention (Hong and Espelage 2012). Given that African American youth are at greater risk of exposure to various types of violence, these youth may perceive their school environment as unsafe (see Fitzpatrick et al. 2010), which can heighten the risk of bullying and peer victimization. However, there are a number of protective factors in schools, such as perceived support from teachers (Benhorin and McMahon 2008), diversity in the classrooms (Felix and You 2011; Juvonen et al. 2006), and racially/ethnically-integrated school settings (Hanish and Guerra 2000). To illustrate, Hanish and Guerra (2000) found from a sample of 1,956 racially and ethnically diverse children that attending racially/ethnically-integrated schools was associated with a slightly lower risk of peer victimization for African American children, whereas it was associated with a significantly higher risk of victimization for White children.
Schools are embedded in neighborhoods that if perceived as dangerous can trigger bullying behavior in school (Hong and Espelage 2012). Considering that placement in risky school and classroom environments occur more frequently for African American than for White children due to the demographic of schools and neighborhood, it is not surprising that African American youth residing in socioeconomically disadvantaged (Thomas et al. 2006) and dangerous communities (Boxer et al. 2008; Fitzpatrick 1997; Griffin et al. 1999) are more likely than other racial/ethnic groups to be exposed to bullying and negative peer relationships.

Researchers have theorized that exposure to community violence leads to desensitization or disengagement and a cognitive orientation that normalizes violence (Ng-Mak et al. 2002). Children who develop such cognitive orientation believe that aggression is normal and morally acceptable, and believe that it is more beneficial to bully than be victimized (Belgrave 2009). Likewise, children in low-income communities may have learned bullying as a self-protective mechanism against potential harm (Belgrave 2009), which can also result in greater engagement in this behavior (Boxer et al. 2008). Findings from these studies can be well-explained by social disorganization theory, which posits that higher rates of misbehaviors (e.g., bullying) occur in neighborhoods characterized by poverty, residential mobility, and lack of social control (Griffin et al. 1999).

**Exosystem**

Understanding the multiple influences of bullying and peer victimization requires an examination the individual as embedded within larger social units. Exosystem comprises linkage between two or more interactions or settings, but only one directly affecting the individual (Bronfenbrenner 1977). The quality of youth’s relationship with their peers can be influenced by a larger system or social structure that is not directly experienced by the individual youth.
Exosystem level factors are significant in research on African American youth, given the highly stressful environmental context for many African Americans (Bean et al. 2006). One notable exosystem level factor is parent’s stress. Parent’s stress can compromise caregiving practices and parent-youth attachment at home, which can affect youth’s developmental outcomes. More specifically, mothers’ stress due to lack of financial resources, dearth of social support, and personal problems has been examined in a number of studies on African American children and adolescents, and has reported to be significantly correlated with youth’s psychosocial development (e.g., Brody et al. 1994; Caldwell et al. 2002). However, only a limited number of empirical studies on African American youth’s involvement in bullying and peer victimization have examined parent’s stress (e.g., Curtner-Smith et al. 2006). Curtner-Smith and colleagues’ (2006) findings from a sample of predominantly African American children attending a Head Start Program suggest high level of mothers’ stress disrupts parent-child relationship, which can influence children’s involvement in overt and relational bullying.

In evaluating the role of exosystem level factors in African American youth’s experiences in bullying and peer victimization, it is important to point out that they are the by-products of changes occurring in the larger social milieu, in which the developing youth is not embedded. For instance, mother’s stress may be due to external forces, such as poor neighborhood conditions or place of employment. Such forces could compromise her parenting practices and parent-child attachment in the home, and subsequently predispose the youth to negative peer relationships outside the home. Despite the limited number of empirical support, it is evident that understanding the multifaceted nature of the risk and protective factors for bullying and peer victimization of African American youth requires a consideration of external forces that unduly affect immediate settings (e.g., home) and interactions (e.g., parent-child relationship).
Macrosystem

The most distal influences of African American children and adolescents’ experiences in bullying and peer victimization are macrosystem level factors, such as society, in which micro- and exosystem factors are embedded. By society, we are referring to cultural norms and beliefs. An examination of the macrosystem level factors can shed more light on the complex web of causal factors that may play a role in understanding bullying behaviors among African American youth. Most evident are culturally prescribed gender role socialization, such as hypermasculinity and relational aggression (i.e., engaging in gossip, rumors, threatening to sabotage friendships), which may perpetuate normative beliefs about aggression among boys and girls.

According to Cassidy and Stevenson’s (2005) study, the pervasive notion of aggression among African American male adolescents may facilitate acceptance by peers in their adolescent years. Putting on the façade of aggression, though one might feel incredibly vulnerable, may be the difference between gaining peer acceptance and social isolation. Among African American males in urban communities, aggressive behavior can be presented as hyper-masculinity. Displays of hyper-masculinity are associated with vulnerability and developmental sequelae to include depression, sensitivity to peer rejection, and fear of safety. As such, growing up in a volatile environment often requires urban African American males to be fearless and tough (Anderson 1999), thus making it difficult for African American boys to take on the persona of a more child-like demeanor (Patton and Garbarino, forthcoming). This hyper-masculine behavior may in fact hide the need of African American boys to receive social support from caring adults.

Hyper-masculinity as it relates to African American males as a cultural construct has been developed by researchers to investigate how gender role beliefs reinforce male dominance (Mosher 1991; Murnen and Byrne 1991). It has been characterized as perceiving dangerous
events as exciting, and as believing that aggression and violence are “natural” for males (Kreiger and Dumka 2006). Hypermasculinity has also been linked to aggressive expression of anger and frustration, suppression of ‘weak’ emotion (e.g., fear), domination of others, and acceptance of sexual aggression (Gold et al. 1992; Hamburger et al. 1996). Hyper-masculinity has been identified as a correlate for bullying behavior of African American male adolescents. Farrar (2006) examined bullying within the sociological construct of race/ethnicity, gender, and the role of perceived gender stereotypes. Consistent with previous research findings, African American and males reported higher frequencies of initiating bullying, as compared with Whites and other racial/ethnic groups and females. The author also found that stereotype perceptions increase bullying behavior. Interestingly, the author theorized that within the hegemonic paradigm, being a male gives a sense of gendered power among African American male adolescents. Therefore acting in the stereotypical role of the hyper-masculine male, which encompasses bullying behaviors, allows African American males to gain back some form of self-respect within the hegemonic paradigm.

With regards to stereotypes, Ferguson (2000) reported that African American boys, when perceived by their teachers as being troublemakers and failures, resorted to exemplifying the popular media images of the hyper-masculine male in an attempt to gain respect and self-esteem when they had self-determined that they would be unsuccessful in the classroom setting. The author found that fear, disrespect, anger, anxiety, student identity, and negative peer networks were significantly correlated with bullying behavior. In examining interactions with peers, the author found that African American male students may draw upon stereotypical expectations in order to gain acceptance and popularity – which may lead to engaging in bullying behavior. It clear that African American students were aware of broadly held stereotypes of African
Americans as menacing and aggressive, and that those stereotypes influenced their interactions with peers.

Among African American girls, relational aggression has been found to precede physical aggression in school (Talbot et al. 2002). One plausible explanation is that African American girls deemed relationally aggressive were more popular than those girls who did not engage in relational aggression (Leff et al. 2009). In evaluating a program to specifically address the cultural and gender-related needs of African American girls within the school context, Belgrave and colleagues (2004) found that interventions which develop positive interpersonal relationships among African American girls and introduce ideas that raise youth’s awareness of issues relating to gender, ethnicity, and oppression significantly decreased relational aggression. These findings add to the growing body of literature on resilience among African American girls and how taking into account race and gender in multiple contexts can make a difference in decreasing relational aggression which results in other types of bullying behaviors.

Discussion

This overview of African American bullying and peer victimization highlights several potential areas for future scholarly theorizing and research and identifies areas to buttress practice and policy. Bronfenbrenner’s social-ecological framework serves as a useful heuristic tool for identifying factors, across ecological contexts that trigger (risk factors) or impede (protective factors) bullying and aggressive behaviors among African American students in school.

Parenting behavior is an area researchers have identified as important for shaping bullying behavior and aggression among African American youth. As indicated in this review, parental monitoring was found to be associated with prosocial behavior while negative parenting
practices (e.g., physical abuse) significantly predicted aggressive behavior among African American youth. Within parental context, researchers need to attend to not only the association between parenting practices and support (microsystem) and children’s peer relationships in school, but also external factors that induce parental stress (exosystem), which could undermine parenting practices. Considering that primary caregivers, particularly mothers typically reside in the same neighborhood as their children, parental stress stemming from navigating chronic community violence and factors associated with poverty may impact how single mothers discipline, monitor, and interact with their children.

In addition, exposure to community violence is a relevant antecedent to bullying and peer victimization among African American youth residing in low-resourced neighborhoods. We should also point out that other neighborhood factors such as parental unemployment or under-employment, high rates of teacher burnout or stress, and lack of school services provisions can also have a negative impact on children’s development and their relationship with their peers (Astor and Pitner 1996). Ironically, research examining the association between neighborhood factors and bullying and peer victimization are scant. Thus, it is critical that researchers and practitioners to assess neighborhood factors, which can eventually lead to more effective prevention and intervention strategies.

Further research is also needed to fully understand how peer relationships influence or inhibit bullying and peer victimization. Researchers have suggested that bullying behavior is highest among individuals with negative peer influences (Farrar 2006; Fitzpatrick et al. 2007; Griffin et al. 1999). Peer relationships, particularly within the context of risk and stress are complex, and more specifically for African American youth growing up in urban neighborhoods, exposure to negative peer influence can increase bullying and aggressive behaviors in one
context, but in another might provide necessary protection against community violence exposure or potential victimization. Research strongly supports the notion that peer socialization of aggressive youth need to be closely examined both within and outside the school, as these youth are likely to be influenced by peers in unmonitored settings, such as the neighborhood (e.g., gangs; Astor and Pitner 1996). It is also imperative that school practitioners, particularly school social workers who work closely with disadvantaged African American youth consider exploring youth friendships as a mechanism that impacts individual behavior in multiple contexts as it might leverage vital interpersonal information that aides in the development of stronger intervention and prevention programs that meet the needs of African American youth.

School climate has the potential to facilitate or impede the development of bullying behavior (Espelage and Swearer 2003). Schools that are viewed as unsafe increase the risk of bullying and victimization. However, when schools embody a positive school climate and offer strong teacher support the risk of bullying and peer victimization is lowered. We should also note that bullying and other forms of school violence can occur in spaces within and outside the classrooms (Astor et al. 1999). It is important that further studies be conducted that examine peer dynamics and peer conflicts within various locations, such as hallways and cafeterias where adults are typically not present. School practitioners (e.g., counselors, psychologists, social workers) may also think critically about developing school climate policies that attend to and integrate issues of school and community safety. For example, school social workers in urban schools may consider the extent to which adults in the school building (e.g., teachers, support staff, school administrators, and security guards) provide a level of safety or facilitate bullying and aggressive behaviors among students. Understanding the relationships between adults and students would not only influence how the adults relate to students but can also result in broader
policy conversations regarding adult/student interactions and the implications for overall well-being and academic achievement. Further, more research is needed to explicate how African American youth make meaning of school conditions and how they might influence bullying behavior.

We also explored the ways in which aggression and bullying behavior are gendered among African American youth. As indicated in this review, African American males and females to some extent experience the social world differently based on their racialized and gendered experiences. Whereas negative stereotypes within and outside school influence how African American males behave in school, interpersonal relationships within the school context can stimulate aggressive behavior among females (Leff et al. 2009). More research is needed to further explore not only proximal (e.g., microsystem) but also distal (e.g., exosystem, macrosystem) factors that can explain the variation in bullying and aggressive behaviors among African American youth.

Lastly, few research studies talk directly to African American youth regarding their lived experiences across the social-ecological systems. Understanding how these youth make meaning of and navigate neighborhood, school, family, and peers can help detect unknown factors that might contribute to bullying and aggressive behaviors and why they are gendered.

Conclusion

A review of literatures on school bullying and victimization among African American youth generates more unanswered questions than a definitive understanding of the etiology. However, what is clear is that the application of the social-ecological framework is useful for clustering such factors as – immediate and distal influences and potential protective factors that interact within and among the following systems: microsystem, exosystem, and macrosystem.
The framework illustrates the complexity of the interactions. Also, implicit in the review of literatures is that some of these youth are living a self-fulfilling prophecy, others are protecting themselves from institutional racism and deprivation of opportunities, and/or some perhaps are masking mental health illnesses with aggressive behavior. Indeed, more research is needed to fully deconstruct these complicated interactions.
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Figure 1. A socio-ecological framework for bullying and peer victimization