

## Experiencing Prejudice and Violence among Latinos: A General Strain Theory Approach

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**Abstract:** *General Strain Theory (GST) predicts that being a victim of ethnically-based discrimination will raise the risk of violent offending. Data from a national sample of 631 Latino students are analyzed to test the hypothesis. OLS regression analysis reveals that perceiving that students at school are prejudiced is positively associated with an index of violent behavior. In addition, the criminogenic effect of prejudice is reduced as conventional social support increases. Partial support is found for a number of other hypotheses derived from the theory. Overall, GST is somewhat successful at explaining interpersonal violence among Latino youths, and in making sense of the effect of school prejudice.*

**Keywords:** crime, delinquency, discrimination, General Strain Theory, Hispanics, Latinos, prejudice, racism, violence

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### INTRODUCTION

While progress has been made over the past few years, criminological research devotes insufficient attention to the study of the Hispanic community (Schuck, Lersch and Verrill 2004). Latinos are a rapidly growing segment of the United States. Having been the largest minority group for more than a decade, their numbers are currently more than 52 million (U.S. Census 2012). Like other minority groups, Hispanics have lower than average levels of education and income and are victims of prejudice and discrimination (Montoya 2009). Along with other high-immigration groups, they face additional challenges, including large numbers of immigrants, rapid growth, social dislocation, language barriers, and issues concerning acculturation (Iceland 2009).

Interpersonal violence among Latinos is one of the understudied areas within criminology. General Strain Theory (Agnew 1992) seems to be a particularly relevant theoretical perspective to explain the link between minority status and violent offending since it views social difficulties as being central to the production of violence. The present study employs a national sample of Latino youths to identify links between various types of strain, particularly perceived prejudice at school and violent

behavior, within a General Strain Theory (GST) theoretical framework.

### HISPANICS, DISCRIMINATION, AND STRAIN

While members of the Hispanic community are a diverse population, originating from many different Spanish-speaking countries, they share some basic cultural values that make them identifiable as part of a coherent group (Marin and Marin 1991). For example, the literature identifies familism, in-group identification, and collective over individual achievement as important dimensions of the Latino cultural value system (Lindahl and Malik 1999; Moore and Pachon 1985; Robbins and Szapocznik 2000; Sommers, Fagan and Baskin 1992; Valenzuela and Dornbusch 1996; Williams 1990).

Research points to the psychological costs felt by Hispanics who experience prejudice and discrimination. Perceived discrimination and racism have been linked to higher rates of psychological distress (Brondolo et al. 2008; Diaz et al. 2001; Fisher, Wallace and Fenton 2000; Taylor and Turner 2002); depression (Coker et al. 2009; Finch, Kolody and Vega 2000); suicidal ideation (Diaz et al. 2001); poor mental health outcomes (Cook et al. 2009; Holt et al. 2006); and attention deficit hyperactivity

disorder, oppositional defiant disorder, and conduct disorder (Coker et al. 2009).

An additional source of strain for Hispanics and their family members is the higher rate of supervision by the criminal justice system. Hispanic males are 2.5 times more likely than white males, and Hispanic females are 1.5 times more likely than their white counterparts to be serving a sentence in prison (Sabol, West and Cooper 2009). Latino males face an estimated lifetime risk of imprisonment that is almost four times higher than white males (Bonczar and Beck 1997).

Research has documented disparities at several points in criminal justice processing. Hagan, Shedd and Payne (2005) found that Latino youth have higher rates of police contacts than Anglos. In large urban counties, Hispanics are over-represented among felony arrestees (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2008). Most analyses of the intake decisions among juveniles demonstrate a bias against minority offenders (Bishop and Frazier 1988, 1996; Bortner, Sunnerland and Winn 1985; Dannefer and Schutt 1982; DeJong and Jackson 1998; Smith and Paternoster 1990). Minority offenders are more likely than white offenders to be formally referred (DeJong and Jackson 1998; Pope and Ferwerherm 1990a, 1990b). Prosecutors are more likely to apply mandatory minimums to Hispanic males (Ulmer, Kerlychek and Kramer 2007).

A body of research demonstrates consistent bias against minority juveniles at sentencing (Bishop and Frazier 1988, 1996; Bortner, Sunnerland and Winn 1985; Dannefer and Schutt 1982; DeJong and Jackson 1998; Fagan, Slaughter and Hartstone 1987; Frazier and Bishop 1985; Marshall and Thomas 1983; McCarthy and Smith 1986; Schissel 1993; Tittle and Curran 1988). Crow and Kunselman (2009) found that Hispanic female drug offenders are disadvantaged at both the incarceration and sentence-length decision points. Brennan and Spohn (2008) found that convicted Hispanic felony drug offenders received harsher punishments than both blacks and whites. According to Lee (2007) defendants in Hispanic victim cases were less likely to face a death-eligible charge than defendants in white victim cases.

While research has revealed bias against Latino defendants, it does not appear to fully explain the disproportionate numbers of Hispanics under the supervision of the criminal justice system. Various sources, including self-report and victimization data, suggest higher levels of criminal violence and gang membership than among Anglos (Felson, Deane and Armstrong 2008; Hawkins et al. 2000; Haynie and Payne 2006; Lafree 1995; Lopez et al. 2004; McNulty and Bellair 2003; Snyder 1999). Self-report studies have reported higher rates of physical fighting (Eaton et al. 2006), bullying (Nansel et al. 2001), and joining gangs (Lopez et al. 2004).

While Latinos are confronted with a wide range of difficulties, recent scholarship has revealed that there is no

simple disadvantage-violence connection. Latinos do better on various social indicators, including violence, than would be predicted by their average level of disadvantage, a phenomenon that has been termed the "Latino Paradox" (Martinez 2002; Morenoff 2005). Sampson, Morenoff and Raudenbush (2005) report no Hispanic-white difference in violence among similarly situated individuals, and Morenoff (2005) found that white and Latino rates of crime and delinquency are converging. The relatively low rate of violence among Mexican Americans has been explained by a combination of having married parents, living in a neighborhood with a high concentration of immigrants, and having an immigrant status (Nielsen et al. 2005; Sampson et al. 2005). High numbers of immigrants appear to offer social protections to immigrants themselves and to those living in their midst (Feldmeyer 2009).

## GENERAL STRAIN THEORY AND VIOLENCE

General Strain Theory (Agnew 1992) seems particularly well suited to explain a link between ethnically-based mistreatment and violent behavior among minority youths. According to the theory, certain life circumstances generate intense stress which, in turn, raises the odds that it will be managed with illegal coping strategies. According to the perspective, there are three broad types of strain: 1) the failure to achieve positive goals, 2) the withdrawal of positively valued stimuli, and 3) the presentation of negatively valued stimuli.

Strains, according to Agnew (1992), generate anger, frustration, depression, anxiety and other negative emotional states. An individual adopts coping strategies in order to manage the unpleasant emotions caused by strain. Coping strategies enable one to minimize or eliminate the experience of strain. Violent behavior is one of several ways to respond to distressful circumstances. The response is conditioned by a number of variables, including the attribution of blame to others, the availability of legal coping resources, the degree of conventional social support and the influence of peers (Agnew 2006a).

According to the theory, the strains most likely to lead to violence are those that are seen as undeserved (Agnew 2001). People who attribute the strain they experience to others are likely to experience frustration, anger and a desire for revenge (Jang and Johnson 2003). Discrimination, for example, is a type of strain that leads to other-directed blame (Kaufman et al. 2008). Further, if strains like ethnic prejudice are diffuse, and specific offenders cannot be clearly identified, one lacks a particular target for retaliation and might develop angry attitudes in general, and may experience despair, hopelessness, and depression (Kaufman et al. 2008; Piquero 2005; Piquero and Sealock 2004).

According to research, Latino youths who experience prejudice tend to react differently than other minority groups. Rasmussen et al. (2004) found that Hispanic adolescents were less likely than African American youth to use positive appraisal, problem solving, and sources of social support as a means of coping with a potentially violent situation. According to a study by Rosario et al. (2003), youth who employ more confrontational coping strategies are more likely to be involved in violent behavior than those who rely on strategies that involve guardians or other sources of social support.

## HYPOTHESES

A number of hypotheses to be tested in the present study can be derived from General Strain Theory. First, the perception of prejudice should raise the risk of violent behavior. Mistreatment might be directed at the target, at others known to the target, or prejudice might be a hostile environment. A person who reacts to perceived prejudice might target a specific person who is acting in a bigoted manner, or he or she might attack a convenient target if the perceived prejudice is diffuse and not specific to any particular person (Jang and Johnson 2003; Kaufman et al. 2008; Piquero 2005; Piquero and Sealock 2004). Since school is a common arena for inter-ethnic interaction among adolescents, perceived prejudice at school should be an important source of strain. Vega et al. (1995) found that Latino adolescents who experience prejudice and discrimination in school were more likely to be involved in delinquent activities.

Academic strains are predicted to be associated with greater violence. The anxiety, frustration and anger generated by learning or behavior problems might lead youths to strike out at others, especially at those who ridicule their difficulties (Agnew 2006b). Poor grades, poor relations with teachers (including unfair punishment and demeaning treatment), and an unstimulating learning environment are all experienced as aversive. Numerous studies have found that negative academic experiences are related to delinquency (Agnew 2005; Colvin 2000; Morash and Moon 2007; Sampson and Laub 1993).

According to GST (Agnew 2006b) family problems are a crucial source of strain for adolescents. Parental rejection, erratic and/or punitive parenting, child abuse and neglect, family conflict, and parental separation and divorce have been found to be important predictors of delinquency (Agnew 2001; Colvin 2000; Piquero and Sealock 2004; Sampson and Laub 1993). Family strains have been found to be particularly relevant in explaining the delinquent behavior of Latino youths (McNulty and Bellair 2003; Rodriguez and Weisburd 1991; Smith and Krohn 1995).

Levels of distress are also predicted to be higher in communities that are viewed as unsafe. Witnessing violence in such neighborhoods is common, as is violent

victimization (Gorman-Smith, Henry and Tolan 2004). Other strains—economic, familial, and educational—are also associated with high crime neighborhoods (Agnew 2006b). Studies of Latino adolescents have shown that exposure to more community violence raises the risk of acting violently (Gorman-Smith, Henry and Tolan 2004; Peacock, McClure and Agars 2003).

Research has shown that more acculturated Latinos are at risk for delinquent behavior (Brook et al. 1998; Samaniego and Gonzales 1999; Vega et al 1995; Wall, Power and Arbona 1993). According to GST, the process of assimilation poses stressful challenges that might raise the risk of counterproductive coping strategies (Agnew 2006b; Perez, Jennings, and Gover 2008). Assimilation often involves the disruption of social networks, parent-child conflict, and language challenges. As a consequence, youths may lose important social resources which would help them successfully manage strain. Communities with large numbers of immigrants do not experience higher levels of violence and may provide social resources which reduce some forms of violent crime (Feldmeyer 2009).

General Strain Theory predicts that strains are likely to be managed criminally if a teenager lacks conventional social support that facilitates more constructive forms of coping (Agnew 2005). Family members, friends, teachers, coaches, religious figures, and others can give advice, emotional support, and other forms of assistance. A strategy for conflict management is an important example of the type of advice that can reduce the odds of violence (Rosario et al. 2003). Research has identified a link between low conventional social support and crime (Cullen 1994; Wright and Cullen 2001).

According to GST, strains are more likely to be converted into illegal behavior if a youth associates with peers who encourage and model deviant coping strategies (Agnew 2006b). Deviant peers communicate beliefs that favor and justify crime. Criminals are more likely to rate objective strains as high in magnitude, and are quicker to make hostile attributions (Bernard 1990). Youths exposed to such individuals are expected to develop a disposition for criminal behavior (Agnew 2006b). The link between delinquent peers and one's own delinquency is well-established (Warr 2002), and studies of Latino youths have reported that more time with delinquent friends raises rates of delinquency (McCluskey and Tovar 2003; Pabon 1998).

General Strain Theory also predicts that the relationship between strains and delinquent behavior will be conditioned by the levels of other variables (Agnew 2006b). In the present study, the degree to which perceived prejudice and academic, family, and neighborhood strains raise the risk of interpersonal violence depend on both the level of conventional social support and the involvement with deviant peers. High levels of social support should reduce the tendency of strains to be managed illegally, while extensive

involvement with delinquent friends should exacerbate the link between strains and violence.

In addition to hypotheses derived from GST and assimilation research, empirical studies point to other predictors of violence. Delinquency appears to increase in the earlier teens, but then declines after mid-adolescence, at least for minor offenders (Farrington 1986; Moffitt 1993). Gender is another important demographic. The higher rate of criminal violence among males is well documented (Moffitt et al. 2002). A number of studies have found that movement away from low-income neighborhoods can reduce the risk of subsequent offending among teenagers (Katz, Kling and Liebman 2001; Ludwig, Duncan and Hirschfeld 2001).

## DATA AND METHODS

Data relevant to the hypotheses described above were taken from The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health). This is a study of a nationally representative sample of American adolescents in grades 7 through 12 conducted during the 1994-95 school year (Harris and Udry 2009). The cohort has been followed into young adulthood, but the present study is based on the first wave of data. In the first stage of Wave I, a stratified, random sample of U.S. high schools was selected. A school was eligible if it included an 11th grade and had a minimum of 30 students. A feeder school which sends graduates to the high school and that included a 7th grade was also selected. In the second stage, an in-home sample of 27,000 teens was drawn consisting of a core and over-samples from each community. For purposes of the present analysis, the sample was limited to those students who described themselves as Latino or Hispanic ( $N = 631$ ).

Regarding violence, students were asked about the frequency of their involvement in the following behaviors: a physical fight, a group fight, carrying a weapon to school, seriously injuring someone, using or threatening to use a weapon to get something from someone, pulling a knife or gun on someone, and shooting or stabbing someone. Scores were standardized and summed to create a violent behavior index (alpha coefficient = .84).

As a measure of perceived prejudice at school, students were asked the extent to which they agree that students at school are prejudiced. Answers to four questions—the frequency of trouble: 1) getting along with teachers, 2) paying attention in school, 3) getting homework finished, 4) and getting along with other students—were standardized and summed to create an index of academic strain (alpha coefficient = .73). Family strain was measured as the sum of three standardized items: the desire to leave home, maternal coldness, and dissatisfaction with the relationship with one's mother (alpha coefficient = .67). (Father-related variables were not included because of too many missing values). For neighborhood strain, a measure was constructed from the

standardized scores of three items: feeling unsafe, dissatisfaction with neighborhood, and a desire to move out of the neighborhood (alpha coefficient = .65).

Three questions were selected to measure various dimensions of assimilation to the dominant culture. 1) Whether or not the respondent was born in the United States measures one's immigration status. 2) The extent to which a child is exposed to mainstream culture in the household is operationalized as whether or not one's mother was born in the United States. 3) Whether or not Spanish (or some other language other than English) is usually spoken at home taps family exposure to mainstream language. While the original plan was to assess the independent impact of each of these three dimensions of assimilation, preliminary analysis revealed that the three items are highly collinear, so an index of assimilation was constructed by summing scores ("yes" responses equal 1 and "no" responses equal 0; alpha coefficient = .78).

Conventional social support is the sum of standardized responses to four questions about the extent to which students feel that adults, teachers, parents and friends care about them (alpha coefficient = .65). Involvement with deviant peers is measured as the sum of three questions concerning the number of best friends who: 1) smoke, 2) drink alcohol, and 3) use marijuana (alpha coefficient = .75). For the control variables, students were asked their current age and their gender (males were scored as 1 and females as 0). Mother's education ranges from no school (scored as 0) to graduate school (scored as 9). Students were also asked if they had moved residence in the past five years.

As described above, General Strain Theory predicts that the effect of strain on illegal behavior will depend on levels of conventional social support, as well as involvement with deviant peers. This implies interaction effects between the various strains, on the one hand, and the two conditioning measures on the other. Four types of strain multiplied by two conditioning variables yields eight predicted interaction effects.

Interaction variables are constructed by multiplying the values of the two component variables together, but a problem with such a strategy is that the interaction variables are frequently collinear with the original measures (Jaccard, Turrissi and Wan 1990). To avoid this problem, the original variables were first centered by subtracting the mean from original values. Following this, the transformed variables were multiplied to create the interactions.

## RESULTS

Table 1 lists the minimums, maximums, means and standard deviations for the dependent and independent measures in the sample of 631 Latino youths. The standard deviation for the violent behavior index ( $SD=5.21$ )

**Table 1. Independent, Dependent and Control Variables, Descriptive Statistics, N = 631 Latino youths.**

<u>Measures</u>	<u>Min.</u>	<u>Max.</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>SD</u>
<i>Dependent Variable</i>				
Violent behavior index	-3.31	38.67	-0.16	5.21
<i>Strains</i>				
Prejudice at school	1	5	3.00	1.19
Academic strain	-3.97	11.51	0.01	2.95
Family strain	-2.53	9.40	-0.06	2.30
Neighborhood strain	-2.85	6.89	-0.04	2.21
Assimilation index	0	3	1.82	1.19
<i>Moderators</i>				
Social support	-15.57	7.07	0.19	2.61
Deviant friends	-2.33	6.17	-0.10	2.40
<i>Controls</i>				
Age	12	21	16.04	1.73
Male	0	1	0.46	0.50
Mother's education	0	9	4.13	2.52
Moved	0	1	0.55	0.50

indicates a great deal of variation in criminal involvement. The mean response on the question about agreeing that students at school are prejudiced is 3.0, indicating that the average student neither agrees nor disagrees. A closer look at the data reveals that 11% of students strongly agree and 27% agree with the statement (percentages are not shown in the table). Standard deviations indicate substantial variation in the level of family (SD=2.30), academic (SD=2.95) and neighborhood strain (SD=2.21) experienced by students. In addition, the mean Latino student is moderately assimilated (M=1.82).

Variation is considerable both for conventional social support (SD=2.61) and the number of deviant friends (SD=2.40). Respondents range in age from 12 to 21, the mean age is 16.04, and 46% of the sample is male. Mean maternal education is 4.13, which indicates that the typical student has a mother who completed high school. Finally, 55% of students moved residence at least once in the past five years.

Table 2 displays the OLS regression coefficients (both unstandardized and standardized) for a model in which the dependent variable is the violent behavior index and the predictors are as follows: perceived prejudice at school, three other types of strain (i.e., academic, family and neighborhood), an index of assimilation, social support, deviant friends, age, gender, mother's education and

residential mobility. This model estimates only main effects. A model that includes interaction effects will be described below.

Agreement that students at school are prejudiced is significantly associated with greater involvement in violence ( $b = 0.28, p < .05$ ). The beta coefficient, however, indicates that the effect is relatively weak ( $\beta = .06$ ). Academic strain, by contrast, is more strongly related to violent behavior ( $\beta = 0.22, p < .001$ ). The effects of family ( $b = .13, p > .05$ ) and neighborhood strain ( $b = .06, p > .05$ ), while in the predicted direction, fail to reach statistical significance. The same is true of assimilation ( $b = .05, p > .05$ ): the coefficient is positive, but more assimilated youths are not significantly more violent.

Offending is negatively and significantly related to conventional social support ( $b = -0.16, p < .05$ ). Having more deviant friends is strongly associated with more violence ( $b = .46, p < .001$ ). The impact of deviant friends ( $\beta = .21$ ), along with academic strain, is the strongest in the model. Older students ( $b = -.38, p < .001$ ) and females ( $b = 1.50, p < .001$ ) commit significantly fewer violent crimes than their counterparts. Finally, the coefficients for mother's education ( $b = -.03, p > .05$ ) and moving in the past 5 years ( $b = -.32, p > .05$ ) are in the predicted direction, but p-values indicate that the associations are not statistically significant. The R-squared statistic shows that

**Table 2. OLS Regression Coefficients, DV = Violent behavior index, N = 631.**

<u>Predictors</u>	<u>b</u>	<u>SE</u>	<u>Beta</u>
<i>Strains</i>			
Prejudice at school	0.28*	0.16	0.06
Academic strain	0.40***	0.07	0.22
Family strain	0.13	0.10	0.06
Neighborhood strain	0.06	0.03	0.03
Assimilation index	0.05	0.18	0.01
<i>Moderators</i>			
Social support	-0.16*	0.08	-0.08
Deviant friends	0.46***	0.09	0.21
<i>Controls</i>			
Age	-0.38***	0.12	-0.13
Male	1.50***	0.39	0.14
Mother's education	-0.03	0.08	-0.01
Moved	-0.32	0.38	-0.03
Constant	4.61*	2.04	
Model chi-square	164.54		
p-value	0.001		
Adjusted R-squared	0.20		

\*p < .05, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001, two-tail test.

20% -- a modest amount -- of the variation in violent behavior is explained by the model's predictors.

Turning to Table 3, OLS regression coefficients are displayed for a model that includes the eight estimated interaction effects in addition to the main effects. Following Jaccard, Turrisi and Wan (1990), an F-test reveals that adding the interactions to the main-effects only model contributes significantly to the model's amount of explained variation ( $F = 4.17$ ). The adjusted R-squared increases from .20 in the main effects model to .24 in the interaction model. Examining coefficients, the results are similar to the main effects-only model, but school prejudice and academic strain are complicated by their interaction with social support. Specifically, the interaction between prejudice and conventional social support is negative and significant ( $b = -.30, p < .05$ ). In other words, the criminogenic effect of prejudice on

violent behavior is strongest when social support is low. The same is true if the focus of analysis is placed on social support: Its reduction of violence is strongest when school prejudice is high and weakest when prejudice is low.

Second, the coefficient for the academic strain/social support interaction is negative and statistically significant ( $b = -.07, p < .01$ ). This means that the impact of academic strain on offending is at its peak when social support is low. Conversely, social support has its strongest violence-reducing effect when academic strain is highest. The strength of the two statistically significant interaction effects is quite considerable, as indicated respectively by the standardized coefficients (betas =  $-.18, -.11$ ). By contrast, the remaining six interaction effects fail to reach statistical significance. Overall, effects tend to exert their influence in a linear rather non-linear fashion.

**Table 3. OLS Regression Coefficients and Interaction Effects, DV = Violent behavior index, N = 631.**

<u>Predictors</u>	<u>b</u>	<u>SE</u>	<u>Beta</u>
<i>Strains</i>			
Prejudice at school	0.29*	0.16	0.07
Academic strain	0.35***	0.07	0.20
Family strain	0.15	0.10	0.06
Neighborhood strain	0.05	0.09	0.02
Assimilation index	0.09	0.17	0.02
<i>Moderators</i>			
Social support	-0.16*	0.08	-0.08
Deviant friends	0.47***	0.09	0.22
<i>Interactions</i>			
Prejudice X social support	-0.30*	0.06	-0.18
Prejudice X deviant friends	-0.08	0.06	-0.05
Academic strain X social support	-0.07**	0.02	-0.11
Academic strain X deviant friends	0.02	0.03	0.03
Family strain X social support	0.04	0.03	0.06
Family strain X deviant friends	-0.05	0.03	-0.05
Neighborhood strain X social support	0.02	0.03	0.02
Neighborhood strain X deviant friends	0.01	0.03	0.01
<i>Controls</i>			
Age	-0.32**	0.12	-0.11
Male	1.62***	0.38	0.16
Mother's education	-0.02	0.08	-0.01
Moved	-0.27	0.37	-0.03
Constant	4.17*	1.99	3.02
Model chi-square	217.28		
p-value	0.001		
Adjusted R-squared	0.24		

\*p < .05, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001, two-tail test.

## DISCUSSION

Results provide some support for General Strain Theory. The link between school prejudice and violence is found here to be statistically significant and of considerable size if both the main and interaction effects are considered together. The results consequently support other research that has tested similar hypotheses (Simons and Burt 2001; Simons et al. 2003; Unnever and Gabiddon 2011; Unnever et al. 2009; Vega et al. 1995). Findings are consistent with the GST hypothesis that experiencing ethnic mistreatment generates aversive emotions which, in

turn, can fuel a violent response. The effect of perceived prejudice appears to operate in tandem with conventional social support. The criminogenic impact of prejudice falls as conventional support is strengthened. As shown previously in research on Latino adolescents (Rosario et al., 2003), conflict with other students is handled more constructively if youths have people to turn to for advice, direction, and emotional support.

The strength of the link between school prejudice and violence reported here is of moderate size, but the connection might turn out to be stronger if students were

asked more specifically about incidents of bias. Items that inquire about discriminatory events directed specifically at the survey respondent are likely to produce stronger results. Mistreatment directed toward the self is likely to be more intensely aversive than a general atmosphere of prejudice, which is what is measured in the present analysis (Agnew 2006b). This is a limitation in using the Add Health data to measure prejudice.

Academic strain strongly predicts violent behavior -- a finding which is consistent with prior research (Agnew 2005; Colvin 2000; Sampson and Laub 1993). An interaction with conventional social support was also found. Evidently, strains at school are more effectively managed if one enjoys a high level of support from parents, adults, teachers, and friends. This finding supports the hypothesis put forth by Agnew (2005) that social support can act as a buffer against strains that might otherwise result in delinquency.

The two other forms of strain – family and neighborhood – are not significantly associated with violence in the present analysis, although coefficients are in the hypothesized direction. Other studies have found that family and neighborhood factors are important in explaining delinquency among Latinos (Gorman-Smith, Henry and Tolan 2004; McNulty and Bellair 2003; Peacock, McClure and Agars 2003; Rodriguez and Weisburd 1991; Smith and Krohn 1995; Sommers, Fagan and Baskin 1994). The measures used here (e.g., dissatisfaction with maternal relationship or neighborhood) probably tap minor levels of strain. Traumatic events and circumstances like experiencing parental abuse or witnessing frequent neighborhood violence are more traumatizing and are probably more relevant predictors of problematic behavior.

While the level of assimilation to the dominant culture is not a direct measure of strain, it does involve stressful circumstances, such as a disjuncture of strong supportive networks, parent-child conflict, and language difficulties (Vega et al. 1993). The coefficient for the assimilation-violence relationship in the present study was positive but failed to reach statistical significance. Other research, by contrast, has reported a heightened risk of delinquency among Latinos who are more assimilated (Perez, Jennings and Gover 2008; Samaniego and Gonzales 1999; Sommers, Fagan and Baskin 1994). Perez et al. (2008) found that the relationship between measures of acculturation and delinquency are non-linear: it depends on the degree of Hispanic concentration. Modeling only the linear relationship might be a limitation of the present analysis. In addition, recent research documenting the “Latino Paradox” (Martinez 2002) points to important social resources and networks which might reduce the relationship between various strains and violence among Hispanic teens—resources and networks which are not modeled in the present study.

Social support has both a linear and an interactive impact on violent offending. Most research has linked social support and delinquency in a linear fashion (Cullen 1994; Wright and Cullen 2001) but the present analysis demonstrates that interactions can exist between strains that motivate deviance and moderators that either reduce or exacerbate the tendency to act inappropriately. The strength of the main effect alone is somewhat weak, but the overall impact is considerable when one also considers the conditioning effects. Specifically, strong social support lessens the criminogenic impact of prejudice and academic strain – evidently by providing the protection and interpersonal resources necessary to manage aversive feelings (Agnew 2005). Moreover, when the focus of analysis is switched, the violence-reducing impact of social support is most powerful when levels of school prejudice and academic strain are at their highest. While most of the interactions examined in the present study do not affect the risk of offending, school prejudice, academic strain, and social support appear to work together in ways that support GST’s emphasis on conditioned relationships.

The positive effect of the number of deviant friends on violent offending is one of the strongest in both the main effects-only and interaction models. A large literature has established the importance of peers in the generation of delinquency (Warr 2002). The relationship is typically explained in terms of social learning (Akers 1998) but research has shown that delinquent peers encourage a youth to perceive strains as unjust, and to react to strain with deviant behavior (Bernard 1990). The interactions between deviant friends and strains in the present analysis, however, failed to reach statistical significance. Evidently, delinquent peers encourage violence in a more straightforward manner and do not condition the influence of various types of strain.

Age and gender are consistently found to be related to offending: older youths are less likely to engage in violence, while males have significantly higher rates. These demographic patterns are well established in the research literature (Farrington 1986; Moffitt 1993). Standardized coefficients indicate that both effects are of moderate size.

The other two control measures—mother’s education and having moved residence in the past five years—are unrelated to the violent behavior index. Coefficients are consistently negative and in the hypothesized direction, but in no case reach statistical significance. Other research has found that residential moves can help Latino youths escape negative influences (Katz, Kling and Liebman 2001; Ludwig, Duncan and Hirschefeld 2001).

General Strain Theory has been shown to be quite effective at explaining interpersonal violence in general (Agnew 2006a; 2006b) and the findings from the present study also demonstrate the usefulness of GST’s focus on the links between minority status, strain, and violence. While level of assimilation did not significantly predict



violence, perceived prejudice at school did. Future research would do well to delve more deeply into the pathways by which minority status, discrimination, and strain are connected to crime and violence among Latinos and how these pathways might differ from those of other minority groups. Focus should be placed on the unique histories and structural conditions experienced by Latinos and the various sub-groups found within that broad category (Stowell and Martinez 2009).

GST is one criminological theory that can illuminate, at the social psychological level, the nature of the discrimination-violence relationship. Exploring the link between discrimination and crime among other minority populations (e.g., African Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans, females, gay males, and lesbians) is an important avenue for future research. Discrimination in contexts other than school—the workplace and the criminal justice system, for example—might also raise the risk of deviant responses. While a number of hypotheses were supported in the present study, data limitations might have prevented stronger empirical support for GST hypotheses. Survey respondents need to be asked about specific, traumatic, and long-lasting events and circumstances and about specific negative emotions if GST is to be properly tested. The explanatory power of the theory warrants sustained inquiry.

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