

Study reveals links between youth victimization, beliefs about government, and political participation

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Young people's views about the government and their level of political involvement are shaped by their life experiences and start developing during adolescence. While most research on this topic focuses on the impacts of positive life experiences, in a paper published in *American Psychologist*, researchers from Baylor College of Medicine explore the links between negative experiences during adolescence, in the form of crime victimizations, and beliefs about government and political participation.

"The motivation behind this study was to gain a better understanding of how these atypical [experiences](#) might intersect with [political involvement](#) and beliefs about government," said first author Dr. Benjamin Oosterhoff, assistant professor of pediatrics in the section of psychology at Baylor. "When going back through the political engagement research, most of it is dedicated to how positive experiences contribute to more involvement, and we didn't really know how [negative experiences](#) can contribute as well. We found that [victims](#) of crime were more discontent with government but also more likely to be engaged."

According to Oosterhoff, a review of victimization and trauma research revealed a common theory that children who endure trauma may experience a violation of an informal social contract between people in society. This contract is essentially an agreement among people to follow laws and not harm one another in order to maintain social harmony,

otherwise there would be social disorganization and violence.

The data that Oosterhoff and his colleagues used came from a separate, ongoing study being conducted by the University of Michigan called [Monitoring the Future](#). For Oosterhoff's study, researchers examined the data collected from separate cohorts of 12th graders each year from 1976 to 2014. The total data set included more than 109,000 students collected over the course of those 39 years and came from approximately 135 different high schools.

"Interestingly, since we used data collected from 1976 and each year up until 2014, we were able to further explore whether link between victimization and political engagement varied by the political administration at the time and see if other types of historical events affected the data over the years," Oosterhoff said.

Seven different types of victimization (being the victim of a crime) scenarios were included in the survey so that researchers could examine whether different types of negative experiences during adolescence are connected with [political engagement](#) and beliefs about the government. Three of the seven scenarios concerned different types of property damage, which referred to if the adolescents had something stolen from them or if somebody ruined something that they owned. The other four concerned threats of physical harm or actual physical harm – both with and without a weapon.

When it came to being unhappy with government, researchers found that experiencing either property damage or physical assault were both connected with greater discontent, although the effects appeared stronger for physical assault. Evidence also showed that victimized youth are more likely to engage in politics, potentially as a means of producing [social change](#).

In the future, Oosterhoff would like to test these findings longitudinally in order to find out whether victimization experiences in high school predict later [political participation](#) and discontent with government.

"Our results show that there is a clear motivation for victimized youth to be engaged in politics," Oosterhoff said. "Recognizing and incorporating the perspectives of victimized youth as agents of social change may be one way to help enact public policy that reduces youth victimization while simultaneously promoting more favorable attitudes toward [government](#), facilitating knowledge of political systems and bolstering greater political efficacy. There is a rich area here to do a lot of good for both society and for our youth."

More information: Civilization and Its Discontented: Links Between Youth Victimization, Beliefs About Government, and Political Participation Across Seven American Presidencies.

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Provided by Baylor College of Medicine

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