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University of Missouri- St. Louis Comprehensive School Safety Initiative (UMSL CSSI)

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Draft Final Summary Overview

University of Missouri-St. Louis Comprehensive Safe Schools Initiative (UMSL CSSI)
January 2016 - December 2020

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Award No. 2015-CK-BX-0021

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Original Proposed Research Design

The original proposal identified districts and schools that participated in the NIJ funded national evaluation of GREAT (2006 to 2012). One objective linked to the proposed design was examination of how rapid technological changes affected school safety and related policies. Unfortunately, efforts to recruit these school districts were not successful. Reasons for declining participation included poor timing (district already engaged in research projects), new policies forbidding research examining offending, drug use, or gangs (i.e., core elements when studying school safety), and unwillingness to commit the district to a three-year project.

As a result of these responses from the GREAT sites, a change of scope request was approved. The original proposal included four areas of interest critical to understanding the root causes and consequences (i.e., correlates) of school violence; only one area of interest (investigating the “longitudinal patterns of the short-term and long-term changes in these correlates of school violence over time”) was affected and subsequently dropped as a result of the change of scope. In its place, the re-design allowed examination of similarities and differences in school safety across a range of contexts, including school districts that represent schools with diverse student populations (ranging from predominantly African-American to predominantly White; and free and reduced lunch eligibility ranging from percentages in the teens to high 90s). Similarly, of the six objectives detailed in the proposal, only one would be unanswered: “Descriptively outline the long-term (ten-year) changes in the patterns of school violence and related outcomes ... and explore how the correlates of school violence, including bullying and cyberbullying, have changed over this period by comparing the 2016-2018 data with 2006-2008 GREAT data.” The other five objectives detailed in the original proposal were addressed in the revised plan.

Change of Scope Project Overview

The research was housed at the University of Missouri-St. Louis which is located in a metropolitan area that offers a diverse setting with respect to school contexts. This multi-year study investigates the causes and consequences of school victimization (e.g., property theft, minor assault, bullying, cyberbullying) as well as factors contributing to safe learning environments (e.g., school disciplinary practices, students' willingness to report dangerous behavior, availability and utilization of victim services). The project includes the following components: 1) three annual surveys of students initially enrolled in 12 middle schools in St. Louis County; 2) a summer component conducted over two summers consisting of in-depth interviews with a subsample of students; and 3) two anonymous surveys of school personnel.

There are three areas of interest that guide our project and are associated with better understanding of the root causes and consequences and correlates of school violence:

- 1) identification of patterns of school violence: two student cohorts were surveyed over three years as they transitioned from middle to high school (7th/8th grades to 9th/10th);
- 2) identification of correlates of school violence from multiple contexts, including: the **individual** (e.g., gang membership, attitudes toward violence), the **school** and school climate (e.g., willingness to report, awareness and utilization of victim services, views on the procedural justice of school disciplinary practices, gang presence at the school) and the **situation** (e.g., where, when, and with whom violence occurs); and
- 3) a specific examination of bullying and cyberbullying as unique forms of school violence.

Research Design

The research design included **three annual surveys** of two cohorts of students initially enrolled in the 7th and 8th grades during the 2016-2017 school year. These same students were

surveyed as 8th and 9th grade students in 2017-2018 and as 9th and 10th grade students in 2018-2019. These grades were selected to allow assessment of 1) developmental changes during a critical period of adolescent development and 2) school transitions (the longitudinal design allows researchers to assess the effects of transitioning from middle school to high school on a range of topics). A second component of the research design included **in-depth interviews** with a subsample of students during the summers of 2018 and 2019. These interviews provide more detailed information about victimization experiences, perceptions of school safety and the factors that affect these perceptions, and contacts with the police. A third component of the research design involved anonymous **surveys of school personnel** during the first year of the study (when all students were in middle school) and during the third year (when all students were in high school).

Site Selection:

The City of St. Louis, similar to other Rust Belt cities, has experienced a net population decline in the course of the past 100 years. Much of this population shift can be attributed to the mobility of middle class, mostly white residents out of the city and into the surrounding counties, primarily St. Louis County. The out-migration also included working-class African American residents to close-in municipalities in the County. To capitalize on the diversity of schools in St. Louis County we strategically contacted school districts with the goal of including schools that would provide a diverse representation of school contexts based on a range of factors, including geographic location, school size, racial composition, and percent of students eligible for free and reduced lunch. Our efforts included contacts with 23 school districts in the city or county of St. Louis. These efforts included introductory email and/or phone conversations with the district superintendent or assistant superintendent and requests to meet in person with them and/or their

leadership team. In email correspondence we included a one-page overview of the project to give the superintendent a basic idea of the study. We subsequently met in person with 15 district teams; eight of the original districts declined the opportunity to participate without any further conversation other than the initial phone or email contact. Of the 15 districts we met with in person, six ultimately agreed to participate. Nine districts declined (reasons included unwillingness to commit to three years, concern with “loss of instructional time”, and belief that the survey questions were too sensitive). Thus, of the 23 districts solicited, six agreed to participate and 17 districts declined our invitation to participate in the research.

There were 12 middle schools in these six districts (three districts had one middle school each, one had two, another had three, and the last one had four) with approximately 4,700 7th and 8th grade students. The six participating districts represented a diverse sample of schools in the St. Louis region and serve students with varying socio-economic backgrounds. For example, five schools had more than 80% of students receiving free and reduced lunch; four schools had between 41% and 67% of students on free and reduced lunch; and three schools had less than 41% of students receiving free or reduced lunch.

Active Parental Consent:

One challenge to conducting school-based research is obtaining active parental consent for student participation. All six districts approved our strategy of recruiting classroom teachers to collect the consent forms for the project. This process included compensating teachers \$2.00 for each consent form that was returned by students in their classes. To encourage participation, teachers also were provided an incentive based on the percent of students returning consent forms (i.e., \$10 for 70%; \$20 for 80%, \$30 for 90% and \$40 if all students in a class returned a signed form). At the time of the consent process (primarily in January – February 2017), there

were 4,719 students enrolled in 7th and 8th grades in the twelve schools; of these students, 3,663 (77.6%) returned positive parental permission forms while 165 (3.5%) parents refused; an additional 891 (18.9%) students failed to return a signed form. The important role of teachers in this process is witnessed by the fact that consent rates varied significantly by classroom (from 31% to 100%), between schools (62% to 89%), and across school districts (ranging from 70% active parental consent in one district to 84% in another). These consent rates allow us to have considerable confidence in the generalizability of our results.

Student Sample

Wave 1 surveys were administered between January and May 2017; of the active consent sample, 3,640 (99.4%) assented and completed the initial online survey through Qualtrics™. All of the school principals were accommodating and allowed research team members to return multiple times in efforts to survey students who had been absent during the initial visit.

Wave 2 surveys were completed during winter/spring 2018 with most of the surveys completed during January through March with “cleanup” running into April and early May. As expected, there had been considerable mobility since sample selection in 2017 and students were enrolled in more than 180 different schools (many of these schools were outside of the St. Louis metropolitan area and the majority of schools included only one student from the sample). Survey efforts were focused on schools in the original six districts and those in adjacent districts with more than 10 participating students enrolled. During the data collection period researchers made more than 100 visits to 33 schools to attain a response rate of 86.4% (N=3,165). Students were surveyed in the original 12 middle schools, the nine high schools in the original six school districts, three schools handling special populations (52 students), and nine schools outside of the original districts (49 students).

During W3 (January – May 2019) a total of 2,753 students completed the survey (75.2%). By this point in time, the vast majority of students had matriculated to high school so most of the students were surveyed in one of the nine high schools serving the six districts. Students were also surveyed in other locations, including four alternative schools in the districts (20 students), and four high schools not in the original districts (63 students).

The sample at Wave 1 was relatively evenly split by grade level; there were more females (54%) than males (46%) and most youth lived with two parents (54%) although a quarter of students lived in single-parent households. The sample was racially/ethnically diverse, with White youths (38%) and Black youths (42%) accounting for 80 percent of the sample. Seven percent was multi-racial and the remaining 14 percent were classified as “other.” Reflecting the initial grade levels of this sample at Wave 1, approximately half of the students were 13 years old, 20 percent were 12 or younger, and about a third were 14 or older.

At the school level, there was considerable variation, especially as it pertains to race/ethnicity and living arrangements. Individual schools ranged from less than one percent to 80 percent of students who are White and between six and 84 percent of students who are Black. With regard to living arrangements, schools range between 22 and 83 percent of students who live with both parents, whereas 8 to 51 percent live in single-parent households.

Summer Component

A second component of the study consisted of in-depth interviews with a subsample of students. The intent of this component was to obtain more detailed information about victimization experiences. As such, the summer sample was selected using a purposive sampling frame that identified Wave 2 survey respondents who had experienced one or more of the following: traditional bullying, cyberbullying, police contact, theft, involvement in fights, and/or

assaults. A list of 734 potential respondents was identified and assigned to interviewers. The summer interview guide was semi-structured, allowing interviewers to probe for more details about the youth's experiences. Interviewers participated in a two-day training session prior to receiving interview assignments. Interviews were conducted in confidential settings in the youth's homes (often on a front porch) and ranged in time from 20 minutes to over an hour. Respondents were paid \$20 for their time. A total of 197 youth were interviewed (52% female, 56% black, and 29% white). The summer interviews initiated in summer of 2018 were continued during the summer of 2019. This second round of interviews with 37 youth sought to obtain more detailed and nuanced information about perceptions of school safety and police contact.

School Personnel Survey

A third component of the research design involved anonymous surveys of school personnel during the first year of the study (when all students were in middle school) and during the third year of the study (when all students were in high school). Computer-assisted questionnaires were created covering a range of topics overlapping with those included in the student questionnaires. These topics include perceptions of school climate, school safety, and reporting of various school policies and services.

During Wave 1 (January – April 2017), these questionnaires were distributed electronically to the principals of each of the 12 middle schools in the participating districts so that each principal could directly contact faculty and staff in their school. In Wave 3 (January – April 2019), questionnaires were distributed to the principals of the 9 high schools in the study districts. Principals were instructed to distribute the questionnaire to teachers, administrators, counselors, or other school staff who routinely interact with students. To ensure anonymity, principals used their own methods to distribute the electronic questionnaire link (e.g., school

listserv). We did not receive information regarding the number of personnel who received the survey in each school, therefore, we cannot calculate response rates. During both waves of data collection, site coordinators offered numerous updates to principals, informing them of the number of responses collected from their school's personnel and encouraging more participation. In total, 409 personnel completed questionnaires during Wave 1, ranging from 16 respondents at one school to 53 at another. In Wave 3, 354 usable questionnaires were submitted, ranging from 10 at one high school to 75 at another. Respondents at both W1 and W3 were disproportionately female, white, and likely to have worked at the same school for six or more years.

Project findings and implications for criminal justice policy and practice:

At the outset of this report, we detailed three broad areas of research interest identified in the original proposal. We briefly summarize project findings in each of these areas and provide reference to products that provide more detailed information.

Patterns of school violence:

Students who are victimized engage in a number of strategies to avoid repeat victimization, including not going to school. A significant number of students report avoiding specific locations in schools to reduce their likelihood of further victimization. (Fact Sheet 5)

In contrast to a common belief that the transition from middle school to high school is associated with adverse consequences, we found that this transition may bring positive change as it is associated with meaningful decreases in problem behaviors. (Fact Sheet 11)

The mass school shooting at Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida occurred in the midst of the Wave 2 student surveys. Examination of responses prior to and subsequent to the shooting revealed some short-term effects of the shooting on students. For students surveyed after the shooting, there was an increase in perception of school disorder,

greater concern about kids bringing guns to school, and greater fear of being attacked or threatened at school. Importantly, these effects appear to be short-lived but it is also important to control for school demographics; the effects of the shooting were more pronounced in schools with characteristics similar to those at Parkland. (Fact Sheet 8; O’Neill et al. chapter)

In the aftermath of the shooting in Parkland, Florida a state-appointed commission recommended that trained teachers be allowed to carry concealed handguns on K-12 campuses. Most students in the St. Louis County school districts are not only against this policy but the majority of students report they would feel LESS safe if teachers were armed. (Fact Sheet 10; Shamserad et al. research paper; Shamserad thesis)

Correlates of school violence:

Consistent with prior work, we found that approximately 5% of youth were gang members and that the membership tended to be transitory (80% were members during only one year) but during membership, offending and victimization were at elevated levels. Online activity was slightly more common among gang members but it does not appear that online peers influence delinquency above and beyond the influence of offline peers. The effect of gang membership on delinquency has serious ramifications for prevention efforts; preventing youth from joining gangs, even for one year, has significant effects on delinquent behavior and victimization both in and out of school. (Fact Sheets 4 and 12; McCuddy and Esbensen chapter)

Teachers and students assess the school climates similarly. In schools where students report a better than average school climate relative to students at other schools, so do the school personnel. For schools with low levels of support, initiatives to increase student-teacher collaboration in the classroom can promote the overall perceptions of supportive school environments. (Fact Sheet 6; O’Neill and Vogel article)

Students who are suspended report lower levels of both school commitment and school climate than their peers. The question remains whether being suspended “causes” lower school commitment and perceptions of school climate, or whether low school commitment and poor perceptions of school climate “cause” suspension. (Fact Sheet 7)

A sizable number of students have encountered the police one or more times. Importantly, police contact can shape youth’s perceptions of the law as well as their behavior during future encounters. Contacts at school, however, are less likely to involve searches and the use of force and less often result in additional justice system responses. This suggests that police are likely responding to minor misbehavior in schools rather than more serious offenses. (Fact Sheet 13; Wiley and Slocum research paper; Wiley et al. research paper)

Bullying and cyberbullying

Measurement is important; the prevalence of bullying varies substantially based on definition. Using a generic measure of bullying (asking students if they have been bullied) 17 percent of students report being bullied during the prior 6 months. However, when using a behavior specific definition with multiple behaviors included, almost half (47%) of the Wave 1 sample was bullied. For cyberbullying victimization, the prevalence rates range from 6% for a generic measure to 20% for the behavior specific standard. Importantly, cyberbullying, for the most part, does not involve a unique group of victims; most cyber victims already experience traditional bullying. (Fact Sheets 2, 3, and 9; McCuddy and Esbensen research paper).

Products:

During the course of the funding period (January 2016 – December 2020), the project produced the following: two project reports; 13 Fact Sheets; a number of publications including two book chapters, two journal articles, one completed Ph.D. dissertation, one Ph.D. dissertation

in progress, one M.A. thesis; 11 research papers; and 25 professional conference presentations (3 additional presentations planned in 2020 were cancelled due to COVID-19). Detailed information is presented below:

Project Reports:

“University of Missouri-St. Louis Comprehensive School Safety Initiative Report to Participating Schools: Student Survey Results.” (Summer 2017)

“University of Missouri-St. Louis Comprehensive School Safety Initiative Report to Participating Schools: School Personnel Survey Results.” (Summer 2017)

Fact Sheets:

Fact Sheet #1: “Overview of the UMSL Comprehensive School Safety Initiative.” (McCuddy, Esbensen, Doherty, Slocum, Medel, O’Neill, Taylor, Vogel, & Thomas). (August 2018)

Fact Sheet #2: “Prevalence and Overlap of School Bullying and Cyberbullying.” (McCuddy & Esbensen). (August 2018)

Fact Sheet #3: “Measuring Bullying and Cyberbullying Victimization.” (McCuddy & Esbensen). (August 2018)

Fact Sheet #4: “Gang Involved Youth and Their Impact on School Climate.” (Esbensen & McCuddy). (August 2018)

Fact Sheet #5: “School Victimization and Avoidance Behaviors.” (Doherty, Esbensen, & McCuddy). (August 2018)

Fact Sheet #6: “Comparing Student and Personnel Perceptions of the School Environment. (O’Neill, Esbensen, & Doherty). (August 2018)

Fact Sheet #7: “Suspensions, School Commitment, and Perceptions of School Climate.” (Medel, Doherty, & Esbensen). (August 2018)

Fact Sheet #8: “Exploring the Potential “Parkland Effect” on Students’ Sense of School Safety.” (O’Neill, McCuddy, & Esbensen). (March 2019)

Fact Sheet #9: “Do Students Understand Bullying? Comparing Experiences and Perceptions.” (McCuddy, Green, & Esbensen). (August 2019)

Fact Sheet #10: “Pistol Packing Teachers: What Do Students Think?” (Shamserad, McCuddy, & Esbensen). (August 2019)

Fact Sheet #11: “Delinquency, Victimization, and Bullying Over the High School Transition.” (O’Neill & Doherty). (August 2019)

Fact Sheet #12: "The Role of Online Communication among Gang and Non-Gang Youth." (McCuddy & Esbensen). (August 2019)

Fact Sheet #13: "Police Contact Outside of and in School." (Wiley & Esbensen). (September 2019)

Publications:

Timothy McCuddy. 2018. "Online Socialization and Delinquency: Expanding the Study of Peer Influence in Criminology." Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Missouri-St. Louis.

Jennifer L. O'Neill, Timothy McCuddy, and Finn-Aage Esbensen. 2019. "Perceptions of school safety in the aftermath of a shooting: Challenge to internal validity?" In Mathieu Deflem and Derek M.D. Silva (eds.). *Methods of Criminology and Criminal Justice Research*. Sociology of Crime, Law, and Deviance, Volume 24. Bingley, UK: Emerald Publishing.

Jennifer L. O'Neill and Matt Vogel. 2019. "School Cohesion Perception Discrepancy and Student Delinquency." *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*. 49, 1492-1502.

Timothy McCuddy and Finn-Aage Esbensen. 2020. "The Role of Online Communication Among Gang and Non-Gang Youth." In Chris Melde and Frank Weerman (eds.). *Gangs in the Era of Internet and Social Media*. New York: Springer.

Faraneh Shamsrad. 2020. "Race Differences in Youths' Attitudes Towards Arming Teachers: Investigating the Role of Procedural Justice." M.A. Thesis. University of Missouri-St. Louis.

Timothy McCuddy. Forthcoming. "Peer Delinquency among Digital Natives: The cyber context as a source of peer influence." *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*.

Research Papers in Progress

Elaine Eggleston Doherty and Jennifer O'Neill. "'Normative' Adolescent Delinquency, School Context, and Psychosocial Development."

Dale Dan-Irabor. "Is Respectful Treatment Enough? The Implications of Youth's Accounts of Police Behavior for their Subsequent Perceptions of the Police"

Dale Dan-Irabor, Lee Ann Slocum, and Stephanie Ann Wiley. "The Effects of Prior Expectations about Police Behavior on Future Police Experiences and Outcomes."

Timothy McCuddy. "Digital Disclosure of Delinquency: Peer Influence and the Sharing of Crime Online."

Timothy McCuddy and Finn Esbensen. "The Bullying Definitional Dilemma: Understanding the Association between Offline/Online Peer Victimization and Delinquency."

Timothy McCuddy, Faraneh Shamsrad, and Finn-Aage Esbensen. "Arming Teachers as a Response to School Violence: How Fear and Risk Influence Perceptions."

Jennifer O’Neill. “Schools on the Front Lines of Governance: How the Merging of Criminal Justice and Education Shapes Adolescent Perceptions and Behavior.” Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Missouri-St. Louis (expected completion 2022).

Faraneh Shamserad, Timothy McCuddy, and Finn-Aage Esbensen. “Pistol Packing Teachers: What do students think?”

Lee Ann Slocum, Dale Dan-Irabor, and Stephanie Ann Wiley. “The Consequences of Criminal Justice Contact for Youth’s Construction of Citizenship.”

Stephanie A. Wiley, Lee Ann Slocum, and Finn-Aage Esbensen. “Location, Location, Location: Variability in the Predictors of in-School versus Out-of-School Police Contact.”

Stephanie A. Wiley and Lee Ann Slocum. “Legitimacy Eroded? An Examination of Students’ Perceptions of Police Contact Inside and Outside of Schools.”

Presentations:

Finn-Aage Esbensen, Elaine Eggleston Doherty, Lee Ann Slocum, and Stephanie A. Wiley “School Safety Research: Challenges to Implementation.” National Institute of Justice Comprehensive School Safety Initiative Conference, Alexandria, VA. May 8-9, 2017.

Finn-Aage Esbensen. “Overview of the UMSL School Safety Initiative.” American Society of Criminology 2017, November, Philadelphia.

Terrance J. Taylor. “The Many Meanings of School Safety: Implications for Estimating the Scope of Safety in Schools.” American Society of Criminology 2017, November, Philadelphia.

Jennifer Medel and Matt Vogel, “Spatial inequality, relative deprivation, and extralocal neighborhood influences on youth offending.” American Society of Criminology 2017, November, Philadelphia.

Lee Ann Slocum and Stephanie A. Wiley, ‘Race, Space and Policing: Growing up in St. Louis in the Post-Ferguson Era.’ American Society of Criminology 2017, November, Philadelphia.

Timothy McCuddy. “Expanding the Study of Peers and Crime: A Cyber-contextual Model of Peer Influence.” American Society of Criminology 2017, November, Philadelphia.

Timothy McCuddy and Finn-Aage Esbensen. “What’s Social Media Got to Do with It? A Gang and Non-Gang Comparison.” Eurogang Workshop, June 2018, Almen, NL

Dale Dan-Irabor, Lee Ann Slocum, and Stephanie Ann Wiley. “The Effects of Prior Expectations about Police Behavior on Future Police Experiences and Outcomes.” American Society of Criminology 2018, November, Atlanta.

Jennifer O'Neill and Timothy McCuddy. "Perceptions of school safety in the aftermath of a shooting: Challenge to internal validity?" American Society of Criminology 2018, November, Atlanta.

Timothy McCuddy. "Peer Delinquency and Digital Natives: Exploring the moderating effect of online peer delinquency." American Society of Criminology 2018, November, Atlanta.

Stephanie A. Wiley, Lee Ann Slocum, and Finn-Aage Esbensen. "If You Label Me, You Negate Me: Examining Race Differences in Deviant Identity." American Society of Criminology 2018, November, Atlanta.

Matt Vogel and Jennifer Medel. "Neighborhood Homicide and Adolescent Well-Being." Western Society of Criminology 2019, February, Honolulu.

Stephanie Ann Wiley, Lee Ann Slocum, and Finn-Aage Esbensen. "Variability in the Correlates and Consequences of Police Contact In and Out of Schools." Western Society of Criminology 2019, February, Honolulu.

Lee Ann Slocum, Dale Dan-Ilabor, and Stephanie Ann Wiley. "The Consequences of Criminal Justice Contact for Youth's Construction of Citizenship." Western Society of Criminology 2019, February, Honolulu.

Jennifer Medel and Finn-Aage Esbensen. "Academic Consequences of Suspension." Western Society of Criminology 2019, February, Honolulu.

Jennifer O'Neil and Elaine Doherty. "Transitioning to High School: Exploring Changes in Student Perceptions and Experiences." Western Society of Criminology 2019, February, Honolulu.

Timothy McCuddy and Cherrell Green. "Perceptions of bullying at school and online: Implications of Bullying Measurement." Western Society of Criminology 2019, February, Honolulu.

Cherrell Green and Timothy McCuddy. "Understanding and defining bullying: An exploratory qualitative examination of student perceptions." Western Society of Criminology 2019, February, Honolulu.

Timothy McCuddy and Finn-Aage Esbenen. "The Unique Effect of Online Peers: A gang and non-gang comparison." 19th Eurogang Program of Research. Canterbury, UK. June 2019.

Finn-Aage Esbensen & Timothy McCuddy. "The Role on Online Communication among Gang and Non-Gang Youth." European Society of Criminology, September 2019. Ghent, Belgium.

Faraneh Shamsrad, Timothy McCuddy, & Finn-Aage Esbensen, "Pistol Packing Teachers: What do students think?" American Society of Criminology, November 2019. San Francisco, CA.

Jennifer O'Neill. "High School Transition as a Life Course Transition: Student delinquency and victimization changes through grade level." American Society of Criminology, November 2019. San Francisco, CA.

Timothy McCuddy. "An Empirical Test of Virtual Differential Association." American Society of Criminology, November 2019. San Francisco, CA.

Stephanie Ann Wiley, Lee Ann Slocum, Finn-Aage Esbensen. "Differential Consequences of Police Contact In and Out of Schools." American Society of Criminology, November 2019. San Francisco, CA.

Timothy McCuddy. "Digital Disclosure of Delinquency: Factors Related to Online Sharing of Offline Crime." Annual Meeting for the Criminology Consortium (Online - November 2020).