

SOCIAL VIOLENCE

The Effects of Community Violence on Child Development

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Introduction

The communities that children grow up in can have a profound effect on the adults they become. Many children are raised in calm and supportive environments with a wealth of resources. At the other end of the spectrum, millions of children grow up under conditions of adversity. This often translates into the absence of basic resources necessary for development. But adversity can also reflect heightened exposure to negative events that shape life outcomes.

Exposure to community violence is among the most detrimental experiences children can have, impacting how they think, feel and act. Community violence refers to interpersonal violence in the community that is not perpetrated by a family member and is intended to cause harm. It can be a by-product of different circumstances, ranging from neighbourhood crime and violence to ongoing civil conflict or war. Exposure to violence is defined as the vicarious experience of violence (e.g., hearing about violence), being the direct victim of a violent act, or witnessing violence involving others.¹

Sadly, in the U.S. and internationally, too many children and youth experience high levels of community violence exposure. For example, in a nationwide survey in the U.S., 55% of adolescents reported some type of exposure to community violence.² In the U.S. at this time, homicide is the second leading cause of death for youth between the ages of 10 and 24, although this figure includes family violence and other types of violent victimization.³ These high rates extend to involvement with lesser types of violence. For example, according to the Youth Risk Behavior Survey, conducted annually with a nationally representative survey of high school students, 32% of youth report having been in one or more physical fights in the last year.³ Although violence cuts across social and demographic lines, exposure to community violence is highest in inner city and urban poor neighbourhoods.¹

Recent Research Findings

What is the impact of violence exposure on child development? One clear message is that “violence begets violence”— children who experience violence are more likely to become ensnared in a cycle of violence that leads to future violent behaviour, including aggression, delinquency, violent crime and child abuse.⁴ This holds true for all types of childhood violence exposure including, but not limited to, community violence.

In addition, violence exposure has been shown to contribute to mental health problems during childhood and adolescence. Psychiatric disorders including depression, anxiety and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are found at higher rates among youth exposed to community violence.⁵ Many children experience more than one symptom or disorder. For example, in a national survey of adolescent exposure to violence, nearly half of boys diagnosed with PTSD had a diagnosis of comorbid depression, and nearly a third had a comorbid substance use disorder. Among the girls diagnosed with PTSD, over two-thirds also had a diagnosis of comorbid depression and one-quarter had a comorbid substance use disorder.⁶

PTSD symptoms have been found to have a graded relationship to community violence exposure where higher levels are associated with increased symptom expression.² In adolescence, PTSD symptoms may manifest as externalizing behaviours when youth are hyper-aroused and over responsive to perceived threat; conversely, youth may appear depressed and withdrawn. Studies typically find gender differences in outcomes, with boys becoming more aggressive and girls becoming more depressed as a result of community violence exposure.⁷

In addition to documenting the impact of violence on child outcomes, a growing body of research has examined the processes underlying the heterogeneity of this impact, particularly for children of different ages. Violence exposure influences development across multiple domains and at different stages. It can impact children’s neurological, physical, emotional, and social development, often leading to a cascade of problems that interfere with adjustment.

For very young children, repeated exposure to community violence can contribute to problems forming positive and trusting relationships necessary for children to explore their environment and develop a secure sense of self.⁸ Difficulties forming these attachment relationships can interfere with the development of a basic sense of trust and compromise future relationships well into adulthood. Of particular concern is the effect of these experiences on the child’s developing brain. Further, because the brain develops in a sequential fashion, disruptions early in life can set in motion a physiological chain of development that becomes increasingly difficult to interrupt. For children who are “incubated in terror,” the neurobiological adaptations that allow the child to survive in violent settings can ultimately lead to violence and mental health problems even when they are no longer adaptive.⁹

Human survival depends on activation of the “fight or flight” response in response to potential threats. Yet for some children, heightened exposure to community violence creates a constant state of fear, activating the stress response apparatus in the central nervous system. This portends a host of problematic outcomes, including hypersensitivity to external stimuli, an increased startle response, and problems with affect regulation.¹⁰ These reactions set the stage for mental health problems, distorted cognitions and problem behaviours.

The connection between community violence exposure, social cognitive development, and behaviour is best illustrated by examining the mechanisms implicated in the cycle of violence. As children grow up and develop a

more sophisticated cognitive understanding of the social world, the neurodevelopmental blueprint linked to early violence exposure can easily translate to a distorted worldview. For some children (particularly boys), it can lead to hypervigilance to threat, misattribution of intent and willingness to endorse violence.¹¹ As these patterns of cognition become increasingly stable over time, they can lead to characteristic patterns of thinking and action associated with aggressive and violent behaviour.¹² In essence, these internalized schemas about the need for and appropriateness of aggression serve as mechanisms through which community violence contributes to future aggressive and violence.¹³

Research Gaps

Community violence does not occur in a vacuum. It often co-occurs with other types of violence. In particular, for young children the family is the primary source of violence exposure, although this exposure frequently is greater for children living in high-violence communities.^{8,9} Although prior studies have addressed the importance of the broader ecological context, it still is the case that most studies examine the effects of violence exposure within a single context. Further, children and youth exposed to high levels of community violence typically experience other stressors or risk factors in their communities, families or among peers. It is important for studies to disentangle the effects of multiple stressful experiences on development and to identify the unique contribution of violence exposure.

In general, research has considered “violence exposure” as a single phenomenon, with few studies examining the unique effects of hearing about violence, witnessing violence or being a victim of violence. These effects may also vary by age. Of critical importance for prevention and intervention, future research can build on studies of resilience (adaptation in the face of adversity) to highlight individual and contextual factors that foster adjustment in violent settings (although clearly a preferred solution would be to decrease levels of violence exposure). Indeed, most youth exposed to community violence do not experience negative outcomes.¹⁴

Conclusions

In the U.S. and internationally, children frequently are exposed to high levels of community violence. Recent surveys estimate that more than 50% of children and youth have experienced some level of community violence exposure. This experience has been shown to have a negative impact on development leading to increased emotional, social, and behavioural problems. A robust finding is the link between violence exposure and later aggression and violence, referred to as the “cycle of violence.” In other words, children who see or experience violence around them are more likely to use violence as they get older and into adulthood. The effects of violence exposure are particularly problematic for young children and have been shown to adversely impact brain development. Disruptions early in life can set in motion a physiological chain of development that becomes increasingly difficult to interrupt. In addition to higher levels of aggressive behaviour, psychiatric disorders including depression, anxiety and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are found at higher rates among youth exposed to community violence. Still, most youth who grow up in violent settings do not develop mental health or behaviour problems, although more research is needed to understand specific processes of resilience.

Implications for Parents, Services and Policy

It goes without saying that the most important response to community violence exposure is to work

collaboratively to reduce violence in the settings where children grow up. There are many examples of community-based strategies to reduce violence that have been effective. Parents can also limit children's exposure to violence, even in more violent neighbourhoods, by carefully monitoring and supervising their activities. They can also curtail violence exposure in other settings, for example, by limiting children's exposure to violent television, movies and video games. Given that violence exposure impacts children's stress reactivity, prevention and intervention programs that help children understand and manage stress are an important ingredient in promoting resilience and adjustment for children exposed to violence.

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