Community/ Environmental Violence

Children's Exposure to Community Violence

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Respondent: Tony Whitehead, Ph.D.

Recent reports describe a distressing trend in lethal violence: while homicide is remaining the same or slightly decreasing in the general population, youth homicide has increased dramatically in the last decade (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1994). A recent analysis found that homicides among 15 to 19 year old males increased 153 percent between 1985–1991 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1994a), and more recent information suggests even greater increases. For example, in Chicago, the number of child homicides (those 14 years or younger) in 1995 is considerably ahead of that for the previous year. According to the *Chicago Tribune*, which for the last two years has published a tally of homicide victims age 14 or younger, 30 children were killed in the first four months of 1995, compared to 67 for all of the previous year; disturbingly, 10 of those children were the victims of child abuse (Martin, 1994). The trend is clear—more children are dying violently at younger ages. Furthermore, the prediction based on demographics (i.e., increasing numbers of youth coming into adolescence), income trends, and family structure is that the situation will get worse. For the African American community and its adolescent males, who currently have a homicide rate approximately ten times that of Whites, this is indeed grim and distressing news (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1994b).

Given the level of violence in many inner–city communities, and particularly among youth, it is clear that youth are exposed to considerable violence as victims, or even more so as witnesses and friends or family, of those who are killed. An issue for practitioners, and increasingly for policy makers, is the impact of this violence on the youth who live in these environments. The current paper reports on a program of research at the Community Mental Health Council, a mental health center on the southside of Chicago, that examines the extent and impact of violence exposure among several samples of African American children (Shakoor & Chalmers, 1991; Bell & Jenkins, 1993; Jenkins & Bell, 1994).

Violence Exposure

Our first study on children and violence was an exploratory survey of 536 elementary school children in the spring of 1985 (prior to the dramatic increase in homicides) (Jenkins & Thompson, 1986; Bell & Jenkins, 1993). In grades 2, 4, 6, and 8, the children were from three elementary schools located in moderately violent, moderate to low income neighborhoods. The children were asked a number of questions about their aggressive behavior and that of those around them; they were also asked (almost as an aside) whether they had ever seen someone shot or stabbed.

The most surprising finding of the study was the extent to which these children had witnessed violence. One in four (26 percent) had seen someone shot and 30 percent had seen someone stabbed. Furthermore, witnessing violence was not linearly related to age among these 7 to 15 year olds; a finding so unexpected that it suggested that the children didn't understand the question. However, several years later Dubrow & Garbarino (1989) published a report on a small sample of mothers in a public housing development in Chicago in which all ten of the mothers reported that their children had witnessed a shooting by age 5. That initial exposure occurs at such early ages is indicative of the general level of violence in these communities.

In 1988 and 1989, over 1000 students, ages 10 to 19, were asked about their violence exposure during their participation in violence prevention workshops (Shakoor & Chalmers, 1991; Uehara, Chalmers, Jenkins & Shakoor, unpublished). In addition to witnessing violence, they were asked more detailed questions on the types of violence witnessed and the characteristics of the victims; they were also asked about their own personal victimization.

The majority of these students had witnessed violence. Three out of four students had witnessed a robbery, stabbing, shooting or killing. Thirty–nine percent had witnessed a shooting and almost a quarter (24 percent) had seen a killing. Many of the victims were known to these children, 50 percent of the shooting victims were either a classmate, friend, neighbor, or family member, as were 40 percent of those murdered. In terms of victimization, they were most likely to report that they had been threatened with a knife (23 percent), gun (17 percent), or had been "shot at" (11 percent). An examination of factors related to exposure found that the strongest predictor of witnessing, victimization, and perpetration was weapon carrying.

Our most recent study of 200 high school students in a high violence neighborhood examined the consequences of violence exposure, characteristics of the youth and of the incident which mediated the impact (Jenkins & Bell, 1994; Jenkins, in press). Not surprisingly, reports of exposure had increased dramatically from the earlier studies. Almost two–thirds (60.9) had seen a shooting and close to one–half (47 percent) had seen a stabbing (See Figure 1). Three in five of those witnessing a shooting or stabbing indicated that the incident ended in a death. An index designed to capture the closest relationship of the victim of this violence indicated that for 70 percent of those witnessing severe violence, the victim was a friend or family member. Twenty–four youths (12 percent of the total sample) reported that the victim was a sibling or parent. About a quarter of these students had been personally victimized: shot, stabbed, raped, severely beaten, or robbed with a weapon. Almost half of the students reported that they had been shot at by others. With the exception of rape, in which victims were overwhelmingly female, boys reported significantly more victimization than girls.

Other research on violence exposure has consistently found high levels of exposure among youth in moderate to high violence neighborhoods. A study of Detroit youth visiting a medical clinic found that over 40 percent had seen a shooting (Schubiner, Scott & Tzelepis, 1993). Fitzpatrick and Boldizar (1993) found a similar rate for youth witnessing a killing in a sample of 7–18 year olds residing in a housing development. In a more elaborate study, Richters & Martinez (1993) found that 31 percent of a sample of fifth and sixth graders in Washington, DC, had seen a shooting.

Psychological Distress

The research indicates that children are affected by their experiences with violence, although

many factors will determine the eventual impact (Bell & Jenkins, 1991). Clinical work with children who have been exposed to acute violence (i.e., sniper shootings and kidnapping) has found that the children display many of the symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Pynoos and Nader, 1988; Terr, 1991). Such symptoms include re–experiencing the traumatic event in play, dreams or intrusive images or sounds, psychic numbing characterized by subdued behavior and inactivity, avoidance behaviors, startle reactions, and sleep difficulties. Children exposed to chronic violence may develop a sense of hopelessness regarding the future and have difficulty forming close personal relationships.

Specific manifestations of the trauma are a function of age and the developmental level of the child. Younger children may regress into earlier stages of development while adolescents often engage in high–risk and self–destructive behaviors (i.e., drug use, delinquency, and violence) (Pynoos & Eth, 1985; Pynoos & Nader, 1988). For all ages, the trauma may manifest itself in poor school performance and increased aggression. Not only is the child's response to the trauma affected by his or her developmental level, but the trauma may disrupt or "throw–off" the developmental trajectory. Children who experience violence are often changed by that experience.

Studies of children exposed to violence, primarily African Americans, using self–report measures of PTSD symptomatology, have found a significant relationship between violence exposure and PTSD symptomatology (Singer, Anglin, Song & Lunghofer, 1995; Martinez & Richters, 1993; Osfosky, Wewers, Hann & Fick, 1993; Fitzpatrick & Boldizar, 1993). For example, in our high school survey we found that children, particularly girls, who had witnessed violence reported more intrusive thoughts, nervousness and fear, startle reactions, and avoidance of reminders of bad events (Jenkins & Bell, 1994).

Many factors affect the relationship between violence exposure and the appearance and severity of subsequent symptoms. For example, physical closeness to the incident, an indicator of life–threat, has been found to be strongly related to the child's reaction (Nader, Pynoos, Fairbanks, & Frederick, 1990). Not surprisingly, relationship to the victim mediates the impact of the traumatic event. Children are most affected by incidents involving individuals close to them. One study found that only violence involving known others impacted the child (Martinez & Richters, 1993). In our survey of high school students, victimization of a family member, whether

witnessed or not, was as strongly correlated with psychological distress as personal victimization (Jenkins & Bell, 1994). Violence within the family seems to be particularly traumatic to youth (Osfosky et al., 1993; Jaffe, Wolfe, Wilson, & Zak, 1986).

One of the more interesting findings of our survey of high school students was the role of gender. We, along with others (Singer et al., 1995; Fitzpatrick & Boldizar, 1993), found that girls exposed to violence display more distress symptoms than boys. Furthermore, we found a different pattern of results for boys and girls. Boys were much more affected by victimization, whereas girls were more affected by witnessing. In comparison to boys, girls had higher scores on psychological distress, which was also strongly related to witnessing. Among boys, the strongest relationship was between exposure and risk behaviors (i.e., weapon carrying, fighting, drug and alcohol use). In fact, for boys, the strongest relationship in the data was between victimization and weapon carrying.

More research is needed on gender differences in response to trauma. Our results suggest the importance of looking at the effects of violence exposure separately by gender. The data also suggests that females may be more vulnerable to the stressors of living in violent environments.

Fearfulness and the Presence of Other Stressors

In addition to specific issues of violence exposure, our high school study also looked at other stressors in these children's lives and their reports of fearfulness (as potential mediators of the impact of violence). These results indicate that these children are aware of the dangers in their environment and are subjected to many other stressors, apparently unrelated to violence.

More than half of these students do not feel safe outside of their homes. Feelings of unsafety ranged from 50 percent of students not feeling safe in their neighborhood, to almost three–fourths (72.7 percent) not feeling safe on the school ground (See Figure 2). Girls were considerably more fearful than boys in these areas. An analysis of the relationship between fear, violence exposure and distress found that fear was independently related to distress for girls, but mediated the impact of victimization for boys (Jenkins & Bell, 1994). Additional analyses of that data indicates that while fear in the home is not very high (9 percent), it is nonetheless a strong predictor of psychological distress.

For children in these environments, rarely is violence the only stressor to which they are exposed. Communities in which violence is the greatest are often characterized by poverty, itself a chronic

stressor which produces other problems. Students in our sample reported a relatively high number of stressors in the six months prior to the survey. These students reported an average of three and one half stressful events in the previous year (i.e., parent job loss, family illness and death, legal problems). Other research in our locale found similar results with elementary school children and noted that these numbers are much higher than those experienced by children in less disadvantaged neighborhoods (Attar, Guerra, & Tolan, 1994). Thus, violence exposure, indeed a serious stressor with its implications of life threat, becomes one of many stressors in already trying circumstances. And as previously noted, it is the presence of multiple stressors which place individuals at increased risk for negative outcomes (Masten, Best & Garmezy, 1990).

Conclusions

The picture that emerges for many children in poor neighborhoods is one of chronic threat, frequent losses, and other stressors which together can have a cumulative, possibly multiplicatively negative effect on the child's development. Also, embedded in these findings are issues of family—the relationship between the child's aggression and that observed in the family, the negative affect of family violence on the child, and the negative impact of the victimization of family and friends. The family also figures prominently in the literature on resiliency, which describes factors that can, and often do, protect children in these high risk environments. Such factors include the importance of a close caring relationship with an adult, effective parenting in the face of danger, and a stable, safe home environment to provide an escape from the danger of the neighborhood (Masten et al., 1990). Clearly, in addition to reducing the poverty and inequality which is fueling the violence in these neighborhoods, energy must be invested in enhancing the strengths of these families as they cope with these adversities.

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Response:

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The participants attending the Institute on Domestic Violence in the African American Community are well aware of the rising trends of violence in the United States and that African Americans are disproportionately represented as both victims and perpetrators of crime. As such, my response to Dr. Jenkins' paper, *Children's Exposure to Community Violence*, will not provide more statistics on such trends, but rather will address her discussion of the *impact* of violence on children. The significance of Dr. Jenkins' findings has serious implications for the future of African Americans as a people and the United States as a world leader. Thus, her call for future research related to her findings is a call that all violence researchers and policy makers should take very seriously, especially researchers and policy makers of African ancestry.

One of the more important findings discussed in Dr. Jenkins' paper is the discussion of children showing symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as a possible consequence of exposure to violence. Dr. Jenkins cites the work of a number of researchers whose findings are similar to her own. The characteristics shown by children exposed to violent environments include such symptoms as:

- re–experiencing the traumatic events during play
- dreams or intensive images or sounds related to violence
- psychic numbing characterized by subdued behavior and inactivity
- avoidance behaviors
- startled reactions
- sleep difficulties

This issue has important research implications for African Americans. The relationship of PTSD symptoms to child development issues explored by Dr. Jenkins and others suggests that children who are exposed to large amounts of violence may develop a sense of hopelessness regarding the future and may have difficulty forming close personal relationships. Practitioners can see this behavior occurring in the African American community. It is not unusual for children to talk about their own funerals and for youth to not see their lives beyond their twenties. Researchers also need to study the conjugal male/female relationships in the Black community, not simply as phenomena of study in themselves; but also why such phenomena exist, and how they contribute to what I call a "cultural ecology of violence" that is so prevalent in our communities. A better understanding of the *why* and the *how* of such violence will contribute to effective policies and programs to curtail its incidence, prevalence, and impact. We also need more research on the impact of violence on the daily interactions and other types of relationships in African American communities, including various relationships to the wider American society.

Dr. Jenkins cites the work of Pynoos and Eth (1985) and Pynoos and Nader (1988) pointing out that younger children may regress to earlier stages of development while adolescents often engage in high risk and self destructive behaviors (i.e., drug use, delinquency, and violence). The field certainly needs further research on this issue. Since adolescence, particularly among males, is characterized generally by more risky behavior, this developmental behavior may be greatly aggravated by children growing up in an environment characterized by violence. This phenomenon could certainly have a relationship with the current pattern of "brothers killing brothers" and the fact that homicide is now the leading cause of death among African American males between the ages of 15 and 34 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1994a, 1994b).

Dr. Jenkins' discussion of the impact of stressful environments and the exposure to violence suggests there is a need for multi–disciplinary, multi–method, ecological research initiatives that will address the problem of violence in African American communities. She notes that the subjects of her research experienced a relatively high number of stressors in the six months prior to being surveyed. Many of the children reported an average of 3.5 stressful events in the previous year (i.e., parent loss, family illness and death, legal problems, etc.). Of course, poverty and all of its circumstances, play an important role in Dr. Jenkins' work. She cites similar findings in the work of Attar, Guerra, and Tolan (1994), and also notes that they found

these numbers to be much higher than those experienced by children in less disadvantaged neighborhoods. Jenkins also states that violence exposure, with implications of life threat, becomes one of many stressors in already trying circumstances. It is the presence of multiple stressors which places individuals at increased risks for negative outcomes (Masten, Bext, & Garmezy, 1990).

Dr. Jenkins notes that her study indicates that children are aware of the dangers of their environment and are subject to many other stressors unrelated to violence (e.g., more than half of these students do not feel safe outside of their homes). Research by Whitehead in Baltimore, Maryland, found similar issues:

Many of the mothers in the study talked about not allowing their children to visit or stay overnight at other children's homes, sometimes even if they knew parents, because they "didn't know what these people did in their homes, they could be selling drugs or doing other things." Parents stated that they included the homes of some relatives in this sense of caution. The researchers were struck by this because of how freely they allowed their children in the suburbs to stay overnight at friends' homes after having met their parents once or twice. Like Dr. Jenkins' research, this study found that the Baltimore parents "anthropomorphized" the streets and spoke of the "streets" as a thing, with statements such as: "if you don't have your children well trained by the time they are 14, the streets take them and you lose them forever." —Tony Whitehead, Ph.D., Institute on Domestic Violence in the African American Community, Minneapolis, Minnesota, June 1, 1995.

Dr. Jenkins also discusses the impact of violence exposure on children and family dynamics. She found that children are most affected by incidents involving individuals close to them. She cites Martinez and Richter (1993), who found that only violence afflicting known others impacted the child witnessing the incident. In her work, Dr. Jenkins found that the victimization of a family member, whether witnessed or not, was as strongly correlated with psychological distress as personal victimization (Jenkins & Bell, 1994). Dr. Jenkins suggests there is a relationship between a child's aggressive behavior and aggression found in the family. She also discusses the role of resiliency factors that can and often do protect children in high risk environments:

- the importance of a close caring relationship with an adult
- effective parenting in the face of danger
- a stable, safe home to provide an escape from the dangers outside the home
- community institutions

Dr. Jenkins argues that while attempts are needed to reduce the poverty and inequality that fuel the violence in these neighborhoods, energy must also be invested in enhancing the strengths of these families as they cope with these adversities.

Finally, Dr. Jenkins addresses the different responses to violence between young boys and girls. She found that children, particularly girls, reported more intrusive thoughts, nervousness, fear, startled reactions, and avoidance of reminders of bad events. In her discussion of exposure to violence and the internalization of environmental fear, Dr. Jenkins found that girls were considerably more fearful than boys. She found that fear was independently related to distress for girls, but mediated the impact of victimization for boys. Similar to the findings of others, Jenkins found that girls exposed to violence display more distress symptoms than boys (Singer et al., 1994; Fitzpatrick & Boldizar, 1993). Moreover, boys were more affected by victimization, whereas girls showed higher scores on psychological distress, which was strongly related to witnessing violence. Among boys, there is a strong relationship between exposure to violence and risk behaviors (i.e., weapons carrying, fighting, drugs and alcohol abuse). For boys, she found a significant correlation between victimization of family members and psychological distress; for girls, a similar relationship appeared for victimization of friends and distress. Dr. Jenkins states that her data also suggest that females may be more vulnerable to the stressors of living in violent environments.

This author shares Dr. Jenkins' call for more research on gender differences in response to trauma. For example, if researchers find that girls tend to be more vulnerable to exposure to

violence, might that also be related to such issues as the continued trend of the gaps between Black and White women in terms of adverse pregnancy outcomes (i.e., low birth weights, very low birth weight, and infant and maternal mortality), even when we control for education and income levels? Could holistic, multi–disciplinary, multi–method studies help researchers and practitioners better understand ethnic differences in environmental stressors, including chronic or traumatic exposure to violence? If researchers find that boys respond to victimization, they may also find a link between such behavior and a construct of masculinity that values control and power in relationships with others. These are areas in which multi–disciplinary, multi–method approaches to the study of violence could make large contributions to our understanding of violence and to the development of effective prevention and intervention programs.

In closing, please permit me to place the significance of Jenkins' paper into a broader anthropological perspective. In the opening paragraph of this response, I suggested that the issues raised in Dr. Jenkins' paper have serious implications for the future of not only African Americans as a people, but also for the United States as a world leader. My reasoning for this comment is based on: (1) the impact of violence and other social stressors on basic institutional life, particularly family life, and on the socialization processes of children; and (2) the fact that with the projected increase of African Americans—and members of other communities of color being disproportionately affected by violence, particularly Latinos—in the immediate demographic projections for the country, America's capacity for competing in the global economy is being severely undermined. To further clarify these points, I will close with a discussion of them from the cultural ecological perspective of an anthropologist.

Cultural ecological perspectives are those that look at the relationship between environment and culture. Culture provides humans with an advantage in adapting to whatever environments they inhabit, and those patterns of adaptation over time become components of the cultural system of that population. Stated in another way—at the heart of the survival of human populations is the ability of those populations to interact with the environment so that (environmental) agents supportive of life and well being outweigh those that are deleterious to the life and well being (quality of life) of the members of such populations. I refer to this relationship (supportive environmental agents outweighing deleterious ones) as a positive ecological balance. A basic assumption of organic survival is that there is a positive correlation between positive ecological balance and the potential for the survival and quality of life for the

population occupying a particular environmental niche. The stronger the positive ecological balance, the greater the potential for the survival and well being of the population.

To establish, maintain, and strengthen a positive ecological balance, human communities adopt patterns of social interaction and cooperation which, with repetition (usually over generations), become social institutions. Thus, there is a mutually supportive relationship between the maintenance of a positive ecological balance and the persistence of adaptive human social institutions. For example, a positive environmental balance supports a community's institutional life and a strong institutional life, with its characteristics of cooperation and collaboration in meeting basic human needs, supports the maintenance of a positive environmental balance.

Historically, life in America for persons of African ancestry has been characterized by *chronic environmental stressors* that have persistently threatened the survival and/or well being of African Americans as a people, as well as the institutional life of African American communities. At the heart of human institutional life, cross-societally and historically, are the concepts of family and kinship. In a word, notions of the family and kinship have historically been the foundation upon which other institutional life, and thus community itself, were built. Similarly, the survival of Africans in the Americas has been due to the institutional responses of African Americans as a people in response to such stressors (i.e., the evolution of such institutions as extended family systems, holistic religious institutions, informal patterns of adoption, and a flexible use of kinship patterns and kinship terminology) (Whitehead, 1989).

Within the last two decades, African Americans have had to deal with environmental stressors that may be the most devastating in their history as a human population. Included among such contemporary stressors are the rising trends in violence, along with a decrease in economic opportunities, increasing trends in drug use and trafficking, an increase in the incidence of AIDS, and an increase in African American incarceration rates. As indicated in the discussion by Jenkins, the violence epidemic strikes at the very heart of the notion of family life. It affects conjugal (male–female sexual) relationships, the bond upon which the human family is initiated. Again, because population survival is studied in intergenerational terms, perhaps even more significant to the survival of a people is the impact of environmental stressors on their children as the link to succeeding generations. When viewed from this perspective, the impact of increasing environmental violence on the personality development of African American children, as discussed

by Dr. Jenkins, is quite sobering.

Earlier, I mentioned the possible emergence of a cultural ecology of violence. Here, the reader should take note that my use of culture and cultural systems is not a reference to African Americans as an isolated group, but as an integral component of the larger U.S. cultural system. Another way of defining a cultural ecological perspective is to view cultural systems emerging as a result of a shared process of internalizing social and psychological responses to environmental stimuli across generations. As violence increases in the environments in which our children live, its impact as outlined in Dr. Jenkins' discussion would suggest *the possible emergence of a violence centered cultural ecological pattern.* The prospects of such a phenomenon do not project well, either for the future of African Americans, or for the country as a whole. To reiterate a point made earlier, African American youth, along with the youth of other communities of color, particularly Latino, will be represented in greater proportions in succeeding generations of American society. We know that Latino communities are also being disproportionately affected by increasing trends in violence (Freidenberg 1995; Tardiff et al., 1994 and 1995; Vega & Amaro, 1994). We also know, as Dr. Jenkins points out, that *the strongest correlate of violence in all American communities is not ethnicity, but poverty* (Durant, et al., 1994; Department of Justice, 1990).

We are aware of the fact that, given the country's current economic problems, there is a rapidly growing White "underclass" which is taking its place beside the poorest of the poor in communities of color. We need research that looks at violence "holistically," in terms of contributors to violence and its impact and across ethnic groups. The evidence is overwhelming and increasing. If we do not come to understand better and to address the impact of deleterious environmental agents, such as violence against our children, the consequences will be felt even more, as our children will be represented in greater proportions in our next generation of adults. This will surely impact on America's capacity to compete among the world's economic powers and on the persistence, institutionalization, and strengthening of a vicious cycle of poverty and violence.

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