



Impact of Community Violence on Youth

Community violence is a global health issue that warrants immediate attention and action. Youth are among the most vulnerable to the effects of violence, particularly those that live in environments with chronic violence, such as Bogotá, Colombia.



Figure 1 Photograph by Columbia ART. Public Domain

Bogotá, Colombia is a relatively high-crime city in a country affected by more than 50 years of civil war. Research investigating how, where, when, and why community violence affects youth is

Living in neighborhoods with high homicide rates has a negative impact on youth mental health, even if youth are not directly victimized by violence.

needed to design interventions and policies that aim to

protect youth and support their communities.

Our study explored how local homicides affect youth mental health problems and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in Bogotá, Colombia. Additionally, we tested how elements of support, safety, neighborhood risk, and direct violence exposure (such as being attacked) affect the relationship between indirect community violence exposure and youth mental health.

Highlights

Community violence impacts all youth, not just youth who are directly exposed to the violence.

Youth who perceive their neighborhoods as safer report fewer mental health problems than those who perceive their neighborhoods as more dangerous.

Methods

We measured homicides within different distances from youth participant's homes to see how violence occurring within the community impacts PTSD severity and mental health disorders. We asked how community violence impacts PTSD and mental health beyond the influence of direct violence exposure, social support, and neighborhood risk.

Results

- Youth living in neighborhoods with more homicides have worse mental health and more severe PTSD symptoms, even when controlling for the relative contribution of direct violence exposure.
- Youth who perceive their neighborhoods as safer reported less mental health problems than those who perceive their neighborhoods as more dangerous.
- The impact of community violence on mental health was worse for youth living in impoverished neighborhoods versus higher income neighborhoods.

HOW DID A COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE INFORM YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE ISSUES, RESULTS, AND IMPLICATIONS?

As Community Psychologists, we are concerned with how our environments affect well-being and our abilities to thrive. These results confirm that living in a violent neighborhood is detrimental to these goals. The results tell us that youth who live in more violent, lower income, and less safe communities have worse mental health.

What Does This Mean For?

Practice: All youth who live in highly violent neighborhoods need mental health support, and not just those who are directly victimized.

Social Action: Community violence is not just a public health problem: it is also a health disparity. Neighborhoods facing high violence and poverty need additional support to help youth thrive.

Research and Evaluation: Additional research should focus on how living in a violent neighborhood impacts other areas of youth functioning such as academic achievement.

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