



Nuancing Community Violence Exposure

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Community violence exposure (CVE) can have a negative impact on the mental health and well-being of adolescents. We identified patterns, severity, and frequency of CVE reported by African American adolescents over time. This helps us to better understand the experience of CVE for these youth and the potential impact of CVE on their well-being.



Figure 1 Photograph by Ryan McGuire of Bells Design. CCO.

“Community-engaged, culturally grounded interventions that seek to address risk factors associated with CVE may aid in protecting youth from community violence exposure or reducing the impact of such exposure.”

This study identified factors that may lead to increased CVE, which can guide policies and prevention programs designed to protect African American adolescents from community violence and promote positive community-wide outcomes.

The participants in this study were African American adolescents living in low-resourced urban neighborhoods. This study explored if these adolescents' exposure to violence in their communities changed or remained stable over time.

Highlights

Many African American adolescents living in low-resourced urban neighborhoods experience high exposure to community violence.

Exposure may vary over time and be influenced by individual- and contextual-level factors.

Adolescents who reported more community problems, more access to community resources, and more depressive symptoms were more likely to experience being a victim of community violence.

Identifying specific risk factors associated with more chronic and severe exposure may guide preventive intervention efforts.

We also tested if individual factors (e.g. depression), and environmental factors (e.g. community resources) influence how likely African American adolescents are to be exposed to community violence.

Methods

Data were collected from 9th and 10th grade students living in urban areas between 2014 – 2016. Study participants reported on their experiences with CVE at four time points over the course of the two years. We examined the extent to which adolescents: a) witnessed or were victimized by community violence, b) whether these experiences with CVE changed or remained stable over time, and c) whether individual and environmental factors influenced the experience of CVE.

Results

- At each of the four time points, three patterns of CVE were identified: (a) low witnessing and low victimization (LW-LV), (b) high witnessing and low victimization (HW-LV), and (c) high witnessing and high victimization (HW-HV).
- One-third of adolescents reported stable CVE across all time points. On the other hand, two-thirds of adolescents experienced at least one change in their pattern of CVE between time points. This suggests that, although stability of CVE may be expected in the short term (i.e., over the course of one year), we can expect some change in CVE over longer periods of time.
- Nearly one-third of adolescents were in the HW-HV group at some point during the study.
- Adolescents who reported more community problems (e.g., crime, boarded-up homes), access to community resources, and more depressive symptoms were more likely to experience violent victimization.

HOW DID A COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE INFORM YOUR WORK?

A Community Psychology perspective led us to examine adolescents' exposure to community violence within their broader social environment. Our results suggest that the community problems and resources accessible to African American adolescents influence their exposure to community violence. A Community Psychology perspective also helped us to identify the importance of community-engaged, culturally grounded prevention programs that protect adolescents from risk-factors for CVE identified in our study.

What Does This Mean For?

Research and Evaluation: Our study outcomes expand our understanding of how patterns of CVE change over time for African American adolescents living in low-resourced urban neighborhoods. Our study outcomes also point to individual and community-level factors that influence how likely these youth are to experience CVE, which may guide future research and evaluation on prevention programs.

Practice: We promote community-engaged, culturally grounded prevention programs that protect adolescents from exposure to community violence and address individual (e.g., depression, hopelessness) and environmental (e.g., community problems) that are associated with increased violence exposure.

Social Action: Many African American adolescents living in low-resourced urban neighborhoods experience high levels of CVE. Our study supports that community-engaged social action is important to reduce rates of community violence exposure experienced by African American adolescents. This social action can include collaborating with adolescents, families, and other community members to change policy that affects community violence.

Similar Settings: People working in low-resourced urban neighborhoods should consider that African American adolescents' exposure to community violence may change over time. Because of this, it may be necessary to actively monitor adolescents' exposure to community violence and its impact on their well-being. People working in similar settings should also recognize the importance of promoting positive community-wide social change to protect adolescents from community violence exposure.

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