IT'S IN MY HOOD: UNDERSTANDING AFRICAN AMERICAN BOYS' PERCEPTION OF SAFETY IN THEIR NEIGHBORHOODS

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Youths' perceptions of their neighborhood are shaped by continued exposure to neighborhood influences. African-American boys in poor, urban contexts are more directly affected by their neighborhoods and are more likely to develop related difficulties such as victimization experiences, and exposure to violence. This study examines African-American boys' perceptions of safety in their neighborhood. Data were collected in 1994 from 553 African-American males at the baseline of an intervention study - the Aban Aya Youth Project (AAYP) - among inner city youth in 12 schools from poor, metropolitan Chicago neighborhoods. We found a significant influence for the interaction between collective efficacy and violent experiences on perception of neighborhood safety. The findings highlight how both neighborhood strengths and risks interact to influence the functioning of African-American boys in disadvantaged communities. More importantly the study demonstrates how neighborhood support or neighborhood collective efficacy can be especially protective to African-American boys in high-risk urban settings. © 2016 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

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High crime rates, drug activity, and violence among other disadvantages characterize poor, urban neighborhoods. These characteristics have been associated with higher levels of psychological difficulties and violence for youth living in these neighborhoods (Neumann, Barker, Koot, & Maughan, 2010). African American adolescents are more likely than their Caucasian counterparts to live in poor, urban neighborhoods (McNulty & Bellair, 2003). They are also more likely to suffer negative outcomes, including violence victimization (Neumann et al., 2010; Overstreet & Braun, 2000). Adolescents who are exposed to negative experiences in their neighborhoods may feel more vulnerable and think of their neighborhoods as unsafe. Given recent fatal interactions between law enforcement and Black males in various parts of the United States (e.g., Fergusson), we add to the limited literature investigating African American boys' perception of their neighborhoods. Multiple risks in poor neighborhoods have been identified in the literature; however, little attention has been paid to boys' perception of safety in their neighborhoods. This study investigates individual, family, and neighborhood factors that are related to African American boys' feelings of safety in their neighborhoods.

African American boys' perception of neighborhood safety offers a way to better understand the social context in which these boys develop. Negative behaviors in these contexts may be understood as a function of the perpetual fear and vulnerability that remain largely unexplored, especially for African American boys. We addressed these research gaps by examining how distal factors like neighborhood characteristics, and more proximal ones like parental and individual factors may explain the perception of safety for African American boys who live in urban neighborhood. We use the risk and resilience model (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005) to explore how African American boys continue to function positively while faced with risks.

The risk and resilience framework accounts for the influence of protective factors attenuate an individual's risk exposure (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). Protective factors are categorized as assets or resources. Assets are internal strengths that the individual employs to reduce the negative influence of risks on outcomes, while resources are external to the individual and reside in the environment and in important persons in the individual's life. The prevailing behaviors of the neighborhood and influential persons in the child's life help to determine youths' behaviors (Brown et al., 2005). We specifically account for the social influence of parents and the neighborhood in this study.

Few studies have explored the neighborhood, family, or individual factors that may explain youths' perception of safety in their neighborhoods or investigated this issue in African American boys. In this study we considered a characteristic of the neighborhood environment (i.e., collective efficacy/support) as well as the individual (i.e., violent experiences) to examine boys' perception of neighborhood safety. In the accompanying literature review, we discuss the relationship between neighborhood disadvantage and neighborhood safety. We then investigate the link between collective efficacy and positive outcomes for African American boys while considering the effect of a personal strength (i.e., self-efficacy to avoid violence), a personal risk factor (i.e., violent experiences), and a family strength (i.e., parent risk communication) in relation to youths' feelings of safety in their neighborhood.

Neighborhood disadvantage and neighborhood safety. Disadvantaged neighborhoods are characterized by structural (e.g., high unemployment rates) and social process (e.g., weakened forms of formal or informal social controls) challenges (Chung & Steinberg, 2006). Social controls and supports in neighborhoods direct community members toward a set of shared principles, norms, and practices of civic life (Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls,

1997; Chung & Steinberg, 2006). Constellations of weakened structural and social factors are found in most disadvantaged neighborhoods, and are related to increased levels of antisocial behavior among youth (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). Not surprisingly, youth may feel unsafe in neighborhoods with resource deficiencies and reduced collective efficacy.

Neighborhood level structural and social disadvantages are linked to criminal behavior including robbery, burglary, assault, and murder (Neumann et al., 2010; Osgood & Chambers, 2006; Sampson et al., 1997). These risks are also related to lowered perceptions of neighborhood safety, especially for young victims of violence. Adolescents in these neighborhoods are also at risk for perpetuating similar acts (Neumann et al., 2010). However, in neighborhoods where there is an increased sense of collective efficacy, reductions in youth violence, delinquency, and related issues have been noted (Molnar, Cerda, Roberts, & Buka, 2008; Fagan, Van Horn, Hawkins, Arthur, & Catalano, 2007).

Youth in high-risk neighborhoods are more likely to view the world through a lens of unpredictability and danger and to respond with fear and feelings of vulnerability based on these internalized attributions (Brunton-Smith, 2011; Overstreet & Braun, 2000; Price-Spratlen & Santoro, 2011). Apart from possible social isolation, and depression among other negative outcomes, youth who continue to live under these conditions may resort to violence as a way to avoid possible victimization or as retribution (Fagan et al., 2007). However, some youth who have been exposed to neighborhood risks have avoided reflecting this behavior, or have reduced their involvement (Farrington & Welsh, 2006; Lösel & Bender, 2003); though, youth who live in positive neighborhoods are much better off and do not live in fear.

Collective efficacy. Collective efficacy refers to neighbors' belief that they are connected to each other and are working toward shared goals (Sampson, 2011; Sampson et al., 1997; Sampson, Morenoff, & Raudenbush, 2005). Collective efficacy therefore includes neighbors' shared social bond and their willingness to support and defend the common good (Sampson et al., 1997).

Youth who have supportive interactions with peers, parents, and other adults have a more positive worldview. On the other hand, violence in the immediate neighborhood shakes one's view of the world as a safe, fair place (Lynch & Cicchetti, 1998) and is linked to reduced feelings of safety (Hartinger-Saunders, Rine, Nochajski, & Wieczorek, 2012). Social support and other elements of collective efficacy are protective for youth. Collective efficacy fosters self-confidence and positive behavioral changes (e.g., Gaylord-Harden, Ragsdale, Mandara, Richards, & Petersen, 2007). Consistent with the resilience framework, social support within neighborhoods and other forms of collective efficacy are protective factors for African American boys. Just as critical as collective efficacy, is the individual's perception of his own ability to avoid violence in the future.

Self-efficacy to avoid violence. African American boys' perception of their ability to avoid violence in the future may be related to how safe they feel in their own neighborhoods. While the literature has explored the link between youths' exposure to violence and their self-efficacy to avoid violence, few if any studies have connected self-efficacy to avoid violence to neighborhood safety. The link between these factors has also not been examined for African American boys; therefore, we make some associations based on related areas of research.

Whereas exposure to violence is related to lower self-efficacy to avoid violence (Kuther, 1999), intervening resources such as supportive parenting and positive neighborhood role

models might buffer this relationship and increase self-confidence in avoiding violent behavior (self-efficacy; Gaylord-Harden et al., 2007). African American boys living in less safe neighborhoods are more likely to exhibit externalizing behavior problems (Peeples & Loeber, 1994). Peeples and Loeber (1994) found that after controlling for individual factors, boys who lived in neighborhoods defined as underclass (e.g., welfare use) were more likely to engage in delinquent behaviors including violence. Increasing African American boys' ability to avoid or safely negotiate unsafe situations in their neighborhood while reducing the likelihood of neighborhood dangers may increase youth self-efficacy. This may also improve their perception of their neighborhoods as safe.

Violent experiences. Exposure to violence includes hearing, seeing, or otherwise experiencing violence whether at home, at school, or in the neighborhood (Kliewer et al., 2004). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) report high levels of physical violence (31%) among high school youth, with more than 4% being injured and needing medical attention CDC (2010). African American males have higher prevalence rates of exposure to violence (43%) compared to their female (30.1%) and White counterparts (32%). More than 80% of youth in poor, urban neighborhoods witness some form of violence, with more than 70% as victims of violence (Cooley-Strickland et al., 2009). These youth are more likely to think of their neighborhoods as unsafe and to develop negative behaviors as a result.

Whereas a large body of research has focused on the effects of exposure to neighborhood violence on youth health outcomes, relatively little research has explored factors that influence perception of neighborhood safety (Overstreet & Braun, 2000). The structural and social deficits in these neighborhoods are signs of social disorder and low collective efficacy. Low levels of neighborhood cohesion make individuals easier targets for delinquent and criminal behaviors (Hartinger-Saunders et al., 2012; Sampson et al., 1997) or for witnessing violence (Miller, Wasserman, Neugebauer, Gorman-Smith, & Kamboukos, 1999). Other demographic factors (e.g., parent's education, household income, and child's age) are also related to exposure to violence (Eriksson, Cater, Andershed, & Andershed, 2010; Pardini, Loeber, Farrington, & Stouthamer–Loeber, 2012).

Experiences of victimization in one's neighborhood are traumatic. Using a quasi-experimental design, Maschi, Perez, and Tyson (2010) investigated the relationship between violence exposure, perceptions of neighborhood safety, and adaptive functioning among 300 inner city youth aged 7–12 years. They found that perception of neighborhood safety was negatively related to victim status or having witnessed violence in the neighborhood. Victims of violence reported more feelings of vulnerability in their neighborhood and less adaptive functioning. Researchers also found that participants who had witnessed higher levels of violence 1 year before the study were worse off than those who reported more recent though lower levels of violence. Researchers suggest that this difference may be related to individual feelings of safety, in which the worldview remained intact when violence happened to others, but not when it happened to them (Maschi et al., 2010).

Violent experiences, especially as a victim, are an assault on the individual's perception of the world as a safe place (Lynch & Cicchetti, 1998). Continued exposure to violent experiences could lead adolescents to perceive their neighborhood as a dangerous place rather than as the haven of safety (Bloom, 1997) necessary for proper social, intellectual, and physical development. Parental behaviors (e.g., communication) may protect African American youth from the negative effects of their neighborhoods.

Parental Influences

Communication about fighting. Youth who receive messages from their parents renouncing violence are less likely to engage in violent behaviors. Parents' messages to their children, especially about risks, mirror their own experiences with their neighborhood (Lindstrom Johnson, 2011; Robinson, Paxton, & Jonen, 2011). Parents may convey fewer messages about avoiding violence and other risks if they think that those risks do not exist in their neighborhood at sufficiently alarming levels.

These kinds of conversations allow parents to transmit values and alternative strategies for dealing with stressful situations. Previous research has found that parents' own attitudes toward violence have direct predictive effects on youth violence, even after youths' attitudes are considered (Copeland-Linder et al., 2007). Parents are likely to convey their attitudes about violence during conversations with their children, thus shaping youths' perception of neighborhood safety. For example, parents' communication with their children about violence may moderate the relationship between psychological distress and violence exposure at the school or neighborhood level (LeBlanc, Self-Brown, & Kelley, 2011). This kind of supportive parenting validates youths' experiences and may interact with neighborhood collective efficacy to become protective.

Parental education. Parent educational attainment is directly tied to the family's economic and social stability and socioeconomic status (SES) residence as well as access to social resources (Knoester & Haynie, 2005). Youth in these underresourced neighborhoods are less exposed to prosocial adults and peers (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, & Aber, 1997; Harding, 2009), which could lead to feeling less safe. There is also an established link between parental education and parenting practices, with lower levels of education being associated with less warmth, an authoritarian parenting style, and in some cases abuse and maltreatment (Zhang & Anderson, 2010). Notwithstanding these limitations, many youth in high-risk neighborhoods continue to thrive and positive parenting practices (e.g., risk communication) remain essential regardless of family SES.

High-risk neighborhoods present fewer resources to support parenting efforts (Pinderhughes, Nix, Foster, Jones, & The Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 2001), and parents with lower educational attainment are less able to move out of these environments. Parenting practices represent their own sense of prevailing risk, and youth learn that interactions with their neighborhood may be risky. Parents adjust their protective behaviors to include increased risk communication and monitoring of their children (Letiecq & Koblinsky, 2004; White & Roosa, 2012), which may inadvertently increase youths' hypervigilance and feelings of vulnerability.

Recent incidents in Ferguson, and across the United States, highlight the need to better understand African American males' perception of safety in their neighborhoods. The current study explores data gathered at the baseline level of a large-scale intervention program. The data provide measurements of variables relevant to the exploration of perception of neighborhood safety among African American boys who have been witnesses or victims of violence.

CURRENT STUDY AND HYPOTHESES

The current study explores data gathered at the baseline level of a large-scale intervention program. The data provide measurements of variables relevant to the exploration of the

perception of neighborhood safety among African American boys who have been witnesses or victims of violence. In this study we explored the relationship between individual (i.e., violent experiences and violence avoidance self-efficacy), family (i.e., communication about fighting), and neighborhood (i.e., perceived collective efficacy) factors as predictors of African American boys' perception of neighborhood safety.

A number of main effect hypotheses were proposed. Hypothesis 1, perception of collective efficacy and self-efficacy to avoid violence, will be related to African American boys' perception of neighborhood safety. Both constructs have been associated with increased adaptive functioning (Kawachi, Subramanian, & Kim, 2008). Hypothesis 2, parental communication about fighting, will be related to boys' perception of the neighborhood as safe. Parental communication about risks has been identified as a protective factor for youth in risk contexts (LeBlanc et al., 2011). Neighborhood disadvantage has been associated with negative outcomes for youth. Additionally, violent experiences have also been linked to behavioral difficulties in youth (Maschi et al., 2010; McNulty & Bellair, 2003; Overstreet & Braun, 2000). Hypothesis 3, African American boys' perception of neighborhood safety, will be associated with neighborhood disadvantage. Hypothesis 4, youths' violent experiences (i.e., witnessed and victimization), will be related to their perception of neighborhood safety.

We hypothesized three moderation effects in this study. First, collective efficacy will moderate the relationship between violent experiences and neighborhood safety (Lynch & Cicchetti, 1998). Second, we propose that self-efficacy to avoid violence will moderate the relationship between violent experiences and boys' perception of neighborhood safety, with more self-efficacy being associated with boys feeling safer in their neighborhoods. Last, the interaction of parental education and youths' self-efficacy to avoid violence will be related to greater perception of neighborhood safety for youth. The hypotheses in this study are largely exploratory because of the relative novelty of this line of research.

METHODS

Sample

Participants were youth and parents from a baseline of the Aban Aya Youth Project (AAYP) collected before they were exposed to any intervention. Previous analyses of differences for baseline data revealed no group differences on violence measures after controlling for preintervention age and modeling school-level nesting (Jagers, Morgan-Lopez, & Flay, 2009). There was no intervention effect for girls; however, for males the rate of increase in violent behaviors lessened by 35% compared to controls. There were additional intervention effects for other target behaviors (e.g., school delinquency, drug use; Segawa, Ngwe, Li, Flay, & Aban Aya Coinvestigators, 2005).

Less than 2% of parents requested that their children be excluded from the original study (Jagers et al., 2009). Of 1,153 participants, 553 were fifth-grade African American males (mean [M] = 10.8). They reported having lived an average of 3.6 years in their current neighborhood. Parents self-identified as African Americans (mean age = 38 years). See Table 1 for more participant characteristics.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Perception of Neighborhood Safety and its Predictors Among Study Sample (N = 544)

Variables	M (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Perception of neighborhood safety	8.20 *(3.39)*	1								
Covariates										
2. Age	10.91 *(.62)*	− .08								
3. Income	3.61 *(1.79)*	.07	−.07							
4. Lived in neighborhood	3.60 *(1.41)*	−.01	.08	.15**						
Main predictors										
5. Neighborhood disadvantage	7.65 *(3.85)*	−.02	.08	−.23**	.02					
6. Collective efficacy	6.64 *(2.35)*	.29**	−.07	.05	.07	-.02				
7. Self-efficacy to avoid violence	12.17 *(3.76)*	.11**	−.13**	.04	−.11*	.05	−.04			
8. Parental education	5.32 *(2.18)*	.09*	−.13**	.34**	−.01	−.14**	−.02	.05		
9. Violent experiences	3.65 *(1.57)*	−.07	.08	.02	.02	.05	.05	−.28**	−.02	
10. Parental communication about fighting	2.41 *(.77)*	−.09*	−.01	.02	−.05	.06	.05	.05	−.04	.17**

Note. M = mean; SD = standard deviation; average income = $10,000; average education level = vocational education or some college education.
*p < .05. **p < .01.

Procedure

The AAYP was a trial investigating the effects of three interventions on the development of violence, unsafe sex, and substance use behaviors among low-income African American youth. Participants were from 12 schools in below poverty, metropolitan Chicago neighborhoods. Self-report data were collected from both adolescents and at least one parent. Measures were based on multiple questionnaires (e.g., Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey and National Health Interview Survey). These were adapted based on feedback from focus groups and pilot testing with youth and parents.

All schools met the following inclusion criteria: enrollment greater than 500 students, with 80% African American and less than 10% Latino or Hispanic; kindergarten through Grade 8; not on probation or slated for reorganization; and not a special designated school (e.g., magnet and academic center, and moderate mobility). Schools signed agreements for 4 years of participation in the study and agreed not to participate in other prevention initiatives during that time. Participants completed measures at six different time points after the baseline. Schools received the intervention free of charge along with a $250 incentive per participating classroom–up to a maximum of $1,000 each year of the study.

Measures

Perceptions of neighborhood safety. The dependent variable for this study is perception of neighborhood safety. To assess this, youth answered five questions about their neighborhood contexts in the last month; for instance, they were asked how often they felt safe

"on their way to school" and "in the neighborhood." Responses were rated on a Likert scale ranging from 0 (*never*) to 3 (*always*). Scale scores ranged from 0 to 15, with high scores indicating feeling safer ($\alpha = .69$). Parents were asked similar questions about their neighborhood ($\alpha = .82$).

Neighborhood disorganization. Parents reported on the structural deficiencies in their neighborhood. They answered questions about whether they had ever noticed certain situations in their neighborhood ("You notice abandoned houses or stores" and "You notice drug sellers or users"). Responses were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*never*) to 4 (*always*). Scale scores ranged from 0 to 28, with high scores indicating more neighborhood disadvantages ($\alpha = .89$).

Collective efficacy. This is a four-item measure in which youth indicated how true certain statements were about their neighborhood residents ("People in my neighborhood care about my well-being" and "I know many people in my neighborhood"). Responses were rated on a Likert scale ranging from 0 (*not true*) to 2 (*very true*). Scores ranged from 0 to 8, with high scores reflecting more collective efficacy in the neighborhood ($\alpha = .69$).

Self-efficacy to avoid violence. Youth completed a four-item measure assessing personal strength: How sure are you that you can (1) keep yourself from getting into physical fights, (2) keep yourself from carrying a knife, (3) stay away from situations in which you could get into fights, and (4) can seek help instead of fighting. Participants rated each item on a Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (*definitely not*) to 4 (*definitely can*). Scale scores ranged from 0 to 16, with higher scores indicating a greater level of boys' perception of their self-efficacy to avoid violence ($\alpha = .84$).

Violent experiences. This measure is a combination of youths' victimization experiences and their exposure to violence.

To assess youths' victimization experiences, youth answered two questions about whether they had ever been shot at or had ever been cut or stabbed (0 = no and 1 = yes). The items were correlated at $p <. 001$, with a Pearson's coefficient of .283 and a Spearman–Brown coefficient of .435. The literature has suggested reporting this additional Spearman–Brown coefficient when exploring the reliability of two-item scales (Hulin, Netemeyer, & Cudeck, 2001; Eisinga, Grotenhuis, & Pelzer, 2013).

To assess youths' exposure to violence, youth completed a five-item measure (e.g., "Have you ever seen someone get shot at?" and "Have you ever seen a friend or family member get cut?"; $\alpha = .69$). Participants rated each item as 0 (no) or 1 (yes), with a total score ranging from 1 to 5 and higher scores indicating more violence acts witnessed.

In calculating the violent experiences measure, victimization was recoded so that 1 = no victimization experiences and 2 = one or more victimization experiences. The combination of victimization and exposure to violence in a measure of violent experiences resulted in scores ranging from 1 to 7, with higher scores indicating more experiences with violence.

Parental communication about fighting. For this one-item measure, parents indicated how often in the last month they had spoken to their sons about physical fighting. Responses were rated on a Likert scale ranging from 0 (*never*) to 3 (*more than 3 times*).

Parental education. Parents indicated their highest level of education achieved on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*less than 8th grade education*) to 11 (*post-college or professional degree*).

Control variables. The demographic variables–child's age, how long the boys had lived in the neighborhood, and the average household income–were included in the multivariate analyses as covariates. Length of time lived in the neighborhood was reported as a continuous measure of between 1 and 5 discrete years. The intervention was controlled for in the analyses, as this baseline study was not meant to test intervention effects.

Data Analysis

Correlations and cross tabulations were conducted to explore the sample characteristics. A square root transformation was used to address skewedness in the victimization variable before it could be used to compute the violent experiences measure. Cross tabulations were used to explore patterns for exposure to violence and victimization experiences. Diagnostic measures indicated that there was no violation of the assumptions of linear regressions. A three-step plan of analysis using hierarchical regressions was implemented. This process allowed specific variables of interest to be entered in a second model, to make it easy to observe the change in the variance explained (Cohen & Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003).

In the first model, we examined the relationship between collective efficacy and perception of neighborhood safety. Control variables were also entered in the first model. The predictors were centered and interaction terms were computed. The centered predictors were entered in the second model. The three resulting interactions terms (1) experiences with violence by collective efficacy, and by (2) self-efficacy to avoid violence, and (3) parents' level of education by self-efficacy to avoid violence were entered in the final model (Cohen et al., 2003). The results of these analyses are presented in Table 2. The interaction was graphed one standard deviation above and below the mean for ease of interpretation (Aiken & West, 1991).

Missing Data

Missing data occurred only at the item level and was handled with the Missing Values Analysis function in IBM's PASW package (version 19). The imputation was completed at a convergence of 0.001, after 100 imputations.

RESULTS

Descriptive Results

Of the participating parents, 86% were female. Almost half of the boys (44%) lived in two-parent households. More than half of the parents reported some vocational or college level classes, with 68% having completed high school, vocational education, college, and post-college education or a professional degree. The household income was in the lower range, with 45% families earning less than $15,000 annually, while 48% earned $15,000 to $40,000. Almost a quarter of the males (19%) were victims of violence, though 92% were exposed to one or more acts of violence and 75% exposed to two or more acts of violence in their lifetime. Almost half (46%) had more chronic exposure to violence.

Table 2. Regression Coefficients for Main Effect and Interaction Models

Variable	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Constant	7.37**	2.59	6.68*	2.59	6.65*	2.58
Covariates:						
Age	−0.22	0.23	−0.166	0.23	−0.17	0.23
Income	0.06	0.09	0.08	0.09	0.09	0.09
Lived in community (years)	−0.08	0.10	−0.08	0.10	−0.09	0.10
Main Effects						
Parental education	0.11	0.07	0.09	0.07	0.09	0.07
Collective efficacy	0.42***	0.06	0.43***	0.06	0.44***	0.06
Community disadvantage	–	–	0.03	0.04	0.03	0.04
Self-efficacy to avoid violence	–	–	0.07†	0.04	0.06	0.04
Violent experiences	–	–	−0.09	0.09	−0.11	0.09
Communication about fighting	–	–	−0.46*	0.18	−0.48**	0.18
Interactions						
Collective Efficacy × Violent Experiences	–	–	–	–	0.08*	0.03
Efficacy to avoid violence × Violent Experiences	–	–	–	–	−0.01	−0.01
Parental Education × Efficacy to Avoid Violence	–	–	–	–	−0.03	0.03
Adjusted R²	0.09		0.10		0.11	
Δ *in R²*	–		0.02*		0.01*	
F statistic	11.591***		7.991***		6.775***	

†$p < .06$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Victims and nonvictims differed in their exposure to violence, $X^2(5, N = 531) = 86.37$, $p < .001$. More victims had been exposed to at least one act of violence (91%), and 71% had been exposed to two or more acts. Fewer nonvictims (17%) had been exposed to chronic violence. Overall, African American boys in this sample had very high levels of violent experiences whether as victims, witnesses, or both. The average score of boys' perception of neighborhood safety was 8.2 (standard deviation [SD] = 3.389) on a 15-point scale, while the average score of the parents was 10.24 (SD = 3.173).

Boys' perception of neighborhood safety was positively associated with collective efficacy, self-efficacy to avoid violence, and parental education (see Table 1). This suggests that boys (a) may feel safer in their neighborhood if they felt supported or (b) had high self-efficacy to avoid violence. The parent's education level is also related to the boys' perception of safety. Boys' perception of safety in the neighborhood was not significantly related to parental reports about neighborhood disadvantages or males' violent experiences. Neighborhood safety and parental communication about fighting were negatively related. The Durbin–Watson statistic of 1.625, which is considered acceptable, indicated that the assumption of independent errors was met.
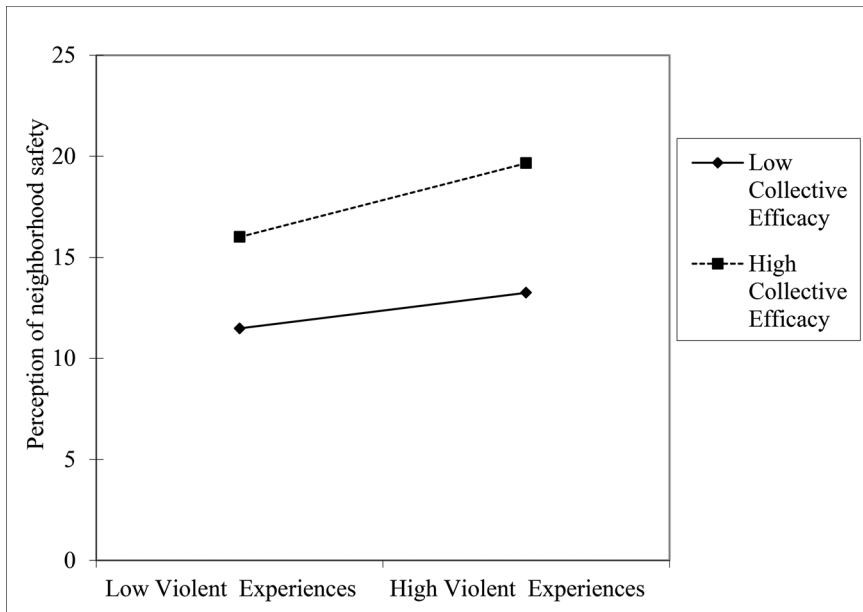
Figure 1.   Interaction of collective efficacy and violent experiences.

Multivariate Results

Table 2 presents the results of the three hierarchical multiple regressions used to determine the effects of key predictors on African American boys' perception of neighborhood safety while controlling for demographic variables. In model 1, collective efficacy was positively related to youths' perception of neighborhood safety. This model explained 9% of the variance in the dependent variable (DV). In the second model, perception of collective efficacy was positively related to neighborhood safety perceptions, while parental communication about fighting was negatively associated with the DV. Neighborhood disadvantage, youths' violence avoidance self-efficacy, and violent experiences were not significantly associated with the DV. However, the inclusion of the new predictors in the second model explained an additional 2% of the variance in the DV, for a total of 10% variance explained (see Table 2).

Interactions were entered in the third model and explained an additional 1% variance in the overall model. The interaction between violent experiences and collective efficacy was the only significant interaction. Figure 1 shows the results of this finding. Under conditions in which African American youth had been exposed to more violent experiences, higher collective efficacy predicted greater perception of neighborhood safety. Boys who believed there was lower collective efficacy in their neighborhood felt less safe compared to those who felt more collective efficacy for both high and low levels of violent experiences (see Figure 1).

DISCUSSION

African American boys living in disadvantaged neighborhoods are more likely than others to experience and/or witness violence (Overstreet & Braun, 2000), reducing their feelings

of safety in their neighborhoods. Adolescents have more exposure to the neighborhood during this developmental period, which is marked by an increased influence of peers and extrafamilial agents (Sim, 2000). Together these developments influence youths' perception of their neighborhoods. The literature that explores associations among neighborhood, family, individual factors, and youth violence have not examined how these factors affect youths' feelings of neighborhood safety. To our knowledge, this is one of very few studies that explores factors linked to African American boys' perception of safety in their neighborhoods.

We found that African American boys who believe that their neighborhood is a place where people are supported and encouraged to adopt prosocial behaviors (collective efficacy) report feeling safer. This finding supports a social dimension to the risk and resilience framework (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005) by demonstrating that positive interactions and reinforcement from socialization agents are beneficial for youth in high-risk neighborhoods (Brown et al., 2005; Hawkins & Weis, 1985).

Self-efficacy to avoid violence was not related to boys' feelings of safety in their neighborhood at the multivariate level, though there was a positive bivariate association. The effect of collective efficacy and its related interaction in this model may have reduced the contribution of individual self-efficacy beliefs (self-efficacy to avoid violence). The separate influence of collective efficacy and self-efficacy to avoid violence requires further exploration. Boys' violent experiences are not associated with their perception of neighborhood safety at either the bivariate or the multivariate level. This may represent a measurement issue rather than a conceptual concern. A significant body of literature has already established a link between youths' exposure to violent experiences and negative behaviors; however, few if any studies have established a similar link to perception of neighborhood safety for African American males. Exploring more specific and comprehensive measures of victimization and exposure to violence may yield more meaningful results.

Parental communication about fighting is negatively related to youths' perception of neighborhood safety at the both bivariate and multivariate levels. These results suggest that boys who perceive their neighborhoods as safe may receive fewer messages about fighting from their parents. The literature shows that parents who communicate with their children about risks provide protection against those specific risks (LeBlanc et al., 2011). The association between risk exposure and communication about risks may be bidirectional so that less risk exposure may also elicit less communication about fighting from parents. Additionally, the parental communication variable does not identify the kind of messages that were communicated. For instance, repeated communication of high-risk messages may itself be a form of risk exposure depending on the quality of the messages. Other parenting practices such as monitoring may contextualize risk messages while providing an additional level of protection.

The association between African American boys' violent experiences and their perception of their neighborhood was moderated by collective efficacy. Under conditions in which African American boys have more violent experiences, high neighborhood collective efficacy predicts a perception that the neighborhood was safer. Collective efficacy, especially in high-risk neighborhoods, represents a source of protection. African American boys who have more violent experiences may benefit most from the positive effect of collective efficacy. Even for boys who have comparatively fewer violent experiences, a perception of high collective efficacy is related to youth feeling safer. In this sample, boys who have more violent experiences also feel safer in their neighborhoods than those who have fewer experiences. It may well be that those who have more violent experiences may

have learned to better navigate neighborhood dangers and become aware of available sources for support and protection.

These findings suggest that positive qualities of a neighborhood may be an especially protective factor for African American boys who experience high levels of violence. In disadvantaged neighborhoods that provide limited protection from deleterious experiences, African American boys may feel unsafe, even with fewer victimization experiences. Service providers who work with parents of African American boys from low-income neighborhoods should help identify and connect parents to community resources that build on neighborhood efficacy strategies. African American boys who present in clinical and other family service settings could benefit directly from services aimed at reducing their exposure to violent experiences especially as victims. Service providers can further support these families by helping parents increase developmentally appropriate communication with their sons, specifically related to violence.

Though older, our data contain unique demographic (e.g., age, race, location) and data characteristics (e.g., types of measures, study design). Our findings also offer important additions to the literature on protective factors for African American adolescent males. We identify factors that are related to safety, including the protective effect of neighborhoods through collective efficacy and the ability of the parents of African American boys to help protect their sons. Adolescent's ability to affect their feelings of neighborhood through their self-efficacy to avoid violence remains an emerging finding that requires further investigation.

Additional research is needed to address questions of causality that cannot be answered in cross-sectional studies. More robust measures of parental communication and youths' violence experiences may further clarify the paths that best explain African American males' perception of neighborhood safety. The study was limited to the variables collected at the baseline of the intervention. A more comprehensive measure of victimization that accounts for less serious victimization experiences that may better match the developmental stage of this sample of males may have improved the findings. Even with these limitations, however, this study contributes to the literature by highlighting the significance of collective efficacy for the safety of African American boys. Strengthening neighborhood bonds in African American communities requires continued exploration from both a public health and a public policy focus. Service providers should also begin to regard the neighborhood as a possible resource when treating African American males.

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