# Exposure to Community Violence:

## Towards a More Expansive Definition and Approach to Research

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### Abstract

Community violence has been identified as a pressing public health crisis in the United States. A wealth of research establishes robust connections between youth's exposure to community violence and an array of negative psychological outcomes. In this article, we argue that developmental scientists need to adopt a more expansive definition of community violence and use a broader range of approaches to understand and intervene in the current epidemic of violence. First, we discuss problems with definitions of community violence in research and propose several types of violent incidents that should no longer be excluded (i.e., gender-based harassment, sexual assault). We also highlight the need for a more nuanced and thorough examination of the dimensions associated with community violence (e.g., severity, physical proximity, relational proximity, chronicity). Next, we discuss methodological problems encumbering research on community violence. Finally, we propose recommendations for research, emphasizing the need to account for children's intersecting social identities.

Keywords: community violence, intersectionality, neighborhoods, poverty, racial/ethnic-minority youth

Many children and adolescents are exposed to very high rates of community violence, which has been identified as a pressing public health crisis in the United States (Finkelhor et al., 2015). Community violence is typically defined as incidents involving harm or threats of harm to individuals or property in neighborhoods and therefore does not include child abuse, domestic violence, in-school bullying, media violence, or sexual abuse. A wealth of research establishes robust connections between youth's exposure to community violence and an array of negative developmental sequelae, including anxiety, depression, externalizing behaviors, poor academic performance, symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and substance use (Elsaesser, 2018; Gorman-Smith et al., 2004; Hardaway et al., 2012; Kennedy & Ceballo, 2016; Lambert et al., 2012). In a meta-analysis (Fowler et al., 2009), children's exposure to community violence was associated most strongly with symptoms of PTSD. Altogether, the developmental toll that this type of violence takes on youth is far reaching, affecting a wide range of psychological and behavioral outcomes. Moreover, children of all ages report high rates of exposure to community violence with accompanying negative sequelae, including elementary school-age children (Bailey et al., 2006), middle schoolers (Gorman-Smith et al., 2004; Salzinger et al., 2011), and adolescents (Borofsky et al., 2013; Hardaway et al., 2012). Among a national sample of children 17 years old and younger, 18% reported witnessing an assault in the past year and 58% of those over 10 years old reported witnessing an assault in their lifetimes (Finkelhor et al., 2015).

Not all youth who live in urban neighborhoods that are impoverished are exposed to high levels of community violence, nor do all youth who are exposed to violence suffer deleterious effects. Still, exposure to community violence varies considerably by race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (SES). Specifically, racial/ethnic-minority youth from families with low incomes experience the highest rates of exposure to this type of violence (Gibson et al., 2009; Stein et al., 2003). We argue here that developmental scientists need to adopt a more expansive definition and use a broader range of approaches to study the impact of community violence on children to understand more thoroughly and intervene more effectively in this public health crisis.

In this article, we first discuss difficulties with definitions and conceptualizations of community violence, and propose several types of violence that should be included in research. In so doing, we highlight the need to consider a more nuanced and thorough examination of the various dimensions associated with youth's exposure to community violence. Second, we discuss

several methodological problems encumbering research on community violence. Finally, we propose new approaches and recommendations for research that highlights youth's intersecting social identities.

## Defining Exposure to Community Violence

Several measures of exposure to community violence distinguish between two types of violence: personal victimization and witnessing violence (Selner-O'Hagan et al., 1998). Personal victimization scales assess how often youth are directly victimized by various types of violence, like being attacked with a weapon. Witnessing violence scales assess how often youth witness such incidents, like seeing someone else get attacked with a weapon. Factor analyses confirm the conceptually distinct nature of victimization versus witnessing violence (Vermeiren et al., 2003). Whereas witnessing violent events is reported more commonly by youth living in neighborhoods with low incomes and high crime rates, findings from a meta-analysis indicate that personal victimization is more strongly linked to negative psychological outcomes (Fowler et al., 2009). Nevertheless, we lack a widely accepted, comprehensive classification for defining and measuring community violence.

Scholars tend to define community violence exposure as a composite index representing an overall level of children's and youth's exposure—without attention to the specific dimensions that characterize violent experiences and without any theoretical justification for this approach. Although convenient, conceptualizing community violence as a general level of exposure does not match most youth's experiences. Indeed, most urban youth experience multiple forms of community violence and few are exclusively victims or solely witnesses to violence (Schwartz & Proctor, 2000). Therefore, understanding the cumulative impact of community violence may best be achieved by examining the interacting effects of different types of community violence and the distinct dimensions that accompany it (Kennedy & Ceballo, 2014).

### Dimensions of Exposure to Community Violence

In keeping with prior proposals (Boxer & Sloan-Power, 2013; Kennedy & Ceballo, 2014), we advocate for a more in-depth, multidimensional approach to studying exposure to community violence, one that also investigates the specific dimensions that accompany violence. Rather than treating community violence as a simplistic, homogenous variable that is associated

linearly with an array of deleterious outcomes, we emphasize the importance of understanding the various configurations by which children experience community violence, including the severity, physical proximity, relational proximity, and chronicity of violence. Additionally, we need to examine the interactions of different dimensions of violence with person-level characteristics, like children's age and gender. At first glance, assessing the severity of violence seems relatively straightforward. It may be reasonable to speculate that witnessing a murder is a more "severe" form of violence than witnessing a mugging. However, this apparent logic ignores a child's subjective perceptions and would not, for instance, capture the perceived salience and impact of a young child witnessing a parent being mugged. In a study of Black and Latino adolescents living in neighborhoods with low incomes, almost half the adolescents who witnessed a homicide did not classify the homicide as the most "upsetting" violent event they had experienced (Aisenberg et al., 2008). In short, we must consider children's subjective beliefs about community violence when assessing the severity.

Physical and relational proximity to violence are equally important dimensions to consider. In a study that assessed school-age children following a sniper attack on a school playground, children who were closer to the shooting experienced more severe PTSD symptoms than children who were farther away (Pynoos et al., 1987). In a more recent study that used geospatial analytic methods, violent crimes close to elementary and middle schools were associated with lower rates of proficiency on third- to eighth-grade school-level standardized tests (Boxer et al., 2020). Still, few scholars have considered children's physical proximity to violence in their research. Relational proximity refers to children's familiarity with the people involved in violence. In certain neighborhoods, it is common for youth to know the victims or perpetrators of violence (Elsaesser, 2018). Indeed, in a study of primarily Black adolescents, half of whom qualified for free and reduced-price lunch (a measure of families' SES), those who witnessed community violence against a family member or close friend experienced symptoms of depression at significantly higher rates than those who witnessed violence against a stranger (Lambert et al., 2012). Few studies have explored the impact of knowing the perpetrators of violence against youth. In one study that addressed this issue, of Black and Latino male adolescents in neighborhoods with low incomes, personal victimization and knowing the perpetrator were associated concurrently with higher levels of depression after adjusting for

hearing about or witnessing violence (Elsaesser, 2018). Therefore, proximity dimensions of violence are likely related differentially to youth outcomes.

Another important dimensional feature of community violence is its chronicity because many youth in neighborhoods with high crime rates are exposed persistently to community violence throughout their lives. Some scholars posit that chronic exposure to community violence leads youth to become desensitized or emotionally numb to violence over time. Evidence supports a desensitization model, finding quadratic associations between violence and internalizing symptoms such that responses of depression and anxiety weaken over time as children and adolescents habituate to chronic violence, while externalizing behavior (e.g., aggression) increases linearly (Gaylord-Harden et al., 2017; Kennedy & Ceballo, 2016; Mrug et al., 2016). In these instances, youth may come to accept violence as a "normal" response to conflict and threatening situations. Conversely, other scholars identify desensitization to chronic violence as a form of coping or adaptation. The central question is to what extent does emotional numbing to violence reflect a longitudinal pattern of pathologic adaptation versus emotional resilience?

**Gender-Based Violence and Violence Involving Police**

Research on children's exposure to community violence generally does not include or measure the types of violence to which girls are more susceptible, such as sexual assault and gender-based harassment that occur in neighborhoods. Indeed, sexual assault is rarely assessed in measures of exposure to community violence. Gender-based harassment includes unwelcome physical contact, verbal and nonverbal advances, and comments or jokes of a sexual nature (Young et al., 2009). While most research on youth's gender-based harassment focuses on school settings, adolescents are also exposed to threats of sexual and gender-based harassment in their neighborhoods. Not surprisingly, girls report more frequent exposure and more severe forms of sexual and gender-based harassment than boys (Camacho-Thompson & Vargas, 2018; Davidson et al., 2016). In qualitative interviews with Latino adolescents from families with low incomes, concerns about gang intimidation deterred boys from participating in structured community-based activities, while girls' fear of sexual harassment impeded their participation (Camacho-Thompson & Vargas, 2018). Adolescents were so keenly aware of their communities that they could name specific streets where the most severe threats of physical assault or rape were likely.

Excluding sexual and gender-based violence from research unnecessarily narrows our understanding of exposure to community violence, biasing current estimates of this type of violence and concealing potential gender differences in violence exposure and its effects.

Rates of death related to legal police interventions in the United States are nearly twice as high among Blacks, Latinos, and Native Americans as they are among Whites (Buehler, 2017; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). Against this backdrop of ethnic/racial disparities in police-related violence, several studies have documented the negative effects that police stops, especially those perceived by youth as unjust and intrusive, have on adolescents' academic achievement and psychological well-being (Jackson et al., 2019; McFarland et al., 2019). Both youth's personal contact with police and their vicarious contact through witnessing or hearing about others being stopped by police were associated with lower levels of youth-reported health (McFarland et al., 2019). Given these initial findings, researchers should consider incorporating police involvement in studies of children's and youth's exposure to community violence.

## Measuring Exposure to Community Violence

Definitions of the construct of community violence vary greatly, and the measures used to assess children's exposure to this kind of violence also vary. The methodological issues we outline in this section correspond to the conceptual and definitional issues previously highlighted. First, because researchers do not share a standard definition about the types of incidents that can be considered community violence, measures of this type of violence lack consistency. For instance, some measures assess frequency of exposure in the past month or year, whereas other scales gauge lifetime exposure to violence. Furthermore, certain scales present truly continuous measures, indicating the number of times youth have experienced different violent events, while others rely on ordinal scales with categorical responses (e.g., (1) = 1–3 violent incidents in the past year). Ordinal scales create greater ambiguity in measuring exposure to community violence. For example, if a scale value of 3 is equivalent to "6 or more exposures to a violent incident," an adolescent who witnessed the violent incident six times would receive the same coded score as one who witnessed the incident 12 times. A further limitation is that point differentials between categorical responses may not represent commensurate differences in exposure to violence. For example, an increase from "no exposure"

to "exposed once" is not the same as an increase from "exposed once a week" to "exposed every day" (Kennedy & Ceballo, 2014).

Second, most measures of exposure to community violence do not assess sexual violence or the dimensions that accompany violence. Few measures incorporate weighted scores to account for the objective or subjective severity of violence, nor do they include indicators of physical and relational proximity. Moreover, chronic violence, like hearing gunfire when at home, may affect youth's psychological well-being cumulatively as a result of repeated exposures. Third, research in this field, even prospective and longitudinal studies, has primarily measured community violence exposure retrospectively, asking youth about traumatic violent events that occurred in the past year or in their lives. Such retrospective reporting is heavily subject to biases and recall errors, and few of these measurement decisions are theoretically guided.

### Theoretical Frameworks and Looking Ahead

Several theoretical perspectives are represented across the literature on community violence. For instance, personal victimization models stress emotion regulation as a potential mediating mechanism related to coping with psychological reactions to violence (Heleniak et al., 2018). Alternatively, models related to witnessing violence rely on social information processing or social learning mechanisms, with witnessing serving as a learning context that influences beliefs and cognitive schemas about aggression or violence (Schwartz & Proctor, 2000). Among the most influential theoretical perspectives is Cicchetti and Lynch's (1993) ecological-transactional model, which draws heavily from Bronfenbrenner's (1979) classic ecological theory in which children are embedded in multiple, reciprocal contexts, ranging from proximal to more distal levels. Cicchetti and Lynch (1993) contend that at every ecological level, individual, family, community, and societal factors may either protect youth from detrimental effects (compensatory factors) or exacerbate the negative impact of violence (potentiating factors). Furthermore, compensatory or potentiating factors may be transient or enduring, and their role may depend on a child's developmental stage. Therefore, we cannot expect interactions between factors to remain static, and developmental approaches are well suited to examine the risk and consequences of community violence, and how potentiating or compensatory factors change over time.

We encourage developmental scientists to adopt more expansive definitional and methodological approaches to deepen our understanding of community violence as a multidimensional phenomenon. Rather than bundle a range of experiences into a global score of exposure to community violence, comprehensive assessments of children's holistic experiences with community violence are necessary. Rigorous use of qualitative methods will allow researchers to tap into children's subjective perceptions about violence, revealing how exposure to community violence is meaningful and salient to youth themselves while acknowledging the limitations that accompany the use of subjective ratings. Equally important is the need to understand how the dimensions that accompany children's exposure to community violence influence the effects of violence on developmental outcomes (Kennedy & Ceballo, 2014). In summary, developmental scientists can adopt approaches that conceptualize community violence as a higher-order construct composed of several underlying yet related dimensions, using weighted models (e.g., reflecting severity of violence), analyses testing for the presence of nonlinear effects, and longitudinal modeling techniques to investigate chronicity of violence.

Few longitudinal studies have examined questions about developmental patterns—specifically testing whether the effects of earlier exposure to violence carry greater risk than exposure at older ages, or whether such "timing" differs from the effects of chronic, lifetime exposure to violence. By modeling developmental trajectories of community violence exposure, researchers can assess whether the effects of exposure intensify over time or subsequently decline. For example, one longitudinal study assessed whether exposure to community violence had short- versus long-term effects on the violent behavior of Black adolescents from families with low incomes (Spano et al., 2006). In keeping with general strain theory, more recent exposure of any amount to community violence had a larger impact on behavioral consequences, and exposure to violence did not present adolescents with long-term developmental consequences that intensified over time. We need more studies that examine the timing of exposure to community violence and the duration its effects.

The use of experience sampling methods (ESM) is an excellent, albeit rarely used, approach to reducing retrospection bias and illuminating details about the temporal associations between exposure to community violence and youth outcomes. In a study that used ESM, actual time spent with family was associated with less exposure to community violence among Black adolescents in households with low to middle incomes and households that were working class

(Richards et al., 2004). In another study, time spent with family in households with low incomes buffered Black adolescents from the negative psychological effects of community violence (Hammack et al., 2004). Once again, more work can be done with ESM in this field. For example, daily diary methods could ascertain whether a violent incident leads to difficulty sleeping or interferes with a child's school performance in the following days. Children suffering from chronic sleep disruptions may have more severe or longer-lasting reactions to violent events in their communities.

The exclusion of sexual violence from studies on youth's exposure to community violence skews and misrepresents our understanding of the prominence of community violence and its effects on racial/ethnic-minority girls from families with low incomes, girls whose experiences are determined by the intersection of their gender, race/ethnicity, and SES. In a study of Latino adolescents from families with low incomes, gender-based harassment in neighborhoods was more pervasive among girls than community violence, and the effects of gender-based harassment were far greater than the effects of either personal victimization or witnessing violence on adolescents' symptoms of PTSD (Mora et al., 2021). Although girls report more frequent sexual and gender-based harassment than boys (Davidson et al., 2016), boys are also victimized by this form of violence, and it is no less important to understand this phenomenon among male children and adolescents. We know even less about the effects of neighborhood violence on sexual-minority adolescents who may experience multiple forms of threat and victimization. In one study, sexual-minority youth living in neighborhoods with higher rates of LGBT assault hate crimes reported higher rates of suicidal ideation and suicide attempts (Duncan & Hatzenbuehler, 2014). Hence, we should pay greater attention to the complexity of youth's intersecting identities to understand how youth may be targeted differentially by neighborhood violence and its developmental consequences.

Drawing on a resilience framework, many researchers have examined factors that moderate the effects of community violence on developmental outcomes, seeking to identify protective factors (Gorman-Smith et al., 2004; Hardaway et al., 2012; Salzinger et al., 2011). This approach is in keeping with ecological theories that highlight how factors across multiple levels of a child's ecology may increase or weaken the effects of violence. For instance, in one study, family cohesion and high-quality parenting attenuated the relation between exposure to community violence and perpetration of violence among Black and Latino male youth from

families with low incomes (Gorman-Smith et al., 2004). Much of this work has focused on racial/ethnic-minority youth, especially Black youth (e.g., Hammack et al., 2004; Richards et al., 2015; Spano et al., 2006). While scholars often acknowledge the disproportionate presence of violence in the lives of children of color living in poverty, serious attention is rarely given to children's intersectional identities. Given the disproportionate toll community violence places on racial/ethnic-minority youth and children living in neighborhoods with high crime rates, attending to the intersectional social identities of children of color is long overdue. Intersectionality posits that no single social identity explains an individual's experience; instead, various social identities affect their experiences simultaneously. Moreover, children with multiple, subordinate, and marginalized identities (e.g., Latina + female or Black + low-income + gay) are likely to experience greater disadvantage (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008). More attention to children's intersectional identities will strengthen our models as well as our understanding of children's resilience to community violence.

Family-level factors are the most frequently investigated type of protective factor; few studies examine possible school (e.g., teacher support) or community (e.g., collective efficacy) factors as buffers between exposure to community violence and adolescents' mental health (Ozer et al., 2017). Common family factors that have been studied include close familial relationships, familial support, and parental monitoring. The influence of protective factors may vary by outcome (e.g., depression versus PTSD) and children's identity characteristics. While many studies examine gender-specific effects in the role of moderators, greater consideration should be given to the complex, intersectional identities of youth beyond gender.

In this vein, continued attention to culturally specific factors that may moderate the impact of violence on children's well-being is warranted. As theorized in García Coll and colleagues' (1996) integrative model, families of color purposely develop adaptive cultures that protect children from harmful environmental effects, using culturally relevant factors to bolster developmental competencies (e.g., religious participation as a protective factor). Families with low incomes who participate in regular religious services may provide youth with access to supportive adult mentors with shared identities of race/ethnicity, SES, or religious affiliation. Both racial/ethnic socialization and the Latino cultural value of familismo (emphasizing family unity and cohesion) are examples of culturally specific protective factors. Among Black adolescents primarily from families with low incomes, maternal racial socialization messages

weakened the relations between exposure to community violence and both aggressive behaviors and depression (Henry et al., 2015). Likewise, among Latino adolescents from families with low incomes, endorsement of familismo was linked to lower levels of exposure to community violence, and familismo buffered adolescents from the association between this exposure and symptoms of depression (Ceballo et al., 2021; Kennedy & Ceballo, 2013). Racial/ethnic socialization and familismo may protect these youth precisely because they correspond with their intersectional identities.

It is not inevitable that a public health crisis in which disproportionately racial/ethnic-minority youth from families with low incomes are exposed to extremely high rates of community violence continues unabated. Yet few studies have examined the malleable factors, whether behavioral, contextual, or cultural, that decrease children's and adolescents' likelihood of experiencing community violence in the first place (among those that have are Burnside & Gaylord-Harden, 2019; Ceballo et al, 2021; Kennedy & Ceballo, 2013; Lambert et al., 2013). Clearly, more work is needed. Developmental scientists have an important role to play in identifying factors that reduce the amount of community violence to which youth are exposed, that buffer youth from the deleterious effects of violence, and that support policies to change the structural inequalities that foster violence in neighborhoods with low incomes.

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