



COMMUNITY VIOLENCE AND AGGRESSIVE CHILD BEHAVIOR:
THE ROLE OF AGGRESSIVE PARENTING

RESEARCH BRIEF | SAIJUN ZHANG & MARY K. EAMON | January 2012

Research confirms that a violent community environment is harmful to children. Children exposed to community violence are more likely to experience a wide range of negative outcomes, such as symptoms of depression, poor school performance and drug use.¹ Perhaps most worrisome is that children exposed to community violence are more likely to behave aggressively and engage in delinquent behaviors, which perpetuates the problem.

We need to know more about how community violence affects children's behavior and development in order to find ways to protect them. Although it seems likely that children may witness violence and be affected by that, community violence may also have an additional effect on children because of its impact on the family environment. Parents experience community violence too, perhaps more frequently than children, and they can understand the threat of community violence better than children. One way community violence might potentially influence children is through its effect on parenting behavior. For example, parents exposed to community violence may end up being more aggressive with their children. The current study explores the relationship between parents' exposure to community violence and children's aggressive behavior and looks at whether aggressive parenting might be one of the connecting links that helps explain the impact of community violence on children.²

Study Description

This study used data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCW). The FFCW surveyed parents of approximately 5,000 newborns in 20 large U.S. cities during 1998-1999. Parents were interviewed again when the children were 1, 3, and 5 years old. The current study used data collected when the children were around 5 years old, and the sample consisted of 2,247 mothers. Many mothers in the sample were stressed because of multiple risk factors: 40% of the families lived below the poverty line, 45% had used food stamps in the past 12 months, and 66% of them were single mothers.

Several measures included in the FFCW study were used in the current analysis. *Community violence exposure* was measured by seven questions asking mothers the frequency of witnessing or being victims of out-of-home violent incidents such as beating, attacking, and shooting. *Children's aggressive behavior* was measured by a subscale of the Child Behavior Checklist, which asked mothers to assess the extent of child aggressive behaviors. Two subscales derived from the Parent-Child Conflict Tactics Scale measured mothers' *aggressive parenting* practices. *Psychologically aggressive parenting* assessed the degree of mothers' verbal aggression toward children in the past year, such as shouting and swearing. *Physically aggressive parenting* assessed the degree of mothers' physical aggression toward children in the past year, such as spanking and pinching. Other variables in the analyses included mothers' educational level, marital status, income, and stress level.

¹ Aisenberg, E., & Herrenkohl, T. (2008). Community violence in context: Risk and resilience in children and families. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 23*, 296-315.

² This brief is adapted from Zhang, S. & Eamon, M.K. (2011). Parenting practices as mediators of the effect of mothers' community violence exposure on young children's aggressive behavior. *Families in Society, 92*, 336-342



Study Findings

The findings suggest that violence and aggression were part of many of these families' lives:

- More than one third (36%) of mothers had at least one experience of community violence exposure;
- 79% of mothers had moderate and high levels of psychologically aggressive parenting;
- 49% of mothers had moderate and high levels of physically aggressive parenting;
- 7% of children scored in the problem range on the aggressive behavior subscale.

Community violence was linked to aggressive behavior in the home:

- The degree to which mothers experienced community violence was modestly correlated with children's aggressive behavior: the more that mothers witnessed or were victims of out-of-home violence, the more likely children were to act aggressively, like arguing more or destroying things ($r=.16$).
- Mothers who experienced high levels of community violence were 1.74 times more likely to be *psychologically aggressive* in parenting compared to parents who did not experience any violence.
- Mothers who experienced high levels of community violence were 1.53 times more likely to be *physically aggressive* in parenting than parents who did not experience any community violence.
- While some of the effects (about one-third) of community violence on children's aggressive behaviors can be explained by its effect on mothers' aggression, the majority of the effect (about two-thirds) was not explained by this, and is due to other, as yet undetermined causes.

Study Implications

This research suggests one specific way community violence might have an effect on children: mothers exposed to violence in the neighborhood are more aggressive in their parenting with children, and this is associated with children being more aggressive. However, we do not have a full understanding of how this relationship occurs. Perhaps parents increase the aggressiveness in their parenting because they are worried about their children becoming involved in community violence, or because children, influenced by the neighborhood, are already becoming more aggressive, prompting an aggressive reaction from parents. Perhaps community violence creates stress for parents, making it more likely that parents will lose control and shout at and hit their children. Perhaps neighborhood, parent, and child aggression all reflect a general standard in a community that condones violence and sees it as an acceptable way to react to frustration and solve problems. All of the above processes could be happening—none are mutually exclusive.

It is important to keep in mind that the majority (two-thirds) of the effect of mothers' exposure to violence on children's aggressive behavior was independent of aggressive parenting, meaning that exposure to violence may be exerting an influence on children's aggressive behaviors in other ways. Violent youths and adults in the community may be negative role models for children, and positive community role models and other community resources that support children may be lacking. In addition, stress from community violence on children and the family could lead to child behavior problems.



The research on community violence suggests it has a pervasive negative effect on children and families. Investments in communities such as community revitalization projects, increased police activity, and community collective action (e.g., neighborhood watches) may all help reduce neighborhood violence.³ The finding that aggressive parenting was a mediating variable suggests that one important part of a comprehensive response is to provide parents living in dangerous neighborhoods with support and methods for coping with stress. Child welfare and mental health professionals who serve aggressive children should assess the level of violence in the community and parents' use of aggressive disciplinary methods, and identify and facilitate interventions to address these and other conditions (e.g. parental alcohol abuse) that increase children's aggressive behavior. Ending the effects of community violence on children requires a comprehensive approach that works simultaneously with communities, parents and children.

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³ See Bennett, T., Holloway, K., & Farrington, D. P. (2006). Does neighborhood watch reduce crime? A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Journal of Experimental Criminology, 2*, 437-458. Sabol, W. J., Coulton, C. J., & Korbin, J. E. (2004). Building community capacity for violence prevention. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 19*, 322-340.