



## Original Article

## African-American Males in Chicago: Pathways From Early Childhood Intervention to Reduced Violence

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 A B S T R A C T

**Purpose:** Extreme youth violence is a salient public health crisis in Chicago, particularly among African-American males. This article examines mechanisms through which a preschool intervention program, the Child-Parent Center program, in inner-city Chicago may divert high-risk males from pathways leading to violent criminal behavior.

**Methods:** We conducted a path analysis from early environmental factors to socioemotional competencies through parent involvement and achievement to violent arrest in emerging adulthood. African-American male participants (N = 677) were followed from age 3 to age 27.

**Results:** Child-Parent Center program attendance initiates a pathway to increased third grade academic achievement and parent involvement, which positively impacts socioemotional competencies and acting out behaviors in adolescence. High parent involvement and low acting out behaviors had direct effects on violent crime in emerging adulthood.

**Conclusions:** High parent involvement in school, fostered by early childhood intervention, promotes adaptive behaviors in adolescence and reduces arrest for violent crime in emerging adulthood.

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 IMPLICATIONS AND  
 CONTRIBUTIONS

This investigation suggests that the Child-Parent Center preschool program has a potential role in the prevention of violent crime in African-American males. CPC attendance increases parent involvement in school, which directly influences both acting out behavior in adolescence and violent crime in emerging adulthood.

In the decades spanning the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st centuries, violent crime rates in the United States decreased by nearly half, from 757.7 cases per 100,000 people in 1992 to 365.5 cases per 100,000 people in 2014 [1]. This belies the disproportionate effects of violent crime on the African-American community, where violent crime rates have declined more slowly than in the general population [2]. In 2011, despite comprising just 12% of the US population, 38.3% of individuals arrested for violent crime and half of individuals arrested for ho-

micide specifically were African-American [1]. African-Americans are also far more likely to be victims of violent crimes than Caucasians [3]. In 2012, homicide was the leading cause of death for African-American males ages 10–24 years old in the United States; furthermore, homicide rates in 2010 were 51.5 per 100,000 for African-American males compared with 2.9 per 100,000 for Caucasian males [4].

Chicago, Illinois, has come to embody this stark disparity, where a recent poll revealed that African-American residents were far more likely to think the youth in their neighborhoods would be victims of a violent crime or go to jail as to graduate from college [5], and where city officials have deemed gun violence a “public health crisis.” [6] By September of 2016, there had been more homicides in Chicago than in the next two most populous cities, Los Angeles and New York, combined [7]. Violent crime

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is clustered in African-American areas of the city, with 25% of the city's violent crimes occurring in just two out of 22 police districts [8]. In 2011, despite comprising just 32% of Chicago's population, 75% of victims and 70% of perpetrators of homicides were African-American males [9].

Importantly, males in adolescence and emerging adulthood are most likely to commit violent crimes [10]. Furthermore, African-Americans are more likely to be arrested than equivalently offending Caucasians [2,11], thereby encountering law enforcement, the criminal justice system, and the resultant repercussions of a felony record at higher rates as well. It is clear that violent crime and involvement in the criminal justice system is a problem that is seriously affecting Chicago's urban communities. This study examines predictive factors and mechanisms that may deter inner-city African-American males from involvement in violent crime, with the aim of reducing rates of youth violence through comprehensive early childhood intervention.

#### *Harsh early environment and youth violence*

Research indicates that early environmental factors (e.g., harsh home life and exposure to neighborhood violence) predict youth violence [12]. Environmental stress predicts these outcomes even when controlling for more proximal violence exposure [13]. The effects of harsh environments may disrupt children's development of age-appropriate competencies, contributing to failure in later developmental stages [14,15]. However, not all children exposed to such situations engage in later violent behavior [16]. Identifying developmental factors that have the potential to divert high-risk youth from pathways leading to violent criminal behavior is needed.

Academic achievement partially accounts for the association between early harsh environmental factors and later antisocial behavior [17]. Evidence indicates that low parent involvement is related to behavior problems in adolescence [18]. Furthermore, poor social competencies have been implicated as predictors of violent behavior [16,19,20], suggesting that the best approach may be to intervene before these behaviors become evident.

#### *Violence prevention programs*

Primary prevention programs designed to divert youth from violent behavior are numerous and diverse in approach. In the past, programs that targeted narrow populations and single risk factors were found to have limited success [21], and nearly half of rigorously studied youth violence prevention programs were found to be ineffective or iatrogenic [22]. The most promising approach for reducing violence on a community level may lie in comprehensive strategies that "attend to the accumulation of risk factors across multiple levels of the social ecology" [21,23]. In their meta-review, Matjasko and colleagues [23] found that programs that targeted family factors were more effective than those that did not. Further, programs beginning earlier in life and addressing the students' school, home, and community environment combined have been found to be more effective than programs that begin later and target just one setting [24].

#### *Early intervention*

The Chicago Longitudinal Study [25] has followed a low-income, mainly African-American sample for 30 years. The participants are a cohort of children who attended the Child-

Parent Center (CPC) program in the South and West sides of Chicago, and a comparison group. The CPC is a preschool-third grade intervention providing wraparound services to children and their parents. Long-term positive outcomes for participants have been documented across a variety of developmental domains [26]. The theoretical basis of the CPCs is found in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, suggesting that development reflects interactions among levels of environmental systems. Specifically, the CPC program aims to provide an enriching, stable environment for children during the early to middle childhood years. The program attended by the current participants focused on four elements: early intervention, parent involvement, a structured curriculum focusing on language and basic skills development, and continuity between preschool and early elementary school [25].

Very limited research has been conducted into the effects of early childhood intervention on violent crime. One exception is a previous investigation into the CPC program, which found that CPC attendance increases parent involvement in school, subsequently decreasing the likelihood of juvenile arrest (before age 18) for any type of crime [27]. Additionally, Hawkins and colleagues found that an elementary-aged intervention reduced self-reported violent crime in adolescence [28]. However, the effects of a comprehensive early childhood intervention starting in preschool on arrest for violent crime in adulthood have not been examined.

Disentangling behavioral, cognitive, and environmental processes for high-risk youth will contribute to understanding the triggers and warning signs of extreme youth violence, as well as whether high-quality early childhood educational interventions are a way to derail these negative trajectories.

#### *Parent involvement, problem behaviors, and youth violence*

A critical feature of the CPC program is parent school involvement. Although frequent and consistent parent involvement has been associated with increases in long-term student achievement [29,30] and health outcomes [31], the effects of these factors on adult violence are unclear. Evidence suggests that parent involvement is related to children's behavior problems in adolescence [32] and that these problems then predict deviant behaviors, including violence, in emerging adulthood [19]. As delinquent behavior and engagement in criminal activity incur a large cost to society [26], it is imperative that these processes be identified. Research suggests that parent involvement affects juvenile delinquency and aggression [32]. The influence of parent involvement in children's lives starts early during the preschool years and continues to have significant influence throughout childhood across numerous domains of development [18,33,34]. It is unclear whether there are other critical elements that explain the relation between early parent involvement and early adult outcomes.

In the criminological literature, some studies have examined the dynamics of parent involvement, social competencies, and deviant behavior [35]. More specifically, Perrone and colleagues [36], studying a large representative sample of youth, found that adolescent social competencies partially mediated the relation between parental efficacy and deviance. Research in this area sheds light on the associations among parent involvement, childhood self-regulation, and adult violent outcomes. However, literature empirically investigating the impact of parent school involvement on violence in emerging adulthood from a de-

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