



# Exposure to violence, student fear, and low academic achievement: African American males in the critical transition to high school

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## ABSTRACT

High rates of exposure to violence and poor school outcomes are well established among African American males. In the current study, exposures to violence in the school and neighborhood and parent factors were examined as predictors of school outcomes among a sample of ninth-grade African American males in the critical transition to high school. Spencer's Phenomenological Variant Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST) was used to conceptualize individual experiences with violence. This research builds on existing work by examining factors that mediate the relation between violence exposure and school-related outcomes. A structural equation modeling strategy revealed that exposure to violence predicted decreased feelings of safety in the school and neighborhood and lower levels of parental support and involvement in school, which, in turn, was associated with lower student self-esteem and academic success.

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## 1. Introduction

Youth exposures to violence reached epidemic proportions in the 1990s (Glodich, 1998; Koop & Lundberg, 1992; Pynoos, 1993). The definition of exposure to violence varies, however, depending on a researcher's discipline and research agenda (Woolley & Patton, 2009). The research reported here, in particular, focused on the effects of exposure to violence in the school and neighborhood on educational outcomes for low-income African American youth. As such, we define exposure to violence for the purposes of the current research as youth experiencing, witnessing, or hearing about violent events across the key microsystems of school and neighborhood. These key microsystems are emphasized as they provide a structural and normative context to identify and locate sequelae associated with violence exposure.

Research on youth violence exposure is often epidemiologic, lacking a theoretical foundation. Further, studies informed by theory typically apply sociological frameworks, which do not examine psychosocial processes resulting from multigenerational exposure to racism or how youth from nondominant race or ethnicity groups perceive and adapt to structural barriers (Spencer, 2001). One way in which to conceptualize the experiences of African American youth exposed to violence in their school or neighborhood is through the Phenomenological Variant of

Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST). PVEST emphasizes experiences unique to the individual within a broader ecological context. Such experiences and contexts include connections between "risks, stressors, coping responses, identity process and outcomes" (Spencer, 2001, p. 56).

## 2. Theoretical framework

Several theories strive to explain the social and economic disadvantages and related sequelae found in urban communities. Two widely applied theories are *concentration effects* and *social disorganization theory*. According to Julius Wilson (1987), concentration effects were brought about by the social transformation of inner-city areas in the United States in the 1970s to 1990s resulting in concentrated populations of African American, poor, and female-headed households. These shifts increased the gap between the economic prospects of those with and without higher education at the same time that civil rights gains allowed more educated African Americans to flee their neighborhoods. As the middle class buffer disappeared, areas of concentrated disadvantage isolated residents from jobs and habits associated with regular employment (Sampson, 2001). By contrast, Massey and Denton (1993) posited a causal relation between economic deprivation and social disorganization. As such, as inner-city communities experienced a downward shift in the distribution of income among racial/ethnic minorities, poverty was geographically concentrated, ultimately producing and reinforcing behaviors indicative of social disorganization (Fig. 1).

Social disorganization theory conceptually links this concentration of social problems to developmental sequelae. The University of Chicago sociologist Shaw and McKay (1942) reported that Chicago

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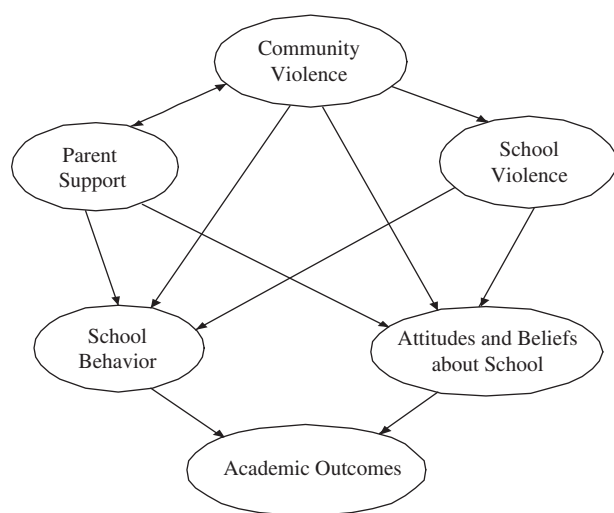


Fig. 1. Theoretical model.

neighborhoods were plagued by three structural factors: (a) low economic status, (b) ethnic heterogeneity, and (c) residential mobility. The researchers linked these structural factors to high rates of infant mortality, low birth weight, tuberculosis, and physical abuse. These effects highlight “the inability of a community structure to realize the common values of its residents and maintain effective social controls” (Sampson, 2001, p. 11) leading to a clustering of environmental risk factors to child development. Such community conditions may, in part, explain higher rates of violence in inner-city neighborhoods and schools.

In terms of conceptualizing such environments of clustered risk, the current research was informed by Spencer's (2001) theoretical work, which stresses understanding African American youths' perceptions and phenomenological experiences, especially in regards to violence exposure. To that end, PVEST: (a) places emphasis on how individuals perceive and assign meaning to their environment, (b) locates the perceptual process in a social-cognitive frame, (c) provides a path for understanding how individual coping mechanisms emerge from the social context, and (d) draws a road map leading to a broad range of outcomes based on those coping mechanisms.

By conceptualizing how context shapes development for youth, PVEST expands on Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), which focuses attention on the developmental impact of three key microsystems family, school, and neighborhood. However, PVEST implies but does not explicate what happens during the coping process that influences behavior among youth and families. In addition, PVEST does not capture the interconnectedness with respect to how the school culture might resemble the culture of the community, thus having a bidirectional influence on the coping, behavior, and development of youth. Still, PVEST provides a framework in which to examine the relation between violence exposures and educational outcomes for African American youth. Therefore, PVEST guided the current study by informing the following central questions: (a) How does exposure to violence impact educational outcomes among African American males in the transition to high school? (2) What are the psychosocial factors that may mediate the impact of such violence exposures on school outcomes?

### 3. Exposure to violence and the transition to high school

Prior research suggests that African American males experience higher rates of violence exposure (Bell & Jenkins, 1993). For example, Gorman-Smith and Tolan (1998) found that 30% of African American boys reported exposure to three or more violent events during the previous year. Findings from recent research also suggest little gender

difference and girls are becoming more violent (Espelage, Mebane, & Swearer, 2004; Guerra, Huesmann, & Spindler, 2003; Litrownik, Newton, Hunter, English, & Everson, 2003); however, boys are still more likely to behave aggressively and commit violent acts in response to exposure to violence (O'Keefe, 1997; see Salinger, Feldman, Stockhammer, & Hood, 2002, for a review). Further, girls often respond to violence exposure with depressive symptoms, while boys increase their protective coping strategies (Jenkins & Bell, 1994). In addition, girls are more likely to address problems immediately and with their peer group, whereas boys typically do not address problems until they become severe and oftentimes address them alone (Boekaerts, 1996).

The current study is placed in the context of the transition to high school because of both the crucial nature of that time in the academic trajectory of students and the accumulating risk factors at that stage of development. The transition to high school marks a pivotal transition when youth move from small, attentive primary school environments; to the larger less personalized more complex and more challenging high school context (Roderick, 2003). As a result, African American male adolescents are battling new independence, in unfamiliar school environments, with less adult attention and support, and increased peer pressures. Along with these new freedoms and pressures, these youth are increasingly susceptible to gang invitations, leading to increased risk for exposure to violence (Voisin, 2007). Furthermore, Allensworth & Easton (2007) found that course performance in the ninth grade predicted high school graduation rates. Examining the impact of violence exposure in the school and neighborhood on the transition to high school may provide insight into the contextual factors that impact successful transition.

### 4. The social ecology of violence exposure

#### 4.1. Neighborhood factors

Adolescents, males, racial/ethnic minority groups, and low-income individuals have a higher probability of being exposed to violence (Bell & Jenkins, 1993; Bowen & Bowen, 1999; U.S. Surgeon General's Office, 2001). To illustrate, Bell and Jenkins found that 45% of youth ( $n=270$ ) on the Southside of Chicago reported having seen someone killed, while 66% reported having seen someone shot. In fact, homicide is the second leading cause of death for African American males, ages 15–19 (Margolin & Gordis, 2000) with on average of 18 youth in this age group being victims of homicide daily, which is about four classrooms of African American males dying weekly (Paxton, Robinson, Shah, & Schoeny, 2004). A survey of middle and high school students in New Haven, Connecticut found that approximately 40% reported witnessing at least one violent crime in the past year and almost all eighth graders knew about someone who had been killed violently (Marans & Adelman, 1993). Despite a high level of interest expressed by researchers, little is known about the impact of such exposure to violence (Korbin, 2001).

Researchers have begun to examine the role of the community as the “village” for child development (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, & Aber, 1997), although the mechanisms and processes remain unclear (Korbin, 2001). Still, several studies indicate a relation between community factors, including crime and violence, and school outcomes (Bowen, Richman, & Bowen, 2002; Woolley et al., 2008). At the core, social problems can be clustered at the community level and linked to structural factors, which may influence school level outcomes. As such, community structural factors mirror the myriad social problems found in the inner city (Bowen et al., 2002). For example, communities with high rates of crime, drug dealing and abandoned buildings were linked to lower grades and higher dropout rates (Williams, Davis, Miller-Cribbs, Saunders, & Williams, 2002). Finally, inner-city parents may choose not to engage in communal

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