



## Exposure to community violence and social maladjustment among urban African American youth



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### A B S T R A C T

**Keywords:**  
Community violence  
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Transactional

**Objective:** Because of the evidence that children living in inner city communities are chronically exposed to violence, the goal of the present study was to longitudinally explore the reciprocal and perpetuating relationship between exposure to violence and child social maladjustment.

**Method:** Participants were 268 African American students (*M* age = 11.65 years, 40% males and 60% females) from six inner city Chicago public schools in high crime neighborhoods. Data was collected longitudinally over three years on measures of demographic information, exposure to community violence, and social adjustment. It was hypothesized that high levels of exposure to community violence, would be related to higher reports of social maladjustment (both cross-sectionally and longitudinally) and these variables would interact transactionally, leading to a greater risk of exposure to violence.

**Results:** These hypotheses were tested using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) and results revealed that exposure to community violence was not consistently linked to social maladjustment. Transactional results revealed that there are certain periods in development in which being more socially maladjusted may put a youth in risk for more exposure to violence.

**Conclusions:** Results of the present study have important implications for interventions for inner-city youth exposed to violence.

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African American youth living in low-income inner-city neighborhoods face daily social and economic disadvantages that put them at heightened risk for adjustment difficulties and psychopathology. While the challenges are numerous, the most significant stressor may be the violence that these children are exposed to in their communities. Exposure to pervasive community violence disrupts a child's psychological development and may lead to difficulties interacting with and relating to others.

With these objectives in mind, the current study examined the reciprocal effects of low-income, inner city youth's exposure to violence and social adjustment. The impact of violence goes beyond the period immediately following the exposure and produces long-term negative effects on the children exposed. Specifically, because of the evidence that children living in inner city communities are chronically exposed to violence, this study longitudinally explored the reciprocal and perpetuating relationship between exposure to violence and child social maladjustment over a 3-year period with a large-scale community sample.

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## Exposure to community violence

Children's exposure to community violence has become a major public health problem in the United States (Finkelhor, Turner, Ormrod, Hamby, & Kracke, 2009). Although a variety of risk factors are associated with exposure to violence, minority children living in low-income, inner-city neighborhoods seem to be disproportionately affected (Stein, Jaycox, Kataoka, Rhodes, & Vestal, 2003). Moreover, children living in inner-city communities seem to be repeatedly and chronically exposed to violence due to the pervasive amounts of violence occurring in their neighborhoods (Richters & Martinez, 1993). This exposure has been characterized as occurring through both witnessing violence and violent victimization, with some statistics reporting that 60–70% of inner city youth have been victimized by at least one violent act and 80–90% have witnessed violence in their community (Bender & Roberts, 2009). Moreover, the violence experienced by these children is often severe. For example, Bell and Jenkins (1993) surveyed elementary school children in Chicago and found that three out of four children had witnessed a robbery, stabbing, shooting or killing. These statistics illustrate the need for researchers and policy makers to fully examine the role of exposure to violence in the lives of children. In addition to the obvious threats to a child's physical and mental health, repeated exposure to violence over time, as is seen in inner city neighborhoods, may alter a child's developmental trajectories and result in more negative outcomes (Garbarino, Kostelny, & Dubow, 1991).

In the community violence literature, researchers have attempted to distinguish between witnessing violence and violent victimization. While the former refers to an indirect exposure (e.g. viewing a violent act), the latter encompasses actually experiencing an event, such as an assault or a robbery. Not surprisingly, it appears that community violence may have differential outcomes based on the type of exposure. While some researchers have found that both witnessing and victimization have harmful effects on a child's development (Richters & Martinez, 1993), it appears that actually becoming a victim of community violence may be more detrimental (Fitzpatrick & Boldizar, 1993). Yet, many studies do not attempt to fully examine the differences in the types of exposure (Salzinger, Feldman, Stockhammer, & Hood, 2002). Thus, this study examined the effects of witnessing violence and violent victimization separately.

## Social adjustment/maladjustment

The middle school years are characterized by developmental transitions, which are even more challenging in inner-city neighborhoods plagued by violence. Of all areas of mental health, such as depression, anxiety, and behavior problems, social adjustment is one of the most significant areas of well-being, as it has both concurrent and predictive effects for child psychopathology (Dougherty, 2006). Thus, this study will focus on children's difficulties with adjustment in the social realm, or in other words, social maladjustment.

Social adjustment can broadly be understood as the interaction between an individual and their social environment (Clare, Corney, & Cairns, 1984). In children, Crick and Dodge (1994) have conceptualized social adjustment as the degree to which children get along with their peers, engage in adaptive competent social behavior, as well as the extent to which they do not demonstrate aversive, incompetent behavior. In this way, a socially adjusted child is characterized by positive social interactions and friendships with peers, social maladjustment often includes aggression, social withdrawal, or peer rejection. Therefore, an understanding of social adjustment includes a child's own positive and negative actions, in addition to the reactions of others to the child.

From this description of social adjustment, it is not surprising that differences have arisen in how to correctly measure the construct. Researchers have made use of a variety of measurements, such as ratings of aggression or loneliness, rankings of peer sociometric status, and role-playing (Crick & Dodge, 1994). Despite the differences in method, each emphasizes the importance of peer relationships in measuring a child's social functioning. While each method has its strengths, all fail to capture the complexity of social maladjustment. A child who has social problems may range from one who acts out to one who does not know how to make friends to one who gets teased often. Each child is having trouble in the social realm, but looks very different. Furthermore, there seems a need to distinguish between merely peer relationships and overall adjustment in the social realm. Thus, this study will address these weaknesses by using a multidimensional approach to a child's social functioning. Namely, this construct of social maladjustment will be measured through parent report of child social problems, aggression, and withdrawal.

The area of social adjustment has become central in the understanding of child development, as children's relationships with their peers are especially important to overall long-term adjustment (Gifford-Smith & Rabiner, 2004; Laursen, Bukowski, Aunola, & Nurmi, 2007; Parker & Asher, 1987). According to a meta-analysis done by Parker and Asher (1987), poor social adjustment in childhood is related not only to criminality and school truancy, but also more severe psychopathology, such as schizophrenia. Thus, quality peer relationships and peer acceptance are related to positive adjustment in children, whilst school-age social difficulties and peer rejection are associated with negative outcomes.

## Exposure to violence and social adjustment

In addition to the internalizing problems, externalizing problems, and post-traumatic stress symptoms that have been consistently associated with violence exposure in the research literature (for a review, see Fowler, Tompsett, Braciszewski, Jacques-Tiura, & Baltes, 2009), exposure to high levels of community violence may result in behavioral and emotional

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