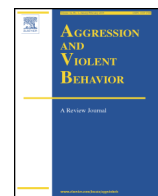




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## Aggression and Violent Behavior



# Youth exposure to violence in the community: Towards a theoretical framework for explaining risk and protective factors

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## ABSTRACT

Exposure to community violence (ETV-C) negatively impacts youth development and is associated with many negative outcomes. Although attention has been paid to examining risk and protective factors that promote or reduce ETV-C, many of the studies in this growing body of literature do not place predictive models within a theoretical framework. In this review, we argue that the routine activity theory and lifestyles perspectives (RAT/LS) within an ecological framework is a useful strategy for examining how a series of behaviors and choices enacted by youth in their everyday lives affects their ETV-C. By focusing on the role of target suitability and capable guardianship within the neighborhood, family, peers, and individual levels of the mesosystem, we suggest scholars can examine the relative salience of these various components to determine whether they serve to increase youth's ETV-C or buffer against such experiences. We propose that the RAT/LS perspectives can not only be placed in an ecological framework, but it also provides effective tenets with which to explore ETV-C.

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## 1. Introduction

Violence among youth continues to be a public health problem, and despite a decrease in murder rates in the United States since 1995 (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2015), assault (including homicide) remains the second leading cause of death among 15- to 24-year olds (Murphy, Xu, & Kochanek, 2012). While such direct violence is undoubtedly detrimental to youth health and psychological well-being, there are also significant risks that plague the large number of youth who witness violence. Further, evidence also indicates that exposure to violence in the community (ETV-C), direct and indirect victimization outside of the home, can have devastating consequences (see Osofsky, Wewers, Hann, & Fick, 1993; Salzinger, Feldman, Stockhammer, & Hood, 2002). Unsurprisingly, the prevalence of ETV-C for 14–17 year olds, particularly among urban minority males (Buka, Stichick, Birdthistle, & Earls, 2001), is greater than individual experiences with direct victimization (Finkelhor, Turner, Shattuck, Hamby, & Kracke, 2015).

Dahlberg (1998) identified key risk factors of youth violence (perpetration and victimization), and highlighted components consistent with an ecological framework: neighborhood, family, peers, and individual factors. Scholarly investigation of the multiple facets of ETV-C often embraces an ecological framework by investigating the relevance of a combination of these contexts. However, the application of an ecological model is often piecemeal, as only some, but not all, of the various contextually relevant factors are examined in empirical models. Although there is ample research on ETV-C, including several review articles, a unifying theoretical base is often lacking and there is a paucity of research that has explored the utility of certain theoretical perspectives in explaining youth experiences with neighborhood violence. Often-times investigations of ETV-C have included elements of particular theories like the routine activity theory/lifestyles perspective (RAT/LS), theoretical explanations of victimization, but have not specifically tested whether these theories can help explain youth experiences with neighborhood violence. We propose that the RAT/LS perspective can not only be placed within an ecological framework, we also suggest that it provides effective tenets with which to explore ETV-C.

The present review covers studies that apply an ecological framework – whether explicit or implicit – to explain the role of context in youth ETV-C, as well as exploring RAT/LS as a theoretical basis for explaining youth ETV-C in multicontextual models. While not a systematic review or meta-analysis of the literature, the current piece proposes a theoretical platform upon which to place investigation into the causes of youth ETV-C. Essentially, this review summarizes research on several mesosystem layers of the ecological framework (neighborhood, family, peers, and the individual) as they pertain to youth ETV-C, and examines the current status of knowledge in this area, in addition to the relevance of RAT/LS theories within these layers. By summarizing the literature on youth ETV-C it is hoped that future studies will broaden their focus and incorporate multiple contexts to explain ETV-C and approach the study of youth ETV-C theoretically. The studies included examining exposure to violence as an outcome variable and focus on children and youth.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> We place children and adolescents under the unifying term – youth. Wilson and Rosenthal (2003) suggest such practice may be problematic given developmental differences between preadolescent and adolescent youth. However, unrestricted access to the neighborhood is itself a developmental milestone marking strides in achieving autonomy. Studies that look at ETV-C (Gibson et al. (2009) for example) often use samples that capture differences in access to the community as a way of controlling for developmental differences. We recognize that particular behaviors are certainly the product of developmental pathways (e.g., friendships, unstructured socializing) and that younger children are less likely to be exposed to community violence or have deviant friends. However, the results of survey research suggest that, by the middle years of childhood, “most inner-city children have already had firsthand encounters with serious acts of violence” (Schwartz et al., 2003, p. 39).

### 1.1. Defining exposure to violence in the community

The concept of *exposure to violence* can have a variety of interpretations and meanings depending on the experience under scrutiny (Guterman, Cameron, & Staller, 2000; Lynch, 2003; van Dulmen, Belliston, Flannery, & Singer, 2008). Exposure to violence in different contexts often results in different outcomes (see Mrug, Loosier, & Windle, 2008; Mrug & Windle, 2010; Slopen, Fitzmaurice, Williams, & Gilman, 2012), elevating the importance of concrete conceptualization. The heterogeneity surrounding the definition of ETV-C deserves attention. What is meant by ETV-C, and how it differs from other forms of violence that may be experienced by youth, is addressed prior to examining the literature on the topic.

The definition of ETV-C has certainly varied across research endeavors. Guterman et al. (2000) address issues of definition and include a discussion of what constitutes “community” and “violence”. For the current review, ETV-C includes violent events (for example being shot at, robbed, beaten, threatened, assaulted) experienced in the community, that specifically locates victimization, witnessing, or hearing of such events within this particular context. We move beyond direct victimization and include secondary ETV-C as the witnessing of violence directed against someone else and/or hearing about someone’s victimization. In essence, community violence, as studied here, follows definitions used by Selner-O’Hagan and colleagues (Selner-O’Hagan, Kindlon, Buka, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1998), Gardner and Brooks-Gunn (2009), and Gibson, Morris, and Beaver (2009) as violent victimization or violence that occurs in the neighborhood/community as is specifically identified by the youth as having happened within that particular context. We draw from Gibson et al. (2009) to include the “hearing of violence” in the neighborhood as a form of secondary ETV-C. However, contrary to others who have studied ETV-C, we do not include perpetration of violence (Selner-O’Hagan et al., 1998) or burglary (Schwartz, Hopmeyer-Gorman, Toblin, & Abou-ezzeddine, 2003). A key element of ETV-C is that it occurs outside of the home. By comparison, other forms of violence such as intimate partner violence, family violence, and child maltreatment are more generally cloistered behind closed doors and less accessible to the public. While these instances of violence are worthy of scientific inquiry, focusing on youth ETV-C is particularly imperative. Neighborhoods are an important factor in shaping youth development, and engagement with the community increases as youth age, become more independent from their families, and form stronger ties with their peers. This increased mobility and exposure to their neighborhood and surrounding communities increases the probability that youth will encounter environments where violence may occur, especially if they lack sufficient guardianship to protect them against ETV-C or have risk factors that inflate their target suitability for such harmful experiences (Jensen & Brownfield, 1986; Miethe & Meier, 1994; Wilcox, Land, & Hunt, 2003). Youth are more likely to experience violence in their community, either as direct victims or by witnessing or hearing about others’ victimization, than in their homes (see Finkelhor et al., 2015) thereby elevating the need to focus on risk and protective factors of ETV-C among youth.

### 1.2. The need for theoretical perspectives

While there has been much research devoted to studying the damaging consequences of youth exposure to violence, including community violence, there is also a growing body of literature focusing on ETV-C as an outcome variable though findings regarding what increases or attenuates risk have been mixed (Gardner & Brooks-Gunn, 2009; Lobo Antunes, 2012). There is substantial depth to the literature on the consequences of youth ETV-C which highlights a multitude of negative outcomes across a variety of contexts. This in-depth focus of ETV-C as a predictor of various dependent variables overshadows the need to examine risk and protective factors that explain ETV-C as an outcome. Some scholars have begun to explore various neighborhood, family,

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