Violence exposure and bullying among African American adolescents: Examining the protective role of academic engagement

Caitlin Elsaesser [a,*], Jun Sung Hong [b,c], Dexter R. Voisin [d]

[a] University of Connecticut, School of Social Work, 1798 Asylum Avenue, West Hartford, CT 06117, United States
[b] School of Social Work, Wayne State University, 5447 Woodward Avenue, Detroit, MI 48202, United States
[c] Sungkyunkwan University, Humanities and Social Science Campus, Department of Social Welfare, 61505 Suseon Hall, 25-2 Sungkyunkwan-ro, Jongno-gu, Seoul, Republic of Korea
[d] University of Chicago, School of Social Service Administration, 969 East 60th Street, Chicago, IL 60637, United States

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ABSTRACT

While African American youth are at disproportionate risk for both community violence exposure and bullying, few studies have examined the association between these two forms of violence in this population. Moreover, given the countless hours that youth spend in schools, identifying school experiences that might protect against this association is an important step to reducing the likelihood of engagement in bullying. The present study explored whether academic engagement buffers the association between exposure to community violence (i.e., hearing about violence, witnessing or victimization) and bullying involvement (i.e., perpetration or victimization) in a cross-sectional sample of low-income African American adolescents residing in Chicago. A convenience sample of 638 African American high school students were recruited from several Chicago neighborhoods between 2014 and 2015. A series of hierarchical linear regression models assessed the relation between types of community violence exposure, academic engagement and bullying behaviors. We found that youth exposed to community violence – specifically, those who had been victimized and heard about violence – were at increased risk for being victims and perpetrators of bullying. High academic engagement reduced the likelihood that youth who heard about violence well would be at higher risk for bullying involvement. Prevention efforts aimed at reducing bullying involvement would benefit from assessing and targeting violence and victimization in the community, in addition to youths' school experiences.

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1. Introduction

While children and adolescents of all backgrounds are at high risk for exposure to violence in their community (Finkelhor, Turner, Ormrod, Hamby, & Kracke, 2009), studies have documented that youth living in urban environments are at especially high risk for exposure to community violence. During adolescence, between 76% and 96% of urban youth report exposure to some type of violence in their community in the past six months (Ozer, 2005; Ozer & Weinstein, 2004; Richards et al., 2015), with estimates of lifetime exposure ranging from 96% to 100% (Overstreet & Braun, 2000). Studies have documented that adolescents living in communities with high rates of community violence are at risk for negative outcomes similar to those growing up in war zones, including low academic achievement, depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress (Fowler, Tompsett, Braciszewski, Jacques-Tiura, & Baltes, 2009; Margolin & Gordis, 2000).

School bullying is also a serious concern that has generated a significant amount of research over the years. Bullying is defined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as aggressive behaviors reinforced frequently by another individual or group of individuals involving an observed or perceived imbalance of power. During the 2009–2010 school year, 23% of public school districts nationwide reported that bullying occurred daily or weekly, and higher percentage of students in urban schools (27%) reported that bullying occurred at least once a week, compared to rural (21%) and suburban schools (20%; Robers, Zhang, Morgan, & Musu-Gillette, 2015). These high rates are concerning, given that victims of bullying are at increased risk of experiencing physical, psychological, social or educational harm (Gladden, Vivolo-Kantor, Hamburger, & Lumpkin, 2014).

Bullying is a social phenomenon that is shaped by interactions between and among various contexts, such as home, school, and community (Barboza et al., 2009; Espelage & De La Rue, 2011; Espelage, Rao, & De La Rue, 2013). Empirical evidence suggests that that community violence exposure may shape an adolescent's relations with his or her peers to reinforce bullying involvement. A study of urban early adolescents found that youth who were victimized in the community developed difficulties with anger regulation, which increased the risk for

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: caitlin.elsaesser@uconn.edu (C. Elsaesser), fl4684@wayne.edu, fl4684@skku.edu (J.S. Hong), d-voisin@uchicago.edu (D.R. Voisin).

bullying by peers (Schwartz & Proctor, 2000). Additionally, evidence suggests that youth who have witnessed violence are more likely to be delinquent and hold beliefs that endorse violence, both risk factors for aggression (Low & Espelage, 2014; Schwartz & Proctor, 2000).

Despite this emerging evidence, a bulk of the extant studies on bullying have explored individual and relational level risk factors. These studies have identified risk factors for bullying in individual, family, and peer domains (e.g., Espelage, Holt, & Henkel, 2003; Low & Espelage, 2014; Pepler, Jiang, Craig, & Connolly, 2008), but literature on bullying behavior and how it is reinforced or inhibited as a result of experiences in the community is relatively scant. This is surprising, as schools – where bullying commonly occurs – are embedded in the community. Moreover, only a handful of studies have examined whether exposure to community violence is associated with bullying behavior specifically among African American youth; understanding these relations in this population is especially important given that African American youth bear a disproportionate burden of exposure to community violence relative to peers or other ethnic backgrounds (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013).

To address these knowledge gaps and add to the dearth of literature on community violence and bullying, the current study investigates how adolescent exposure to community violence (i.e., hearing about violence, witnessing, and victimization) is linked to bullying (i.e., victimization or perpetration) in a sample of low-income African American adolescents residing in a high-crime inner-city area in Chicago. In addition, informed by the Social Development Model (Catalano, Oesterle, Fleming, & Hawkins, 2004), this study aims to explore how academic engagement might moderate the relation between exposure to community violence and African American adolescents' bullying experiences.

1.1. Community violence exposure and bullying among African American youth

Exposure to community violence is higher among African American youth than among youth of other races (Alim, Charney, & Mellman, 2006; Schwartz & Proctor, 2000; Voisin, Chen, Jackobson, & Fullilove, 2015). African American youth are more likely than their peers of other races to live in low-resourced urban communities (National Poverty Center, 2009), where they are confronted with cumulative social, economic, and structural disadvantages (Lauritsen, 2003; Martin et al., 2011). African American youth exposed to repetitive violence are at increased risk for emotional problems, behavioral maladjustment, and violence perpetration, as numerous studies have demonstrated (Carey & Richards, 2014; Cooley-Quille, Boyd, Frantz, & Walsh, 2001; Dempsey, 2002; Goldmann et al., 2011; Thompson & Massat, 2005; Voisin, Patel, Hong, Takahashi, & Gaylord-Harden, 2016). Exposure to community violence, in conjunction with limited resources in the community, might exacerbate stress, culminating in greater risk for stressful peer relationships.

Several studies document that African Americans are more likely to report participating in bullying than their peers of other races/ethnicities (Carlyle & Steinman, 2007; Koo, Peguero, & Shekarkhar, 2012; Nansel et al., 2001; Peskin, Tortolero, & Markham, 2006; Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009). For example, in a school-based survey of 6th–12th graders in 16 school districts across U.S., scholars found that African Americans are more likely than other races to report both bullying perpetration and victimization (Carlyle & Steinman, 2007). Given the high rates of exposure in this population, it is critical to identify factors relevant to the prevention of these two forms of violence among African American adolescents.

1.2. Types of community violence exposure

Community violence exposure is commonly operationalized as a global, composite construct including a range of violent experiences (Fowler et al., 2009; Margolin & Gordis, 2000). However, community

violence exposure is multi-dimensional, comprised of different types such as hearing about violence, witnessing a violent event, and being directly victimized (Kennedy & Ceballo, 2014). Youth exhibit a range of negative outcomes in response exposure to violence, including aggression, delinquency, depression or now visible response – and this range in response may depend on the type of exposure (Guterman, Cameron, & Staller, 2000; Kennedy & Ceballo, 2014; Trickett, Durán, & Horn, 2003).

The majority of research examining types of exposure to community violence has assessed the impact of victimization or witnessed violence on youths' physical and psychosocial wellbeing. A meta-analytic review of 114 studies suggested that victimization and witnessed violence were equally associated with externalizing problems (e.g., aggression, delinquency), but that victimization was a stronger predictor of internalizing problems (e.g., anxiety, depression; Fowler et al., 2009). Studies from the trauma literature suggest that the more proximal the type of exposure (i.e., exposure situated closer to the individual such as victimization), the more deleterious impact on youths' psychosocial outcomes (Bonanno, Galea, Bucciarelli, & Vlahov, 2006; Martinez & Richters, 1993; Nader, Pynoos, Fairbanks, & Frederick, 1990), possibly reflecting that youth closest to the violence (i.e., victimization) may experience a direct threat to their lives, rendering a more acute response (Nader et al., 1990). These findings suggest that types of exposure to community violence is an important consideration; however, most studies examining the impact of witnessed violence and victimization have not assessed these two types relative to each other, limiting comparisons of effect sizes.

Even fewer studies have assessed the relative impact of hearing about community violence on youths' psychosocial wellbeing. A cross-sectional study of university students at low risk for violence exposure found that hearing about community violence was negatively associated with socio-emotional adjustment (i.e., depression and aggression; Scarpa, Hurley, Shumate, & Haden, 2006). However, this study did not control for more proximal types of violence (i.e., witnessed violence, victimization) that may have been more closely associated with adjustment, obscuring the specific contribution of hearing about violence. A longitudinal study consisting of a regionally representative sample of young adults found that hearing about violence (defined as knowing someone who had been shot) predicted criminal offending, even after adjusting for witnessing and victimization (Eitle & Turner, 2002). While criminal activity is different than bullying behaviors, some research has shown that aggressive and delinquency behaviors often overlap (Lynne-Landsman, Graber, Nichols, & Botvin, 2011). These studies suggest that hearing about violence is negatively associated with youth psychosocial wellbeing, but more work is needed to understand the influence of hearing about violence relative to more proximal types of community violence among African American youth.

Missing from the abovementioned studies is a direct comparison of the relative relationship between these three types of community violence exposure (i.e., hearing about violence, witnessing community violence, and being a victim of community violence) and youth outcomes, including bullying victimization and perpetration. Studies in the trauma literature examining the impact of disasters have assessed the relative influence of these three types of exposure, and have documented that the most proximal types of violence (i.e., being a victim of community violence) are more closely associated with negative outcomes than distal types (i.e., witnessing community violence and hearing about violence; Bonanno et al., 2006; Galea et al., 2002). However, the extent to which these findings are relevant to community violence exposure among youth living in impoverished urban neighborhoods, where few youth experience solely witnessing or victimization (Schwartz & Proctor, 2000), is unclear.

1.3. Academic engagement as a moderator

While primary prevention of community violence exposure in low-income communities is difficult given that this requires addressing