



Behavioral health correlates of exposure to community violence among African-American adolescents in Chicago



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 29 March 2016

Received in revised form 7 August 2016

Accepted 7 August 2016

Available online 8 August 2016

Keywords:

Exposure to community violence

Mental health

Delinquency

School engagement

Substance use

Sexual behaviors

ABSTRACT

Aims: Though public health researchers are more aware of behavioral health concerns among African American youth, few studies have explored how exposure to community violence may be related to adverse youth concerns. This study examines the relationship between exposure to community violence and mental health problems, substance use, school engagement, juvenile justice involvement, and STI risk behaviors.

Methods: A total of 638 African American adolescents living in predominantly low-income, urban communities participated in the study by completing self-report measures on exposure to community violence, mental health, school engagement proxies, substance use, delinquency markers and sexual risk behaviors.

Results: Adolescents who reported higher rates of exposure to community violence were significantly more likely to report poorer mental health, delinquent behaviors, a history of juvenile justice involvement, lower school bonding and student-teacher connectedness. These youth were also significantly more likely to use alcohol, cigarettes, and illicit substances, and engage in sexual risk behaviors.

Conclusions: Findings suggest that there is a critical need for culturally relevant prevention and intervention efforts for African American adolescents who are frequently exposed to community violence.

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1. Introduction

There is little doubt that African American adolescents comprise a clear and urgent group experiencing severe health disparities (Ahmed et al., 2005; Kung, Hoyert, Xu, & Murphy, 2008; Williams & Mohammed, 2009). Generally, adolescence is a period where many youth are vulnerable to mental health problems, antisocial behavior, school difficulties, illicit substance use, and sexual risk behaviors (Mahalik et al., 2013; Spear, 2012). Inequality and discrimination have been argued to be fundamental determinants of such disparities (Pascoc & Richman, 2009; Williams & Mohammed, 2009). As a consequence, African American youth not only lag behind their peers of other races when it comes to critical developmental concerns, but in addition, African American youth are considerably more likely than youth of other races to be exposed to community violence (Cooley-Strickland et al., 2009; McCart et al., 2007; Patton, Woolley, & Hong, 2011). For

instance, national prevalence documents the homicide rate for African American male teenagers was 66.4 per 100,000, which is nearly 20 times higher than the rate for White adolescent males (3.4 per 100,000) (CDC, 2015).

The effects of such violence on physical and mental health especially for adolescents of color are still not well understood, especially with respect to behavioral health disparities. Exposure to community violence has been defined as violence taking place outside the home. Two main forms of community violence are identified in the literature: victimization and witnessing. Victimization is conceptualized as being the object of deliberate harm initiated by another person or persons, such as being robbed, theft, physical attack, being shot or stabbed; whereas witnessing includes hearing or seeing these events (Fowler, Tompsett, Braciszewski, Jacques-Tiura, & Baltés, 2009). To address this research gap, the present study examines the extent to which exposure to community violence is related to mental health, delinquency, school engagement, substance use, and sexual risk behaviors across a sample of African American youth. The objective here, keeping the sample constant, is to determine the specific associational effects of community violence exposure on a variety of behavioral health measures.

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1.1. Behavioral health and exposure to community violence

1.1.1. Mental health

African American youth are 20% more likely to report having serious psychological distress (e.g., depression, posttraumatic stress disorder) compared to non-Hispanic, White youth (OMH, 2014). In addition, African Americans living below the poverty level are three times more likely to report psychological distress than those living above the poverty level (OMH, 2014).

Exposure to community violence has been correlated with negative psychological health, such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Reviews of the literature indicate that most youth exposed to community violence report PTSD symptoms (Dulmus & Hilarski, 2003; Margolin & Gordis, 2000; McGill et al., 2014), with symptoms that are similar to those noted in war-torn countries (Luna, 2006). Longitudinal evidence further documents that among a sample of African American late adolescents, the negative effects of exposure to community violence during childhood, such as aggression and depression persist into young adulthood (Scarpa, 2001).

Research has also documented an association between exposure to community violence and depression, as well as other internalizing behaviors such as anxiety and PTSD among adolescents (Margolin & Gordis, 2000). Studies have shown that witnessing community violence predicts depression and anxiety over a 12-month period (Gorman-Smith & Tolan, 1998; Schwab-Stone et al., 1995) and aggressive behaviors in children over a 2-year (Gorman-Smith & Tolan, 1998) and 4-year period (Miller, Wasserman, Neugebauer, Gorman-Smith, & Kamboukos, 1999).

These abovementioned findings on the negative relationship between exposure to community violence and mental health outcomes have made significant contributions to the extant literature. However, several gaps remain. Many of these studies were conducted almost two decades ago. Few of these studies have focused exclusively or specifically on African American youth (for reviews see Margolin & Gordis, 2000) or adequately controlled for the potential confounding effects of race/ethnicity (Gorman-Smith & Tolan, 1998; Miller et al., 1999). In addition, studies have only included males with results having uncertain generalizability to girls (Gorman-Smith & Tolan, 1998; Miller et al., 1999). Addressing these gaps are important given the higher rates of suicide and mental health problems among African American youth (CDC, 2015; Joe, Baser, Neighbors, Caldwell, & Jackson, 2009).

1.1.2. Delinquency and juvenile justice involvement

Delinquent behaviors are characterized as lying, stealing, truancy, and vandalism (Barnow, Lucht, & Freyberger, 2005). Among all youth, racial minorities and African Americans in particular are over-represented in the juvenile justice system (Fabelo et al., 2011; Stahl, Finnegan, & Kang, 2006). This overrepresentation of African Americans occurs at every level of the justice system, from initial contact with the law enforcement, sentencing and incarceration (Stahl et al., 2006).

Several theories provide explanations for the relationship between exposure to community violence and delinquency (Hong, Huang, Golden, Patton, & Washington, 2014). However, only a few studies have empirically evaluated this association and results have been mixed. One cross-sectional study based on a diverse population of high school youth documented that exposure to community violence was associated with delinquency (Chen, Voisin, & Jacobson, 2013). In addition, Pearce, Jones, Schwab-Stone, and Ruchkin (2003) found that exposure to community violence has also been shown to predict delinquent behaviors even while controlling for prior levels of delinquency. On the other hand, Stewart, Simons, Conger, and Scaramella (2002) reported that exposure to community violence was not significantly related to delinquency. Mixed findings from these limited number of studies warrant further investigation of the association between exposure to community violence and delinquency. More specifically, it is important to examine whether exposure to community violence is correlated with

delinquent behavior among African American youth, given the disproportionate representation of low-income African American youth involved in the juvenile justice system. The current study examines the relationship between exposure to community violence and delinquent behavior as well as a history of juvenile justice involvement from an African American youth sample.

1.1.3. School engagement

School engagement reflects the degree to which students are engaged emotionally, behaviorally, and academically in school (Furlong & Christenson, 2008). However, African American youth show much lower rates of school engagement and educational attainment than their peers of other races/ethnicities. Racial/ethnic disparities in school engagement emerge as early as during 4th grade, as one study has documented significant differences in standardized reading and mathematics test scores at the 4th and 8th grade levels (Vanneman, Hamilton, & Anderson, 2009). National data indicate that 6% of African American high school students drop out of school compared to 2.3% of White and 1.9% of Asian students (US Department of Education [ED], 2012). Similar disproportionate trends also exists for African American youth relative to their counterparts from other races when it comes to high school graduation (ED, 2012).

Several researchers have identified direct links between exposure to community violence and school engagement markers (i.e., grades, school behavior, school attendance, or school safety) (Henrich, Schwab-Stone, Fanti, Jones, & Ruchkin, 2004; McGill et al., 2014; Schwartz & Gorman, 2003). Longitudinal findings, based on a diverse racial/ethnic sample, documented that participants who witnessed community violence reported lower school performance (i.e., standardized test scores) over a two-year period (Henrich et al., 2004). Another study, based on a national probability sample of racially/ethnically diverse youth, documented that students' self-reports of exposure to neighborhood and school danger were related to poor attendance, school misbehavior, and lower grades (Bowen & Bowen, 1999).

Although the abovementioned findings are informative, few studies have once again focused exclusively on African American youth, controlled for racial/ethnic differences (for reviews see Margolin & Gordis, 2000) or explored the relationship between other important dimensions of school engagement, such as school bonding or student-teacher connections from a sample of low-income African American youth. This study will expand on this literature by exploring the relationship between exposure to community violence and school bonding and student-teacher connectedness among African American youth.

1.1.4. Substance use

The portrait of substance use for African American adolescents is both better and worse compared to their peers of other racial/ethnic groups. On the positive side, African American youth begin drinking at a later age and consume less alcohol than other racial/ethnic groups. (Substance Abuse & Mental Health Service Administration [SAMHSA], 2013). Despite this evidence, African Americans experience more negative social consequences from drinking, report more alcohol-related illnesses and injuries, and to some extent, are more likely to report alcohol dependence symptoms and/or diagnosis relative to other racial/ethnic groups (Mulia, Ye, & Greenfield, 2009; Zapolski, Pedersen, McCarthy, & Smith, 2013). Although the rate of alcohol use is significantly lower among African American youth compared to other racial/ethnic groups, their rate of illicit drug use is higher (SAMHSA, 2013).

Few studies have examined the association between exposure to community violence and substance use, and to our knowledge, none have focused exclusively on African American youth. Existing research suggests that these are interrelated (Kilpatrick et al., 2000; Voisin et al., 2007); Findings indicated that witnessing violence tripled the risk of alcohol, marijuana, and cocaine use (Kilpatrick et al., 2000), and witnessing community violence was related to alcohol and marijuana use (Voisin et al., 2007). This study seeks to expand the dearth of

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