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Predicting violent behavior: The role of violence exposure and future educational aspirations during adolescence



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ABSTRACT

Few researchers have explored future educational aspirations as a promotive factor against exposure to community violence in relation to adolescents' violent behavior over time. The present study examined the direct and indirect effect of exposure to community violence prior to 9th grade on attitudes about violence and violent behavior in 12th grade, and violent behavior at age 22 via 9th grade future educational aspirations in a sample of urban African American youth ($n = 681$; 49% male). Multi-group SEM was used to test the moderating effect of gender.

Exposure to violence was associated with lower future educational aspirations. For boys, attitudes about violence directly predicted violent behavior at age 22. For boys, future educational aspirations indirectly predicted less violent behavior at age 22. Implications of the findings and suggestions for future research are discussed.

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Exposure to violence is a significant public health concern. In a national survey of children ages 2–17 years, one-third of youth had witnessed the victimization of another person or were exposed to victimization indirectly (e.g., had someone close to them murdered but did not directly witness the murder) during the previous year, and more than half had been the victim of an assault (Finkelhor, Ormrod, Turner, & Hamby, 2005; Finkelhor, Turner, Ormrod, & Hamby, 2009). In addition, youth represent one-quarter of violent crime victims reported to law enforcement agencies (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). The disproportionate numbers of youth who are victimized by violent crimes and witness victimization highlight an increased risk of exposure to violence during adolescence. Exposure to violence has been identified as a risk factor for violent behavior by influencing adolescents' attitudes and beliefs about violence (Huesmann & Guerra, 1997). Academic aspirations may also be influenced by violence exposure; however, they may also decrease the potential negative effects of violence exposure as youth may be reluctant to engage in behaviors that could jeopardize their goals. Because positive aspirations for the future may lead to more positive outcomes after adolescents experience adversity (Stoddard, Zimmerman, & Bauermeister, 2011),

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we examine whether future educational aspirations mediate the relationship between witnessing community violence and later violent attitudes and behaviors among African American adolescents in an impoverished urban city.

Conceptual underpinnings

The current study was grounded in theories associated with risk exposure and violent behavior (i.e., social learning theory and General Strain Theory; Agnew, 1992; Bandura, 1978), as well as a theory related to positive assets and resilience (i.e., resiliency theory; Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). Social learning theory posits that behaviors are based on beliefs and attitudes acquired through observational learning and modeling behaviors (Bandura, 1978). Consistent with this perspective, Huesmann and Guerra (1997) posit that adolescents exposed to community violence are more likely to report attitudes favoring the use of violence to solve interpersonal problems and to use violent behavior compared to adolescents who witnessed less community violence. In addition, environmental factors such as exposure to community violence may contribute to cognitions that limit an adolescent's ability to think about the future (Lorion & Saltzman, 1993; McGee, 1984). According to General Strain Theory (Agnew, 1992; Agnew & White, 1992), strain can occur when an individual has negative relationships with others, such as living in a violent environment or having one's goals or aspirations thwarted. Adolescents may experience and react to these negative experiences (e.g., exposure to community violence) in different ways. For some adolescents, exposure to violent events may change their expectations about their future. The reality of (or negative experiences within) their social and environmental circumstances may conflict with their envisioned educational aspirations; the difference between the two can contribute to greater strain. Violent behavior may be used as a reaction to strain as individuals attempt to avoid, alleviate, retaliate against, or cope with its effects (Agnew, 1992). Furthermore, violent behavior may provide an opportunity to achieve certain goals that are not otherwise perceived as attainable (e.g., social status and respect).

Within a resiliency framework, risk factors (e.g., exposure to community violence) are conditions associated with a higher likelihood of negative outcomes (Kazdin, Kraemer, Kessler, Kupfer, & Offord, 1997), whereas promotive factors (i.e., individual assets and contextual resources) operate to enhance healthy development (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). Promotive factors can counteract the negative impact of risk through a direct, compensatory route (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). As such, individual assets or external resources may directly decrease the likelihood of negative behavior like violence. Optimistic future aspirations, for example, may provide motivation to pursue positive outcomes and paths for success, thereby decreasing the propensity to engage in violence (Sun & Shek, 2012). Based on these tenets, we propose that exposure to violence may contribute directly and indirectly to the acceptance of the use of violence to solve problems and violent behavior during later adolescence and early adulthood. We propose that exposure to community violence may contribute to violent behaviors in later adolescence and early adulthood by reducing future educational aspirations while reinforcing attitudes toward the use of violence to solve problems (Fig. 1). We also propose that beliefs in the future (e.g., future educational aspiration) will function as a promotive factor, reducing adolescents' later violent attitudes and behaviors both directly and indirectly, regardless of earlier violence exposure.

Exposure to violence

Youth living in urban environments are exposed to higher levels of community violence (Voisin, 2007). Approximately 80% of youth living in urban areas have reported witnessing community violence and 70% report being victims of violence

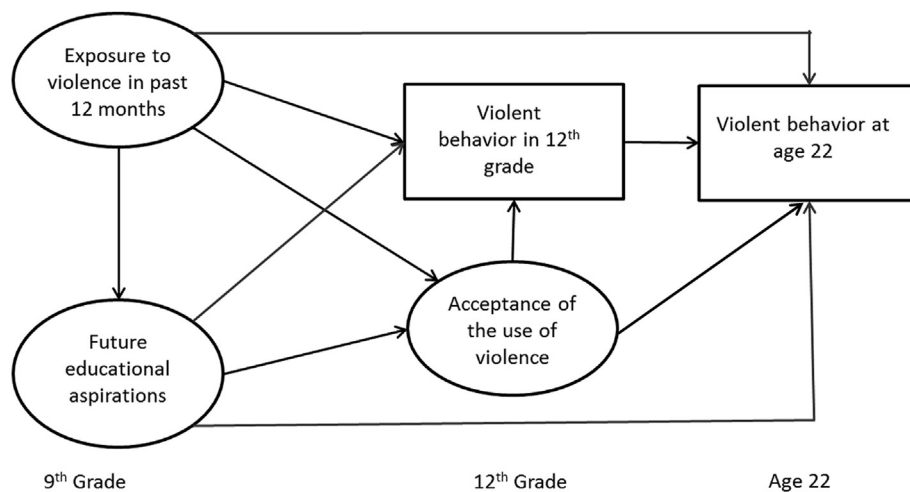


Fig. 1. Conceptual model. Exposure to violence and future educational aspirations assessed in 9th grade; attitudes about violence and violent behavior assessed in 12th grade; violent behavior assessed at age 22.

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