



National Institute of Justice

Research Preview

Jeremy Travis, Director

November 1996

Assessing the Exposure of Urban Youth to Violence

A Summary of a Pilot Study From the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods

Recent research suggests that exposure to violence during childhood and adolescence may lead to substance abuse, delinquency, and adult criminality and contributes to emotional problems. With trends pointing to mounting involvement of young people in crime—as offenders or victims—a parallel increase in exposure to violence in the community, school, and home seems inevitable.

Current efforts to gauge the extent and, ultimately, the impact of childhood exposure to violence are hampered by a number of difficulties in research methods. Many studies, for example, do not distinguish between witnessing violence and experiencing violence. Others include only questions about more consequential events, such as shootings or attacks with a weapon, but may not include sexual violence. Still others include media violence. Given these disparate approaches, comparing these studies is difficult and generalizing from them to urban youth as a whole is inadvisable.

A new measurement tool

To explore ways to overcome these deficiencies, the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods last year developed and tested a new way to measure young people's exposure to violence. The Project is a long-range study of the determinants of antisocial behavior, delinquency and crime, and substance abuse. Some 7,000 male and female youths and their primary caregiver (that is, mother, father, or other person who has major responsibility for the child), selected from 80 economically and ethnically diverse neighborhoods in Chicago, are being studied. After the first phase of the Project is completed, in December 1996, they will then be interviewed annually for a total of 8 years to obtain information for the study.

The measurement tool is new in that it covers multiple aspects of violence. It includes witnessing violence as well as experiencing violence, covers a range from less serious to

more serious events, and also extends to sexual violence. It was used in a pilot test consisting of interviews with 80 people who are part of the ongoing Project. They were asked about their lifetime and recent (past year) exposure to 18 different violent events that they had either witnessed or personally experienced.

The findings produced strong evidence that the new method works—exposure to violence can be reliably ascertained from this type of interview—and also that exposure is extremely high among these urban youth. The amount varied with gender, race/ethnicity, and neighborhood.

The young people interviewed and their neighborhoods

The pilot test was part of a supplement to the established approach developed for the Project and used in its first year. The 80 people interviewed were ages 9 to 24 (caregivers were not included). Sixty-one percent were male, and the racial/ethnic composition was 47 percent African American, 38 percent white, 10 percent Latino, and 5 percent other. Analysis of neighborhood-level crime statistics showed that 50 percent of the people interviewed lived in low-crime areas, 33 percent in high-crime areas, and 17 percent in moderate-crime areas.

Highlights of the analyses

The findings revealed a wide range of exposure: from the 88 percent who said they had seen someone hit during their lifetime to the 3 percent who had been sexually assaulted during the past year.

- **Witnessing violence.** The young people were frequently witnesses to serious violent events. For example, during their lifetime between 23 and 30 percent had seen a shooting or someone being killed or shot at.

Even in this small sample, 24 percent had seen an apparent murder victim in the past year and 66 percent had heard live gunfire.

- **Violent victimization.** Violent victimization in this sample of urban youth was also common, with 8 percent saying that in the past year they were shot at, 15 percent saying they were attacked with a weapon, and 31 percent saying they were hit. One in seven (14 percent) had been sexually assaulted during her or his lifetime.
- **Patterns of exposure.** Higher levels of exposure to violence were reported among those who were male, older, and African American (although there was some variation from this general pattern). About one-quarter of the males (and 7 percent of the females) said they had been seriously threatened in the past year. African Americans experienced higher total exposure to violence in the past year than whites, but there was no difference in race/ethnic groups in *lifetime* exposure. Of those ages 15 to 24, between 43 percent and 53 percent had been seriously threatened *on more than one occasion in their lifetime*.
- **Neighborhood violence.** Personal exposure to violence in the past year tended to vary with the level of violence in the neighborhood. Thus, for example, 35 percent of the young people who lived in a high-crime neighborhood had witnessed a shooting during the past year compared to only 2 percent of those who lived in a low-crime neighborhood (and 21 percent who lived in a moderate-crime community).

Expanding the use of the measure

Future analyses will focus on the context in which the exposure to violence occurred, including the location (e.g., whether home, school, or neighborhood), the relationship of the victim to the assailant, and the victim's reaction to the violence.

With additional funding from the National Institute of Mental Health, the new tool will be included in all interviews with young people ages 6 to 18 during the next phase of the study, which will begin in early 1997. Careful measurement of exposure to violence will enhance the understanding of its consequences for the development of children who are growing up in a violence-plagued environment. This should include enhanced understanding of exposure to violence as a factor contributing to antisocial behavior. Use of the measure is also expected to be helpful in assessing the impact of violence prevention programs.

This Research Preview was based on a study by Mary Beth Selner-O'Hagan, Ph.D.; Daniel J. Kindlon, Ph.D.; Stephen L. Buka, Sc.D.; Stephen W. Raudenbush, Ed.D.; and Felton J. Earls, M.D., "Assessing Exposure to Violence in Urban Youth," *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* (submitted). Dr. Raudenbush is with Michigan State University. The other researchers are with the Harvard School of Public Health. The Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods, of which this study was a part, is directed by Felton Earls and jointly sponsored by NIJ and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. This Project is supported under NIJ grant 93-IJ-CX-KOO5.

Points of view in this document do not necessarily reflect the official position of the U.S. Department of Justice.

U.S. Department of Justice

Office of Justice Programs
National Institute of Justice

Washington, D.C. 20531

Official Business
Penalty for Private Use \$300

BULK RATE POSTAGE & FEES PAID DOJ/NIJ Permit No. G-91
--