



National Institute of Justice

Research Preview

Jeremy Travis, Director

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Adolescent Violence: A View From the Street

Summary of a Presentation by Jeffrey Fagan, Ph.D., Center for Violence Research and Prevention

Typically, studies on violence have focused on propensity, that is, on who is or is not likely to become violent. But propensity models do not account for the transactional, contingent nature of violence or for within-person variability over time or place. Further, they cannot explain the occurrence or nonoccurrence of a violent event—that mixture of motivation, context, and facilitation that channels arousal or other actions into actual violence or the failure of an event to escalate to violence despite the presence of the dynamic factors that would make it likely.

Researchers at Columbia University's Center for Violence Research and Prevention are conducting a qualitative, multistage study on adolescent violence that draws strategically from theories of cognitive and developmental psychology to construct a situational framework for understanding violent behavior. Cosponsors of this research include the National Institute of Justice (NIJ), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the National Science Foundation (NSF), and the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation.

Methodology

The research design includes three samples of young men, ages 16 to 24, with histories of involvement in violent activities and currently (or, if incarcerated, formerly) residing in two of New York City's highest youth homicide rate neighborhoods—East New York (Brooklyn) and Mott Haven (South Bronx). The criminal justice sample includes young men convicted on gun-related charges and incarcerated in the Rikers Island Correctional Facility and facilities under the auspices of the New York State Division for Youth Facilities. The second sample consists of victims of violence identified in the emergency rooms of two hospitals, one near each of the two neighborhoods. The community sample consists of young men who are involved in violence but have avoided both the criminal justice system and the emergency room.

To date, 150 subjects, primarily from the criminal justice and community samples, have been interviewed and their responses transcribed. Interviews were conducted by “street smart” young men who are a few years older than sample members, are from the neighborhoods where subjects were recruited, and are role models for avoiding serious violence. The interview protocol sought narrative responses to structured questions regarding general information (respondent's family, school, work, and problem behavior), perceptions of social interactions in the community (including dealings with the police), and the details of two violent and two near-violent events during the past 2 years in which the respondent participated as (1) an *armed* perpetrator or victim, and (2) an *unarmed* perpetrator or victim. Information was requested on the social context of these events and the strategic decisions the subjects made that led them to engage in or withdraw from a situation, as well as decisions made once a violent episode had begun. Interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. Findings from these first 150 interviews are presented here.

Findings

Preliminary analyses focused on three areas: (1) the functions, contexts, and variability of violence; (2) an assessment of the “code of the streets,” a sociocultural structure that establishes rules, motivations, and justifications for engaging in violence in poor and socially isolated neighborhoods; and (3) the role of alcohol and other drugs in violent events. In addition, the study tried to determine how the subjects avoided potentially violent confrontations.

Variability and function of violence. The study confirmed that respondents were involved in a wide range of violent acts in diverse social contexts. Violent events have different motivations, meanings, and outcomes depending on context:

- Gang conflicts, both within gangs and between rival gangs.
- Neighborhood and ethnic conflicts, often over “turf.”

- Continuing feuds between individuals over perceived insults or disrespect.
- Disputes over girlfriends.
- Acquisitive violence, such as extortion and robbery.
- Preemptive or strategic violence, i.e., “I’m going to get him before he gets me.”
- Dating violence.
- Ritualized violence, e.g., gang initiations.

The most compelling function that violence served in the lives of respondents was to achieve and maintain status as a “tough” person—a reputation that conferred social power and dominance and protected the young men against victimization. Violence was also seen as a means to acquire the accouterments of wealth (e.g., nice clothes, flashy cars, or access to clubs), control or humiliate another person, defy authority, settle drug-related “business” disputes, attain retribution, satisfy the need for thrills or risktaking, and respond to challenges to one’s manhood.

Violence as a code of behavior. The study found that identities and normative behavioral codes were situation-specific. Many young men alternated their demeanor between “decent” and “street” codes of behavior, language, and dress. Both orientations lived side by side within the same individuals. The street code’s rules for getting and maintaining respect through aggressive behavior forced many “decent” youths to situationally adopt a tough demeanor and perhaps behave violently in order to navigate through an otherwise hostile and possibly dangerous environment. The reaction of bystanders is a key factor in the outcome of a situation. Bystanders can cool off or heat up the response to a confrontation or dispute. Repeated violent interactions can motivate a person’s strategic decisionmaking to internalize a street code. The pressure of guns often escalates the stakes of a dispute and increases its potential lethality.

Alcohol, drugs, and violence. Alcohol and drugs can influence social interactions in two ways that may lead to violence. First, alcohol can shape the dynamics, decisions, and strategies in a violent or near-violent episode—that is, interactions in which one or both individuals have been drinking will turn out differently than those in which one or both are sober. The second is that the context in which drinking occurs exerts independent effects on how violent or near-violent events unfold.

Respondents reported that intoxication increased the likelihood that a person’s language would become provocative and boastful turning minor disputes into violent encounters. Alcohol exaggerated the sense of outrage over perceived transgressions of personal codes, resulting in violence to exert control or exact retribution. Some drinkers acted on bystanders’ provocations to fight more seriously; others felt invincible and started fights that they then lost. In addition, certain bars or bodegas were frequent scenes of

violence, regardless of who was present or how much alcohol had been consumed: being in the wrong place at the wrong time resulted in injuries, including gunshot wounds, to a number of respondents.

The effects of drugs on violence were much less clear. Marijuana made some subjects less prone to violence, others sought out victims to exploit or dominate, and still others became paranoid—either avoiding human contact or becoming hostile and prone to defensive violence. Circumstances tended to overtake the effects of drugs; that is, if a fight broke out, even the most relaxed and “mellow” individual would immediately snap out of his stupor to defend himself.

Some respondents blamed their violent behavior on alcohol or drugs, and others did not. A number of young men used alcohol or drugs *after* violent events as a form of self-medication.

Avoiding violence. Even under the influence of alcohol, some youths were able to walk away from violence. Researchers repeatedly heard stories of “graceful” and strategic retreats from violence by persons able to simultaneously pay respect to the other party and maintain their own status. This took verbal skills and mental agility in the midst of a scene where both parties showed anger and arousal—cognitive abilities that not everyone possesses.

Interventions for the future

The researchers concluded that classroom instruction in conflict resolution skills is generally ineffective when practiced in the neutral, unemotional context of a classroom. The findings of this study indicate that adolescents should be taught negotiating and conflict avoidance skills under conditions that mimic the street—that is, under emotional states that stimulate unpredictable behavior. Role playing can help participants better understand the provocative and steering behaviors of bystanders and other third parties. Bystanders can also learn how their behavior can increase the risks of lethal violence for young men facing off on the street.

This summary is based on a presentation by Jeffrey Fagan, Ph.D., Director for the Center for Violence Research and Prevention at Columbia University’s School of Public Health, to an audience of researchers and criminal justice practitioners. His coinvestigator is Deanna L. Wilkinson. The seminar, *Adolescent Violence: A View From the Street*, is available as a 60-minute videotape for \$19 (\$24 in Canada and other countries). Use the order form on the next page to obtain this videotape, NCJ 163059, and any of the others available in NIJ’s Research in Progress Seminar Series.

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