Are Community Violence-Exposed Youth at Risk of Engaging in Delinquent Behavior? A Review and Implications for Residential Treatment Research and Practice

By: Jun Sung Hong, Hui Huang, Meghan Golden, Desmond Upton Patton, Tyreasa Washington


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Abstract:

Numerous studies have documented a direct association between children’s exposure to community violence and subsequent delinquent behavior. Regrettably, an understanding of the community violence exposure-delinquent behavior link is incomplete because violence-exposed children rarely engage in delinquency immediately. Rather, there are complex, developmental pathways in which these children experience behavioral problems before subsequently exhibiting delinquent behavior. Despite the importance of understanding the mechanisms that illuminate how children exposed to violence in the community might engage in delinquency, relatively few studies have investigated potential mechanisms. This review proposes four potential mechanisms: depression, anxiety/PTSD, conduct disorder, and aggression. More specifically, we examine how certain internalizing and externalizing behaviors can potentially mediate the relationship between community violence exposure and delinquent behavior. We also discuss implications for residential treatment research and practice.

Keywords: community violence | delinquency | residential treatment | violence | youth

Article:

In the United States, children, particularly those in low-income urban areas are exposed to unprecedented levels of violence in their communities (Kaynak, Lepore, & Kliwer, 2011; McDonald, Deatrick, Kassam-Adams, & Richmond, 2011). Although there has been a relative decline in overall violence since the early to mid-1990s (U.S. Department of Justice, 2013), youth homicide rates remained high (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2002), and as many as 38% of adolescents nationwide had witnessed violence in their communities (Zinzow et
The rate of community violence exposure is particularly high in urban areas, as estimates indicate that over 90% of urban youth have been exposed to some form of violence in their communities (Kaynak et al.; McDonald et al.).

*Community violence* is broadly defined as events occurring in the local neighborhood involving criminal activities, weapons use, and violence or potential violence perpetrated by persons outside the immediate family (Bell & Jenkins, 1993) and can be experienced in several ways. *Witnessing* is one way many adolescents are exposed to violence, including sexual assault, burglary, weapon use, muggings, the sounds of gun shots, as well as the presence of teen gangs, drugs, and racial/ethnic divisions (National Center for Children Exposed to Violence, 2003). In inner cities across the country, as many as 88–90% of youth have witnessed a robbery, beating, stabbing, shooting, or murder at least once (Kaynak et al., 2011; McDonald et al., 2011). Witnessing violence may be categorized as either a chronic stressor or a day-to-day hassle (Miller & Townsend, 2005). For example, a chronic stressor might include witnessing ongoing gang violence and/or pressure to join a gang throughout the academic year.

The effects of exposure to community violence on child development have also received a significant amount of research attention (Burton & Jarrett, 2000). One of the most commonly researched outcomes is *delinquency* (Patchin, Huebner, McCluskey, Varano, & Bynum, 2006), defined as participating in illegal behavior by minors (Siegel & Welsh, 2011) and is determined both by age (under the legal age of majority) and behavior (law-breaking)(Stark, 1998). Disruptions occurring in children’s community environment can predispose them to both violent and non-violent types of offenses during adolescence (Garbarino, 1999). Indeed, there has been empirical support for the association between children’s exposure to community violence and delinquency (Chen, Voisin, & Jacobson, 2013; Gorman-Smith, Henry, & Tolan, 2004). Children who frequently witnessed violence in their neighborhoods are likely to engage in delinquency and criminal activities, such as assaultive behavior and weapon-carrying, during adolescence and adulthood (Patchin et al., 2006).

In addition to empirical support, numerous theories also provide explanations for the relationship between community violence exposure and delinquency. For instance, social learning theorists argue that children learn behaviors through observation, role modeling, and reinforcement in their immediate environments, such as home, school, and neighborhood (Monks et al., 2009). Children may learn to accept violence and delinquency as legitimate and may choose to participate in these activities when they are frequently exposed to those activities in their communities. Social disorganization theorists purport that disadvantaged and disorderly communities promote an environment in which crime and delinquency becomes pervasive (Sampson & Lauritsen, 1994), and earlier researchers (Shaw & McKay, 1942) argue that urban characteristics, such as poverty and low educational achievement can explain the emergence of criminal activities. Agnew’s (1992) general strain theory asserts that children who are exposed to community violence typically have inadequate opportunities to achieve their life goals through legitimate institutionalized means. Youth’s emotional and behavioral reactions to violence can
increase their tendency to engage in delinquency (Agnew). In other words, youth residing in a low-resourced community where exposure to violence is pervasive might have limited opportunities. These youth might find themselves in a position of financial strain, yet wish to attain material success, and therefore may be tempted to resort to crime and delinquency to achieve socially desirable goals (Bender, 2010). And finally, Hirschi’s (1969) social control theorists propose that youth’s interpersonal relationships and ties to conventional institutions that value law-abiding behaviors can decrease their likelihood of engaging in deviant and delinquent activities. However, neighborhoods that are characterized as dangerous and violent can limit youth’s opportunities to be involved in organizations that foster law-abiding behaviors. As a result, these youth may develop a propensity to break the law.

The relationship between the community contexts and levels of criminal offending has long been documented in research and theory. Many studies have shown that youth’s reactions to being witness to neighborhood crime and violence are complex and multifaceted. For example, research on the strengths of the relationship between community violence exposure and delinquent behavior mostly implies a causal mechanism linking the two (Rosario, Salzinger, Feldman, & Ng-Mak, 2008). Despite this sizable body of literature underscoring the importance of understanding the community context of delinquent behavior, research investigating the potential pathways that explicate or buffer the effects of community violence exposure on delinquency is rare (Wikstrom & Sampson, 2003). As a result, a serious research gap exists, despite the increased interest in the effects community has on delinquent behavior. Rarely do youth who are exposed to community violence immediately engage in delinquent behaviors. Scholars have recognized that delinquency emerges in some youth through complex pathways, in which a developing youth’s risk for delinquency increases with each added exposure to violence or engagement in delinquency, as well as continued exposure to deviant role models (Bender, 2010; Moffitt & Caspi, 2001). Regrettably, few researchers have examined potential mediators or moderators of this association (Rosario et al.), although a closer investigation of what leads violence-exposed youth down the path of violence is warranted.

This review aims to explore the mechanisms that potentially link community violence exposure and delinquency. More specifically, we focus on examining the development of behavioral problems due to community violence exposure, which can potentially increase the risk for delinquent behavior. The bulk of the U.S.-based research has focused on the association between youth’s community violence exposure and behavioral outcomes, along with behavioral problems as predictors of delinquency. Taking into account the considerable amount of empirical support, it is important to examine whether youth’s behavioral problems can provide a theoretical support for examining closely the pathway from exposure to community violence to delinquency. Although methodologically complex, an examination of these third variable effects can provide an optimal fit for the complexity in the provision of evidence-based practices and services for youth who are situated in an “at-risk” environment (Magill, 2011). Researchers, and the intervention practices they inform, have the tendency to address complex, multidimensional
social problems. This complexity has led many social scientists to voice concerns about evidence-based practice (Magill), as complex social environments make it difficult to make intervention decisions. Moreover, recent directions in social science research have targeted mediating risk factors to be interrupted and moderating protective factors to be enhanced (Fraser, 2004). Thus, we propose four potential mechanisms of internalizing and externalizing behaviors and delinquent behaviors.

MECHANISMS LINKING COMMUNITY VIOLENCE EXPOSURE AND DELINQUENCY

Internalizing and externalizing behaviors are examples of potential mechanisms that help explain the linkage between community violence exposure and juvenile delinquency. Children who witness violence in their community are significantly more likely to exhibit behavioral problems (Farrell & Sullivan, 2004; Fowler, Ahmed, Tompsett, Jozefowicz-Simbeni, & Toro, 2008; Fowler, Tompsett, Braciszewski, Jacques-Tiura, & Baltes, 2009; Ludwig & Warren, 2009; Mrug & Windle, 2009, 2010). A recent longitudinal study by Mrug and Windle (2010), which investigated the effects of children’s exposure to violence within multiple contexts (i.e., home, school, and community) from a sample of 603 children, found that violence exposure is associated with both internalizing and externalizing behaviors. Similarly, researchers have also reported that internalizing and externalizing behaviors are predictive of delinquency (White, Moffitt, Earls, Robins, & Silva, 1990). To illustrate, White et al. reported that internalizing and externalizing behaviors during preschool years were the strongest predictors of delinquent problems during early adolescence (ages 11–15). Considering the relevance of behavioral problems in community violence exposure and delinquency, it is necessary to examine how certain internalizing and externalizing behaviors can potentially explain this relationship. Four potential mechanisms highlighted in this review include depression, anxiety/PTSD, conduct disorder, and aggression (Figure 1).

![Figure 1. Mechanisms that potentially link community violence exposure and delinquency.](image-url)
Depression

One internalizing behavior that has been commonly identified in relation to community violence exposure is depression. Children who are frequently exposed to violence in their communities are at a heightened risk of depression (Bruce, Farrell, Kliwer, & White, 1998; Fitzpatrick, Piko, Wright, & LaGory, 2005; Kaynak et al., 2011; McDonald & Richmond, 2008; McKelvey et al., 2011; Ozer & Weinstein, 2006; Rosario et al., 2008; Zinzow et al., 2009). Children exposed to violence may perceive their world as unsafe and that they are unworthy of being kept safe (Margolin & Gordis, 2004), which could undermine their behavioral adjustment and increase negative self-perceptions and a sense of hopelessness, thereby leading to depression. Ozer and Weinstein’s study, which investigated community violence exposure and psychological functioning among urban adolescents, found that, even after controlling for daily hassles, increased exposure to violence predicted more self-reported depressive symptoms. Studies also reported that the correlations between community violence exposure and depressive symptoms ranged from $r = .11$ to $r = .51$ (Foster, Kuperminc, & Price, 2004; Hammack, Richards, Luo, Edlynn, & Roy, 2004; Ozer, 2005; Ozer & Weinstein, 2006; Ruchkin, Henrich, Jones, Vermeiren, & Schwab-Stone, 2007; Self-Brown et al., 2006).

Depressive symptoms, in turn, predict involvement in delinquency. Children with depressive symptoms such as irritability may present through defiance and causing problems in the home and school (Akse, Hale, Engels, Raaijmakers, & Meeus, 2007), resulting in increased conflict with parents and peers and subsequent involvement in delinquency. Research findings also provide sufficient evidence that depression can contribute to delinquent behaviors for both male and female adolescents (Kofler et al., 2011; Manasse & Ganem, 2009; Obeidallah & Earls, 1999; Wiesner, 2003). Obeidallah and Earls examined the association between depression and delinquency, using a sample of 754 12 to 15-year-old adolescent girls. Their findings revealed that mildly to moderately depressed girls were more likely to commit property crimes and crimes against others than nondepressed girls, even after controlling for socioeconomic status. Wiesner’s study, which used a sample of 1,218 adolescents, also found that depression predicted delinquency. More recent studies also confirmed the existence of the depression-delinquency relationship. Manasse and Ganem reported that depressed male adolescents are 50% more likely to engage in delinquency than nondepressed males, and adolescents with elevated levels of depression displayed delinquent behaviors more frequently than nondepressed adolescents. Kofler et al. (2011) also found, from a representative sample of adolescents, that early depressive symptoms predicted later delinquency significantly more than early delinquency predicted changes in depressive symptoms.

Anxiety/PTSD

Anxiety is another internalizing behavior and a frequently investigated emotional outcome of exposure to community violence (e.g., Bruce et al., 1998), and one of the most common types of anxiety experienced by community violence exposed children is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
Youth who display anxiety and PTSD are vulnerable to delinquency involvement. Anxiety is a basic human emotion, which is an adaptive reaction to an unidentifiable or vague threat (Gullone, 2000). Because it is an unpleasant emotion, accompanied by a high level of physiological arousal, people have the tendency to control the anxiety in idiosyncratic ways (Kramer & Zimmerman, 2009). Children who suffer from anxiety tend to exhibit greater levels of distress and lower levels of self-restraint, which increases their risk of delinquency. Loeber, Stouthamer-Loeber, and Raskin White (1999) found from a sample of male students in grades 1, 4, and 7, that children who displayed persistent anxiety are likely to engage in persistent substance use (to self-medicate) and delinquent behaviors (pick-pocketing, vandalism, weapon carrying, car theft, robbery, attacking) during middle to late childhood. Cross-sectional research also documented that youth involved in juvenile justice are also at risk of anxiety, which increases the severity of delinquent behaviors. For example, the findings of Monahan Goldweber, Meyer, and Cauffman (2012) indicate that trait anxiety was associated with greater delinquent behavior among incarcerated female adolescents. Similar to anxiety, PTSD can also manifest in delinquency as well as frequency of arrest (Becker & Kerig, 2011). PTSD symptoms are higher for incarcerated female delinquents than for girls in the general population (Cauffman, Feldman, Watherman, & Steiner, 1998). The relationship between PTSD and delinquency is even stronger for youth with past histories of childhood sexual abuse. That is, youth with childhood sexual abuse histories are likely to experience PTSD, putting them at risk of delinquency (Danielson et al., 2010; Feiring, Miller-Johnson, & Cleland, 2007).

**Conduct Disorder**

Conduct disorder appears to be a relevant externalizing behavior outcome of children’s community violence exposure (Cammack, 2011; McCabe, Hough, Yeh, Lucchini, & Hazen, 2005; Mrug & Windle, 2009; Pearce, Jones, Schwab-Stone, & Ruchkin, 2003). According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder IV-TR, *conduct disorder* is defined as a frequent and persistent pattern of behavior in which the basic rights of others or age-appropriate societal rules or norms are violated (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). There are some overlaps between conduct disorder and delinquency. However, conduct disorder is typically diagnosed during childhood, whereas delinquency is normally reported among adolescents. The chronological order of the two diagnoses allows researchers to recognize the differences between conduct disorder and delinquent behavior and to investigate conduct disorder as a potential mediator. Children who frequently witness violence are predisposed to exhibit difficulty in their interactions with peers, teachers, and adult figures.
Margolin & Gordis, 2000), which indicates an underlying lack of social competence. This lack of social skills may serve as a significant risk factor for conduct disorder (Weaver, 2005). Additionally, conduct disorder is reinforced through the negative behaviors of neighborhoods and peers (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). Individual behavior in the neighborhood can influence conduct disorder through modeling (Pearce et al., 2003). Several longitudinal findings support this association. McCabe et al. (2005) found that community violence exposure contributed to the development of conduct disorder among 12- to 17-year-old adolescents. Mrug and Windle (2009) also reported that community violence exposure was linked to greater frequency of conduct disorder for boys over time. In a similar finding, boys who reside in a low-income public housing engage in delinquent behaviors more frequently than those residing in more resource-rich communities (Wikström & Loeber, 2000).

Conduct disorder can subsequently result in delinquent behaviors (Foley, Carlton, & Howell, 1996; O’Shaughnessy, 1992; Pardini & Fite, 2010; Pardini, Obradovic, & Loeber, 2006). Conduct disorder and delinquency often co-occur in youth with behavioral problems. Despite the co-occurrences and significant overlaps, there are several differences. For instance, youth with conduct disorder frequently have more complex behavioral problems, verbal skill deficits, and frontal lobe dysfunctions than do those identified as juvenile delinquents (Loeber, Burke, Lahey, Winters, & Zera, 2000). Conduct disorder is the most common DSM diagnostic precursor to serious delinquency (O’Shaughnessy). Fergusson and Horwood (1995) reported that 90% of youth with three or more symptoms of conduct disorder at age 15 were frequent offenders at age 16.

Aggression

And, finally, aggression is another externalizing behavior that frequently results from exposure to community violence (Bolland, Henly, Sieving, & Stoddard, 2011; Spano, Rivera, & Bolland, 2006; Brady, Gorman-Smith, Henry, & Tolan, 2008; Lambert, Boyd, Cammack, & Ialongo, 2012; Sams & Truscott, 2004). Various forms of children’s aggressive behaviors exist, including direct, physical, verbal, material, relational, indirect, and social aggression (Card, Stucky, Sawalani, & Little, 2008; Little, Jones, Henrich, & Hawley, 2003). Although many of these types overlap considerably, two types of aggressive behaviors can be distinguished—overt (verbal and physical behaviors with the intent to cause harm) and relational (acts intended to damage another child’s friendships or peer group membership; Card & Little, 2006). Studies have also documented that early exposure to violence was the strongest predictor of aggression (e.g., Brady et al., 2008). Children who witness violence might adopt aggressive identities to avoid victimization and attribute meaning to their world, in which violence is the norm and aggression is a necessary means of survival (Garbarino, Kostleny, & Dubrow, 1991). These findings are also in line with social learning theory, suggesting that violence exposure can reinforce aggression and weaken children’s disinhibition toward behaving aggressively (Bandura, 1986). Physiological theorists also argue that youth exposed to community violence experience arousal, which can trigger aggressive behavior.
Aggressive behavior puts children at risk for later delinquency (McEachern & Snyder, 2012). Children identified as aggressive may be likely to affiliate with an aggressive peer group, which increases the propensity of them to engage in violence and delinquency (Harachi et al., 2006). Peer group membership is important for adolescents, and peer groups are formed based on similarities in behavior (Espelage, Holt, & Henkel, 2003). Moreover, considering that males have been considered the more aggressive gender (Coie & Dodge, 1998), it is not surprising that aggressive behavior during childhood is a significant risk for violence and delinquency for males during adolescence (Broidy et al., 2003).

**IMPLICATIONS FOR RESIDENTIAL TREATMENT RESEARCH AND PRACTICE**

This review investigated mediating factors that might clarify the community violence exposure-delinquency trajectory. Overall, research suggests that children exposed to violence display elevated levels of internalizing and externalizing behaviors, and consequently are at a heightened risk of delinquency. These findings highlight the importance of understanding the mediating influences of depression, anxiety/PTSD, conduct disorder, and aggression on children’s behaviors. It is also important to investigate other potentially relevant mechanisms, such as academic performances and deviant peer relations (Nofziger & Kurtz, 2005). For instance, Sharkey (2010) documented that exposure to homicide in the local community reduced academic performance substantially for African American children. Poor academic performance could lead to special education placement and stigma, which impact children’s self-esteem, thereby leading to acting-out behaviors. Researchers need to explore mediating influences of broader level systems and structural factors operating in low-resourced communities such as racial residential inequality (Sampson & Wilson, 1995), structural disadvantages (Mouw, 2000), and de-centralization of employment opportunities (Jargowsky, 1996), any or all of which can limit low-income children’s access to important resources and frequently expose them to dangerous situations. As argued by McNulty and Bellair (2003), researchers have paid less attention to the larger structural contexts in which individuals are situated, despite extensive theory regarding the role of concentrated poverty and related disadvantages in low-resourced communities.

Likewise, internalizing and externalizing behaviors rarely occur in isolation, and it is imperative that researchers examine the comorbidity of various mediators. For instance, recent researchers have found that both internalizing and externalizing behaviors frequently co-occur, which lead to unique behavioral profiles (Kunimatsu & Marsee, 2012; Marsee, Weems, & Taylor, 2008). A recent review of studies conducted by Kunimatsu and Marsee found that there are numerous correlates of anxiety and aggression, and anxiety co-occurs more frequently with various types of aggression, such as relational, reactive, and reactive relational aggression. The authors concluded that conceptualizing anxiety and aggression as components of the larger fight/flight system reflects the importance of the inter-connectedness of these behaviors, which are dictated by the same underlying emotional and cognitive mechanisms (Kunimatsu & Marsee).
There is also a critical need for understanding the moderating effects of family, peer, and school support, which might buffer the association between community violence exposure and delinquency. Moreover, considering that a number of researchers have reported gender differences in the effects of community violence exposure and delinquent behavior, it is also necessary to examine gender as a potential moderator. An investigation of the moderating factors is necessary for understanding when, or under what conditions the relationship between the predictor and criterion variables is likely to occur. Relatedly, moderators are the social or personal resources that can attenuate the effects of community violence exposure on children’s behavior. Understanding and testing relevant moderators can help identify modifiable risk factors, which can then inform practice.

Most importantly, an examination of the pathways from community violence exposure to delinquency can illuminate effective prevention and intervention strategies in residential treatment centers for violence-exposed children who are at risk of delinquency. In recent years, moderators and mediators of intervention effects have been of increased interest, and across behavioral science research domains (Magill, 2011). Behavioral scientists have begun to recognize the importance of probing into more complex questions of intervention effectiveness that speak to variations by agency, clinician, or client factors, as well as questions about the mechanisms through which interventions produce their effects (Magill). Such directions can inform a more evidence-based practice in residential treatment centers and provide practitioners and staff members with empirically supported guidelines for assessing what factors to target in delinquency prevention. For instance, should research findings indicate depressive and anxiety symptoms as significant intermediary factors, practitioners and staff members in residential treatment centers could work with parents in identifying an effective treatment plans for youth who suffer from these symptoms because of community violence exposure. Cognitive-behavior therapy has been commonly identified as an effective intervention for addressing and reducing depression and anxiety (Compton et al., 2004), as well as reducing recidivism among juvenile offenders (Landenberger & Lipsey, 2005; D. B. Wilson, Bouffard, & Mackenzie, 2005). Moreover, there is also strong support for parent and caregiver education and social skills training for children in reducing the early onset of conduct disorder and aggression (Nangle, Erdley, Carpenter, & Newman, 2002; Webster-Stratton, Reid, & Hammond, 2004). School-based intervention programs also constantly showed effects for preventing or reducing aggressive behavior (S. J. Wilson & Lipsey, 2007; Wilson, Lipsey, & Derzon, 2003). Although assisting at-risk youth in modifying negative attitudes and behaviors is necessary, it is even more important that practitioners and staff members in residential treatment centers help affected youth to develop psychological resilience and help them find positive and constructive ways to cope with difficult situations in their communities (Garbarino, 1999).

CONCLUSION
The relationship between community violence exposure and delinquency is complex, which requires a rigorous empirical investigation that employs a longitudinal research design and utilizes sophisticated research methods (e.g., structural equation modeling) with a representative sample to better understand these mediating influences (Bender, 2010). The primary focus of this article is to review internalizing and externalizing behaviors that can potentially mediate the relationship between community violence exposure and delinquency. However, it is critical that researchers and practitioners consider other potentially relevant intermediary factors (e.g., deviant peer influences), particularly broader level factors (e.g., quality of life) that might elucidate this link. American communities are not uniform, and given the racial/ethnic diversity in many of these communities, researchers might consider examining racial/ethnic differences in the association between youth’s exposure to community violence and delinquent behavior. To this end, identifying potentially relevant intermediary factors is an important first step. The next step is to test these empirically to inform evidence-based treatment plans for youth in residential treatment centers who have been frequently and persistently exposed to violence.

REFERENCES


