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PREVIEW

Effects of Chronic Violence on
Inner City Junior High School Aged Children
by
Harold A. Coles, M.A., M.S.Ed.

A Doctoral Project Submitted in Partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Psychology
in the Department of Psychology at Pace University

New York

1995

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This section is probably going to be the hardest one to complete. To be working on it only means that this project is near completion and I've finally reached a major goal I set for myself one dark lonely night when I was 14 years old. This has been a long time coming and God only knows the many sacrifices it took to get here. My friends have been very patient with me over the years and my family has been a continual source of strength. I want to start off by thanking two very important people. Thank you Dr. Chisholm and Dr. Ward for your support, patience, and guidance. You both helped me explore some concerns I've had since I started working with the inner city youth of New York City.

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Finally, I would like to give a special thanks to the young people that volunteered their time to help with this study. Their exposure to violence should be viewed as being more than just the hottest topic of interest in the field. Long after a new point of interest shifts attention, inner city children will

still be dealing with the impact of stress reaction on their lives. It is hoped that this study can add to a better understanding and contribute to a possible solution to inner city children's ongoing struggle.

PREVIEW

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Abstract

Until recently, there has been very little research dealing with the effects of chronic exposure to violence on children. Many inner city children live in an environment, that is, by definition -- stressful. When children experience trauma in their daily lives and it goes unrecognized, what are the possible ramifications? One of the goals of this study was to go beyond documenting frequency accounts of different types of chronic traumatic experience. This study investigated the relationship between chronic exposure to violence and stress reaction.

The sample consisted of 4 classes totaling 100 sixth grade mainstream students (51 males and 49 females) attending a junior high school in Brooklyn, New York (80 African-American, 7 Latin-American, and 13 other). The junior high school was one of 5 in a very high crime area of the city. The questionnaire designed for this study consisted of Background information, a Violence Screening Form, the Child Post Traumatic Stress Reaction Index (CPTS), Checklist of Child Distress Symptoms (CCDS), Kazdin Hopelessness Scale (KHS), and a Life Events scale of the last six months (LSM).

The students completed the questionnaire during the morning part of their school day in June 1993.

Correlations were obtained between exposure to violence (type and target) and resulting stress reactions. The relationship between social support buffering the effects of exposure to violence and stress reactions were also investigated.

According to the CPTS scoring, most of the children experienced some level of symptoms associated with PTSD. Males and females showed similar reactions to exposure to violence across four of the five categories.

The first hypothesis was supported with a positive correlation found between the exposure to violence type and target on two measures of PTSD related symptoms. A positive relationship was found between exposure to violence and stress reaction.

The second hypothesis of the greater the degree of social support, the lower the level of one's stress reaction was not confirmed. However, a positive correlation was found between levels of symptoms related to PTSD and number of friends. A significant relationship was also found between negative view of the future and having adult friends with whom to share problems.

The results were analyzed to determine if a profile could be established to identify children that were

experiencing and or at risk for developing PTSD related symptoms. Stress reactions resulting from exposure to violence were evaluated to determine their relationship. A high correlation was found among these instruments which provides a good measure of concurrent validity. A relationship was found between negative views of the future and increased measures of symptoms associated with PTSD. Males were found to have more of a negative view of the future, than females. Being threatened by someone and exposure to violence through hearing about an experience were both found to be predictors of symptoms associated with PTSD.

The students were divided into two groups to investigate the relationship between resilience (students that had high exposure to violence and low stress reaction) and nonresilience (rest of the students). The resilient group was found to have a positive outlook on the future and the nonresilient group was found to have negative views of the future.

The implications of the relationship between children's exposure to violence and the impact of stress reaction, as well as goals for interventions were also explored.

CHAPTER I

Introduction

According to the latest Federal Bureau Investigation statistics, the threat of violent harm within the inner cities is on the rise (Federal Bureau Investigation [FBI], 1993). With the increase in violence, questions can be raised concerning what is it like for inner city children to live in constant fear for their safety. How does this affect their growth, development, and sense of well-being? Many inner city children live in an environment, that is, by definition -- traumatic. The risk of becoming a victim of a nonfatal violent assault in the United States was three times greater for persons from families with incomes below \$7,500 than for those with family incomes above \$50,000 (Department of Justice, 1991).

Upon first glance at inner city children at risk, one could be struck by their resilience and survival abilities. However, after careful observation over time, some of their survival techniques could be considered pathological: the anxieties and the aggression masking depression could be seen as traumatic symptoms resulting from their inner city experiences. When children experience trauma in their daily lives and

it goes unrecognized, what are the possible ramifications? Is there a way of detecting children at risk? In looking at the range of behaviors within inner city public schools, is it possible that what is seen as acting out or immature behavior, may conceivably be symptomatic of trauma undiagnosed and untreated? The foci of this study were to explore the link between stress reaction and exposure to violent stress, and the role support structures play in minimizing traumatic experiences.

Environment as a Trauma

Exposure to Violence Statistics

How is the environment in which these children live traumatic? A violent crime is committed every twenty-two seconds (FBI, 1993). According to the latest FBI statistics the rate of violent crime is 19 percent above the 1988 rate and 41 percent above the 1983 figure (FBI, 1993). Violent crimes consist of murder (one every 22 minutes), forcible rape (one every 5 minutes), robbery (one every 47 seconds) and aggravated assault (one every 28 seconds) (FBI, 1993). Metropolitan area rates for violent crimes were significantly greater than rural and suburban community rates. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (1992) reports that the rate of violent crime by juveniles in the United States increased more than 25 percent in the last decade.

Youth crime has shifted from crimes against property to violent crime against people. In 1990, 16% of all homicide victims were 19 years of age or younger as compared to 15.8% in 1989 and 12.6% in 1985 (FBI, 1991). Homicide is the second leading cause of death for Americans, ages fifteen to thirty-four, and is the leading cause of death for young African-Americans (Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, 1992). The average age of both violent offenders and victims has been decreasing each year (Department of Justice, 1992). This increase in violence prompted the Surgeon General in October 1985 to identify violence as a public health issue (Koop, 1986). This marked the entry of a public health initiative to reduce incidents of violence. The public health approach is to view injuries (fatal, nonfatal, psychological, and physical) as indicators and measures of the impact of violence (Mercy, Rosenberg, Powell, Broome, & Roper, 1993).

Exposure to Violence in School

Inner city youth are exposed to violence at home, and in their neighborhood. The media reports the preponderance of unexpected incidents of violence occurring within inner city neighborhoods. For example, at Red Hook Brooklyn grade school, Principal Daly was shot and killed as he searched for a missing pupil on the grounds of a housing project (Gonzalez, 1992). Violence occurs on the way to and from school like the

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incident of three students shot and injured in a violent spree by students at feuding Brooklyn high schools that spread from a school yard to two nearby subway stations, and finally to a city bus (Barron, 1993). The school, once viewed as a safe haven from crime and violence, is not immune. For example, three students were shot and killed at Brooklyn's Thomas Jefferson high school (Goldman, 1992). Reported crimes of assault, robberies, sex offenses, drug possession, and weapons possession in New York City schools rose nearly 16% during the 1992/1993 school year (Barbanel, 1993). The biggest fear is when violence will strike again and to whom.

Exposure to Violence in the Mass Media and Entertainment

The mass media and entertainment business have recently come under fire for their portrayal of violence. Drevitch (1994) reports that by age 18, the average American teenager has seen 40,000 people killed on TV. In 1992, the Center for Media & Public Affairs recorded 1,846 individual acts of violence on TV during a single 18 hour day in April in Washington D.C. (Guthmann, 1994). During the past forty years, there have been over 3,000 studies on violence, none of which have proven conclusively that watching TV violence can turn orderly people into killers (Drevitch, 1994). Despite the lack of consensus in the research literature on the impact of media violence on youth, a debate has sprung up in Congress concerning monitoring and

censoring mass media. The debates resulted in representatives of the video game industry pledging to put rating labels on all video games released after November 1, 1994; and television networks, beginning in June 1994, running air warnings alerting viewers about the violent content of some programs (Guthmann, 1994).

What role does mass media violence play in the inner city child's life, and what does it symbolize to them? There are two schools of thought concerning media violence exposure. One is that repeated exposure causes desensitization to real life violence and or encourages aggressive behavior. Inner city high school students in California were recently criticized for their behavior during a movie depicting the experience of Holocaust victims. A national debate was sparked when (these students) were evicted from the theater because a few of them were laughing and talking while Holocaust violence was being depicted. The final straw was reported to have been when students laughed at a scene in which a Nazi guard shoots a Jewish woman in the head (Rosenthal, 1994). Mr Grumet, a math teacher and chaperone that also lost relatives in the Holocaust, reported, "Most of my students have seen people shot, so they laughed when the shooting didn't look realistic. They're not Afro-American kids laughing at Jewish horror; they're the inner-city, hip-hop generation, desensitized to violence because they see it everyday"

(Rosenthal, 1994, p. 1).

For inner city youth, there is more to the debate of mass media violence because inner city children are exposed not only to mass media violence, they also experience violence on a daily basis in their own environment. Isips (1994, p. 10A) believes some of those kids who are "on the wrong side of the tracks" have not been helped by all the exposure to violence they encountered growing up. Dr. Baufarb, states "when I get a child in here who's acting out aggressively, I look first to the family environment" (cited in Sunila, 1994, p. 5). One of the best predictors of violent behavior is exposure to violence in the home (Banks, 1993). Real life experiences of violence have a greater impact than TV violence. Studies have shown that the more realistic the violence is, the more likely it will be internalized (Lachenauer, 1993). For example, a stout ten year old boy from Detroit, who was raised in a crack house and witnessed his sister being shot in the face, demanded money from a pregnant woman who had gotten money from a cash machine. When the woman did not give him any money, he signaled to his fourteen year old friend who shot and killed her (The Record, 1994).

The other school of thought is that media violence exposure provides a "purifying experience to violence" (Guthmann, 1994, p. A1). The psychodynamic perspective on good healthy ego functioning suggest that the ability

to stop and reflect on impulses is far better than acting upon them. Martin Scorsese whose films include "Raging Bull" and "Goodfellas" has said, "Maybe we need the catharsis of blood-letting and decapitation, like the ancient Romans needed it" (cited in Guthmann, 1994, p. A1). Viewing violent acts allows individuals to vicariously act upon and or work through their own traumatic experiences and ideations. Inner city youth have reported viewing media depicting horror, graphic violence, and mutilation, and laughing and making fun of the characters involved. There is a fascination and identification with the villain "Freedy (the villain from the Nightmare on Elm Street movies) is fly" and ridicule of the victim "Ah, he deserved to get waxed."

Ms. Dennis, a teacher at an inner city California high school, reported that "a few students giggled and talked only because they were affected by the Nazi killing. Other kids have seen more violence and suffered more oppression than these people" (cited in Rosenthal, 1994, p. 1). Ms. Dennis' statement addresses a possible intervention strategy the students tried to use to work through their reaction to violence. Marsha Kidder states "Children are drawn to violence for its action and power. It's the idea of being able to control the world, having an impact on other people and entities around you, and being able to see the impact of what you're doing. Little guys beating up big guys is