**Pathways of Resiliency and Risk Among Youth Exposed to Chronic Community Violence**

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# ABSTRACT

This study examines the effects of community violence exposure upon trauma and resiliency-related process among inner-city youth. A mixed-method design was applied with a sample of twelve adolescents. Standardized instruments were used to assess levels of community violence exposure, and posttraumatic symptoms and diagnoses. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather qualitative data pertaining to trauma and resiliency-related processes. Subjects reported high rates of chronic community violence and most met diagnostic criteria for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and complex trauma. Integrated analysis of the data determined distinct processes related to community violence. The path of resiliency tended to lead youth towards trauma recovery; while the other risk-oriented path tended to lead towards complex trauma and increased violence involvement. This study indicates the need to assess for violence exposure among urban youth and the importance of in-depth counseling to identify risk and resiliency factors.

Keywords — Community violence, youth, trauma, risk, resiliency

## INTRODUCTION

Community violence is one of the greatest threats to youth safety and well-being worldwide. Homicide and non-fatal assaults involving young people contribute greatly to the global burden of premature death, injury and disability (Reza & Krug, 2001). In 2000, an average of 565 youth between the ages of 10 and 29 years died each day as a result of interpersonal violence (Krug, 2002). Over 85% of urban youth report witnessing some form of community violence in their lifetime and almost 70% report direct victimization (Farrell & Bruce, 1997; Overstreet & Braun, 2000; Mazza & Reynolds, 1999). Community violence exposure (CVE) includes direct victimization, witnessing, and hearing about violence in the community, which can be an extreme stressor affecting the physical and mental health of youth (Cooley, et al., 1995). Although there are consistent empirical findings for the relationship between CVE and mental health symptoms, not all youth in urban settings who are exposed to community violence develop negative sequelae (Wilson & Rosenthal, 2003). Some display signs of positive youth development, despite these experiences. Adversity and trauma do not always produce deleterious outcomes, and can conversely, be catalysts for positive growth and change in certain individuals (Lerner et al., 2005). The potential for growth is often greatest following exposure to extraordinary traumatic life experiences (Linley & Joseph, 2004; Tedischi & Calhoun, 1995). Community violence is a prevalent and potentially life changing social issue for youth. It is imperative to examine factors contributing to increased risk and those that lead to resiliency and positive traumatic growth.

# RESEARCH METHOD

This mixed-methods study examined the relationship between community violence exposure, trauma, risk and resiliency among urban youth. The sample for this study consisted of twelve youth (ages 12-17) who were exposed to chronic community violence in San Francisco, CA, USA. The sample included boys and girls from heterogynous racial and ethnic groups. Each individual participated in a two-hour semi-structured interview. The first phase of the interview involved completion of two structured assessment instruments: *The Survey of Children’s Exposure to Community Violence* (Richters & Martinez, 1998) and *The Children’s PTSD Inventory* (Saigh, 2004). The second phase of the interview was a semi-structured interview with the opportunity for open-ended questions and statements from participants.

**2.1 Qualitative Data Analysis of Youth Experiences with Violence & Trauma**

The semi-structured interviews were taped, transcribed, and analyzed to allow dominant themes to emerge from the data. Assessment and survey instruments were scored according to the procedures identified for each instrument. The data obtained from the assessments and surveys was compiled to analyze similarities and differences across cases. Qualitative data reduction and analyses were conducted according to the constant comparative analysis approach (Corbin and Strauss, 1990). The final stage of data analysis was conducted to discern overall patterns and emergent theories. One of the advantages of qualitative studies is that they can potentially yield new theories during the process of data analysis and refinement. In the current study, the result was a theoretical model for the developmental process of risk and resiliency as it pertains to chronic community violence.

# Emergent Theory: Pathways of Resiliency & Risk in Response to Community Violence

A comprehensive analysis of the cross-case themes revealed potential patterns of youth development in response to community violence. The youth who appeared to adjust and recover from their violence-related traumas described common themes. Similarly, there were common themes among those youth who had an overall worse prognosis for a myriad of risk factors including: violence-related trauma, personal involvement in violence, and criminal activities. A comprehensive examination of the data derived from the interviews suggested two trajectories of personal and social development in response to community violence. One trajectory was in the direction of resilience and recovery from trauma. The other trajectory led towards a cycle of complex trauma and increased involvement in violence and other detrimental risks. Based upon the qualitative data, there were pivotal experiences that influenced the direction of either trajectory for each youth. These pivotal experiences were influenced by several factors, including: pre-trauma environmental factors; trauma-related specifics; internal response of the individual; and the interaction with the broader social community.

A theory of youth development in the context of community violence is presented in Table I: Pathways of Resilience & Risk in Response to Community Violence. Stages are presented which relate to the interaction between community violence and the personal development of the youth. At each stage, tasks have been identified corresponding to the two trajectories of development in response to community violence.

**3.1 Stage I: Violence Exposure**

There is a broad range of the type, frequency, and severity of community violence which inner-city youth are exposed to. However, the results of this study strongly suggest that community violence is a chronic threat rather than an a few isolated incidents. This chronic exposure to community violence appears to affect individuals in different ways depending upon several variables. Results suggest there are both protective and risk factors that may determine the impact of community violence exposure.

**3.1.1 Protective Factors**

Several protective factors were identified by the youth that may have minimized the effects of community violence. These included family support in the form of safety, protection, and the capacity to share feelings and concerns. Adult supervision appeared to be a protective factor that reduced the risk of violence exposure. Youth who were involved in positive activities such as school or youth programs were better equipped to deal with the violence they were exposed to. Youth programs were identified as places where they could talk about their experiences with violence and find mutual support from peers and staff.

**3.1.2 Risk Factors**

There were several risk factors that placed youth at greater risk of experiencing violence and exacerbated the effects of exposure. Previous exposure to violence, especially at younger ages, placed individuals at greater risk for future exposure and increased susceptibility to posttraumatic symptoms. Family discord and conflict were also risk factors that often prevented youth from having familial resources for coping with violence related experiences. Academic and behavioral difficulties placed youth at greater risk. Truancy and criminal activity increased violence exposure risk, as did affiliation with peers involved in such activities. The risk factors identified by the youth appeared to both increase the chances of being subjected to violence as well as limit the resources for coping with the physical and emotional effects.

TABLE I

Pathways of Resiliency & Risk in Response to Community Violence

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Development & Community Violence | Path of Resiliency: Recovery & Positive Growth  | Path of Risk:Complex Trauma & Violence |
| *Stage I:**Violence Exposure* | *Protective Factors* | *Risk Factors* |
|  | Close support systemSafer environmentPositive behaviors | Few intimate resourcesChronic violencePrevious traumaRisk-taking behavior  |
| *Stage II:**Critical Incident* | *Distress & Loss* | *Numbing & Anger* |
|  | Acute PTSD & griefLife changing eventImmediate safety | Avoidance of supportNumbing of affectAnger  |
| *Stage III:**Internal Response* | *Personal Meaning & Faith* | *Hopelessness & Self Preservation* |
|  | Spirituality & existential searchingIncreased moralityPositive reframing  | Emotional dysregulationSelf-destructivenessNegative self-conceptTruncated morality |
| *Stage IV:**Social Interaction* | *Reaching Out* | *Isolation & Negative Peer Interaction* |
|  | Vulnerability Sharing emotionsPositive peer groupAdult confidantsEmpathy & altruism | Emotional isolationHyper vigilanceDeviant peer groupDelinquency & crime |
| *Stage V:**Future Orientation* | *Perseverance & Community* | *Resignation & Violence Perpetuation* |
|  | Optimistic futureEmphasis on successCommunity involvementHope | Violence perpetrationAcademic/Job failureFew opportunitiesNegative view of futureDespair |

**3.2 Stage II: Critical Incident**

Every youth in this study was able to identify at least one incident that was more traumatizing or threatening than the multitude of violence-related events they had experienced. These critical incidents often resulted in posttraumatic stress reactions. For several of the youth, the critical incident also marked a turning point in their lives. The emotional upheaval of the traumatic event caused them to re-examine their own lives and often led towards positive personal growth. Those youth who appeared to recover from their trauma and make a more adaptive shift in their development all stated that their painful, critical experience was ultimately beneficial to them. In contrast, the youth who continued to be at risk for future involvement in violence did not identify any positive outcomes of their traumatic experiences. For these youth, the traumatic events they experienced only appeared to exacerbate complex traumatic symptoms and violence-related behaviors.

**3.2.1 Distress & Loss**

Positive growth following trauma was associated with high levels of distress immediately following the incident. Youth with the most intense trauma and grief related symptoms were also the individuals who described the most posttraumatic positive growth. Individuals who witnessed someone killed, especially with whom they had a close relationship, explained how the event changed them permanently. As did the youth who felt that their lives were being seriously threatened. The critical incident that led towards personal change was subjectively the most distressing to the individual, rather than the most severe by objective standards. Thus, the critical incident and subsequent change were highly subjective and personal to the individual. In addition to distressful levels of posttraumatic symptoms, witnesses to violence also reported significant grief and loss. Youth with a strong relationship to the victim tended to have more intense and longer periods of grief. As with trauma, those who experienced the most distress also reported the most significant positive changes.

**3.2.2 Numbing & Anger**

The youth who did not portray positive growth following their traumatic experience described psycho-physiological reactions associated with complex traumatic reactions. These youth reported less severe distress in response to the critical incidents identified. Most of the at-risk youth tended to block out feelings and not risk the vulnerability to share their emotions. They did not share the traumatic experience with others, especially not family members. Outwardly, these youth presented with a tough, invincible demeanor, stating that violent experiences affected them very little. However, based upon their PTSD inventory, most of these youth had clinically significant PTSD symptoms. Anger was the most common reaction these youth had to both their own victimization, and harm inflicted upon people close to them. Their behavioral reaction to most of their traumatic experiences was increased arousal symptoms in the form of hyper vigilance and aggression.

**3.3 Stage III: Internal Response**

Following critical incidents of violence, youth reported a period during which they tried to find meaning related to the event. This was especially true for the youth who were resilient and tended to recover better from the event. Resilient youth found ways to salvage some positive personal meaning from the trauma. In contrast, the youth who were at more risk tended to view the event as evidence that their world was a hostile place to defend themselves against.

**3.3.1 Personal Meaning**

All of the youth who experienced positive growth following trauma described a period of working through their pain and fear to find some meaning in the experience. For some, creative expression helped them in this working through phase. For others it was the faith or belief system of supportive adults. These youth engaged in a form of existential searching to understand why such an unfortunate tragedy happened to them, or to someone close to them. Resilient youth described how the critical event caused them to change perspectives on their own lives and future. Many youth described how they realized how fragile life can be, and how easily it can be taken away. A common theme amongst resilient youth was transformation towards nonviolence. Following the death of someone close, or the threat to personal safety, resilient youth realized how potentially fatal any conflict can become. As a result, many youth made conscious efforts to manage their own anger and avoid fights. In the process of recovering from their trauma, resilient youth became more mature, and positively future oriented.

**3.3.2 Hopelessness & Self-Preservation**

Youth who did not struggle with finding personal meaning to the traumatic events continued to engage in violence, and tended to have less positive future orientations. The youth most involved in violence appeared to be the most apathetic to its effects. They did not come to the realization that their behavior was self-destructive. Rather, they described how they retaliated in response to their victimization. Many of these youth described how they became excited in anticipation of a fight. Violence had become a source of power for these youth; a way to combat the powerlessness they may have experienced as a victim. Based upon their statements and behaviors, at-risk youth appeared to be more amoral than the resilient youth. They reported criminal activities and the perpetration of violence with very little remorse. Youth reported assaults, robberies, and narcotics trafficking as common activities. Remorse reported often related to being apprehended, rather than concern for their victims. The youth at-risk for violence portrayed a degree of cold self-protection. Their value system seemed to be based on getting what they could, by any means necessary.

**3.4 Stage IV: Social Interaction**

In concert with forming personal internal values related to violence, youth from the two different paths exhibited divergent social patterns. Youth who recovered from their trauma and were more resilient sought adaptive peer relationships and attempted to effect positive solutions to youth violence. The at-risk youth gravitated towards other youth who had similar interests; and developed patterns of social interaction fraught with conflict, defiance, and aggression.

**3.4.1 Reaching Out**

A common social trend among the resilient youth was reaching out to others for support in order to cope with trauma-related difficulties. Individuals who were resilient identified significant sources of social support in their lives that they could rely upon immediately after their trauma. Initially many of the youth reported avoidance symptoms of blocking out feelings and not talking to others about the event. However, resilient youth tended to open up to others after a short period of time; initial isolation was gradually overcome and they were able to share their feelings with others. Resilient youth described consistent, trustworthy sources of social support in their lives. They found relief in the support of peers, family members, and adult confidants. Every resilient youth was able to identify at least one significant individual in their lives with whom they could share their more private thoughts and feelings. For some, these were family members, or peers. Others, who were less connected to their family, found intimate support in adult confidents such as the leaders of their youth program, therapists, or teachers.

**3.4.2 Isolation & Negative Peer Affiliation**

At-risk youth tended to be more emotionally isolated and affiliate with other youth who engaged in self-destructive activities. These youth tended to report that they told no one about their traumatic experiences. They also did not have significant people in their lives that they trusted enough to share their innermost feelings, especially emotions that may reveal vulnerability or weakness. These youth presented with an impervious armor of toughness despite underlying posttraumatic symptoms. Most of these youth had to ignore their own emotional reactions related to being victims of violence. During the interview process, the youth who presented as being the toughest, least scared of violence, were the individuals who spoke incessantly for hours once they trusted the interviewer. These youth seemed to have no healthy outlet for their accumulated fear, anxiety and loss.

There appeared to be a negative social progression for those youth most at-risk whereby their interactions with peers and society became increasingly detrimental and self-destructive. Some of the signs of this progression were: school failure and drop out; criminal involvement; poverty; and negative peer affiliation. Most of the youth who perpetrated violence attended school rarely, had already been incarcerated, and came from neighborhoods and families of extreme poverty. These youth also reported having friends with similar histories. These youth sought to belong as do any youth; however, they found it among peers who were equally involved in destructive lifestyles. As a result, their most influential source of social support was also their greatest source of risk for future involvement in violence and crime.

**3.5 Stage V: Future Orientation**

There was a distinct difference between the perspectives of the future formed by resilient youth versus those at high risk. The resilient youth tended to be more optimistic and view their future as an opportunity to grow, despite their painful experiences. Youth who were at higher risk tended to maintain a view that the future only held more of the same threat and suffering they had endured. Whereas resilient youth tended to be excited about the unknown possibilities that lay in the future; at-risk youth were guarded and pessimistic about unexpected threats that the future may entail.

**3.5.1 Perseverance & Community**

Resilient youth presented with perseverance to overcome the obstacles of their environment and self-confidence to attain positive life goals. Most of them did not regret the painful experiences they endured because they felt these pivotal events had helped them focus on having a more meaningful life. Many of these youth also described becoming part of a broader community devoted to affecting positive change. They were involved in programs that advocated for youth and attempted to ameliorate youth violence. Resilient youth managed to transform their traumatic experiences into lessons to teach other youth. Common characteristics these youth exhibited were self-esteem, efficacy, and a mature level of self-awareness. They conveyed a desire to promote positive change in their communities and overcome adversity rather than succumb to its perils.

**3.5.2 Resignation & Perpetuation of Violence**

The at-risk youth tended to be reactionary to their environment and were more pessimistic about their own future than their resilient peers. They had few recommendations for dealing with youth violence and tended to retaliate with violence whenever threatened. Some of the youth even admitted to being the provocateurs of violence. These youth did not convey a sense of genuine self-esteem or a healthy sense of self-efficacy. Several youth said that they feared they would die at a young age. At risk youth did not tend to have the optimistic plans for their future that the resilient youth had. Many had stopped attending school and were already involved in crime. Their orientation tended to be with the thrills and material gains of the present rather than striving towards more adaptive future goals. Several of the at-risk youth viewed violence as one of their only sources of power. They garnered respect by the fear they could instill in others. These youth tended not to have other healthy sources of self-esteem. Money from criminal activities provided a false sense of success, but also increased their involvement in violence. These youth described how they had to fight or carry a gun to protect their territory when dealing drugs. Crime often led to incarceration, which in turn resulted in more involvement with violence. Consequently, youth became engaged in a viscous cycle whereby they became deeper entrenched in self-destructive behaviors and violence with fewer opportunities to escape.

**4. DISCUSSION**

Community violence has become one of the greatest risks facing youth worldwide. Chronic exposure often results in violence becoming a common aspect of urban life. Youth are the most common victim and perpetrators of violence in their communities. This study provides insight into the vicious cycle of violence many youth are trapped in; as well as ways in which many youth survive, and even thrive, in the face of such adversity. Many youth in this study found ways to turn traumatic events into positive turning points in their lives. This study provides an initial theory regarding risk and resiliency factors related to community violence. Educators and mental health professionals should consider these when working with urban youth. Despite the prevalence of community violence exposure and trauma among inner-city youth, there has been scant research on effective treatment approaches with this population. Further research is needed to better understand the complexities of trauma and resiliency among inner-city youth in order develop more effective, culturally relevant intervention strategies.

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