Violence Trends, Patterns and Consequences for Black Males in America:

A Call to Action

A CITIES UNITED REPORT

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cities united
Safe, healthy and hopeful

About this Report Series

This report is a part of a three-part Cities United series focused on identifying the patterns, predictors and interventions for reducing violence among black males in the United States.

Violence Victimization Trends, Patterns and Consequences for Black Males in America: A Call to Action

The first report in the series will provide trend data on violent offending and victimization among black males with the bulk of the report devoted to understanding homicide victimization trends, patterns, and consequences for black males.

Explaining and Predicting Violence Perpetration Among Young Black Males in America

The second report in this series will explore the evidence on violent offending and its associated trends, patterns and explanations. In particular, it will review the evidence base on predictors and causal factors for violent offending among young black males.

Interventions for Reducing Violence and its Consequences for Young Black Males in America

The third report in this series will synthesize the existing evidence base regarding policy and programmatic interventions for reducing violence among young black males.

About Cities United

Launched in 2011, Cities United is a national movement focused on eliminating the violence in American cities related to African American men and boys. The almost 80 mayors participating in Cities United intend to reduce violence by 50%, by the year 2025, in each of their cities by targeting the highest-risk neighborhoods and engaging African American males in finding solutions, focusing on prevention rather than prosecution and intervention rather than incarceration. Moreover, they are committed to restoring hope to their communities and building pathways to justice, employment, education, and increased opportunities for residents.

As a resource, Cities United helps mayors assess their current situations, increasing opportunities for awareness, alignment, action, advocacy, and accountability in communities across the country. The organization provides assistance with planning and implementing solutions by sharing best practices, instituting innovative approaches, and understanding how and where to reconfigure resources. The members of Cities United hold each other accountable for achieving results, calling on Federal support while asking members of the community to get involved as well.

From the outset, Cities United was based on the simple but fundamental premise that African American men and boys matter and are assets to our nation. Under the leadership of Philadelphia Mayor Michael Nutter and New Orleans' Mayor Mitch Landrieu, Cities United was founded at a time when every 24 hours in America, 14 young people were being gunned down on the streets of our cities. That number has begun declining in many major US cities, including Philadelphia itself, where the murder rate has declined over 35%.

Cities United has grown to support a national network of mayors committed to working in partnership with community leaders, families, youth, philanthropic organizations, government officials, and other stakeholders to reduce the epidemic of homicide-related deaths and injuries plaguing African American men and boys. They receive support in their mission from Casey Family Programs, and the Campaign for Black Male Achievement. Additional support comes from the Ford Foundation, W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the Jacob and Valeria Langeloth Foundation, William Penn Foundation, the Mayor's Fund of Philadelphia, Lenfest Foundation and John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.

Message from the Executive Director

Mayors and other local community leaders are working tirelessly every day to reduce violence in their communities. They are looking across the country to find solutions to this most pressing issue and are partnering with others to change outcomes for our young black men and boys in their cities and our country. This new report is the first in a series that will strengthen the case for taking concerted action across our nation to reduce the tragedy of violence among young black men and boys.

Anthony D. Smith, Executive Director
Cities United

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I

Introduction

Rates of violent victimization and offending among young black males have declined substantially over the past couple of decades, serving as a welcome reversal to an epidemic growth in violence that occurred during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Yet rates for these young boys and men remain alarmingly high and their disparate experience with violence sets them apart from nearly every other demographic group including black men older than 25, white men, and black women. This report paints a detailed picture of the trends and patterns of violent offending and victimization among young black males as well as the profound consequences this violence wreaks upon not only the lives and futures of these young males but upon that of their families and communities as well. Summarizing and marshalling the latest scientific research, this report seeks to galvanize leaders to take vital action across our nation's cities to reduce violence and violent deaths among young black males.

A note about this report

Although the first section will provide trend data on homicide offending among black males, the bulk of the report will be devoted to understanding homicide victimization trends, patterns, and consequences for young black males. The second and third reports in this series will then examine predictors and factors associated with violence among young black males as well as evidence-based interventions for reducing that violence.

II

Violence Trends and Patterns for Black Males in the U.S.

Section Overview

1. Defining "Community Violence"
2. Rates of fatal offending and victimization show stark disparities for young black males, although gaps have narrowed since rates peaked in the early 1990s
3. Black males are significantly more likely than other males to be non-fatally violently victimized and the likelihood is most pronounced for young black males
4. Rates of fatal and nonfatal violent victimization are far higher for young black males living in neighborhoods of high disadvantage
5. When violently victimized, black males are substantially more likely to be assaulted with a firearm or other weapon
6. Black youth are substantially more likely to witness serious violence compared to their white counterparts, and household income does not appear to buffer against the risk of exposure
7. Risk of violent victimization among black males is highly concentrated and transmitted through social networks

Defining "Community Violence"

The meaning of "community violence" varies substantially throughout the research literature, making it difficult to arrive at a commonly shared definition of the concept. In a broader sense, the concept of community violence has been used to refer to interpersonal violent acts taking place within families, neighborhoods, and schools, with the acts variously described as "hearing about", witnessing, or being directly victimized by a violent act.[1]

Looking to a recent report by Thomas Abt and Christopher Winship, however, community violence is defined in a way that thoroughly captures the meaning of the concept as discussed in this report. Their definition is worth quoting at length:

> "Community violence, particularly homicide, occurs primarily in public settings. It is interpersonal, taking place between individuals and small groups that may or may not know one another. It is generally unplanned and impulsive in nature but its impact is nevertheless severe, often resulting in death or disabling injury. Its perpetrators and victims are generally, but not exclusively, young men from disadvantaged backgrounds and communities. It may result from disputes or from conventional forms of street crime, e.g. robberies. Community violence implicates both the public health and public safety fields and multi-disciplinary, multi-sector responses."[2]

Within this meaning, "community violence" can be seen as similar to the colloquial term "street violence". Throughout the remainder of this report, community violence will be shorthanded to the term "violence" and its usage will reflect the concept as detailed by Abt and Winship above.

The Varied Meanings *of* "Violence Exposure"

In this report, the term "violence exposure" will be used to encompass all of the following concepts unless otherwise specified:

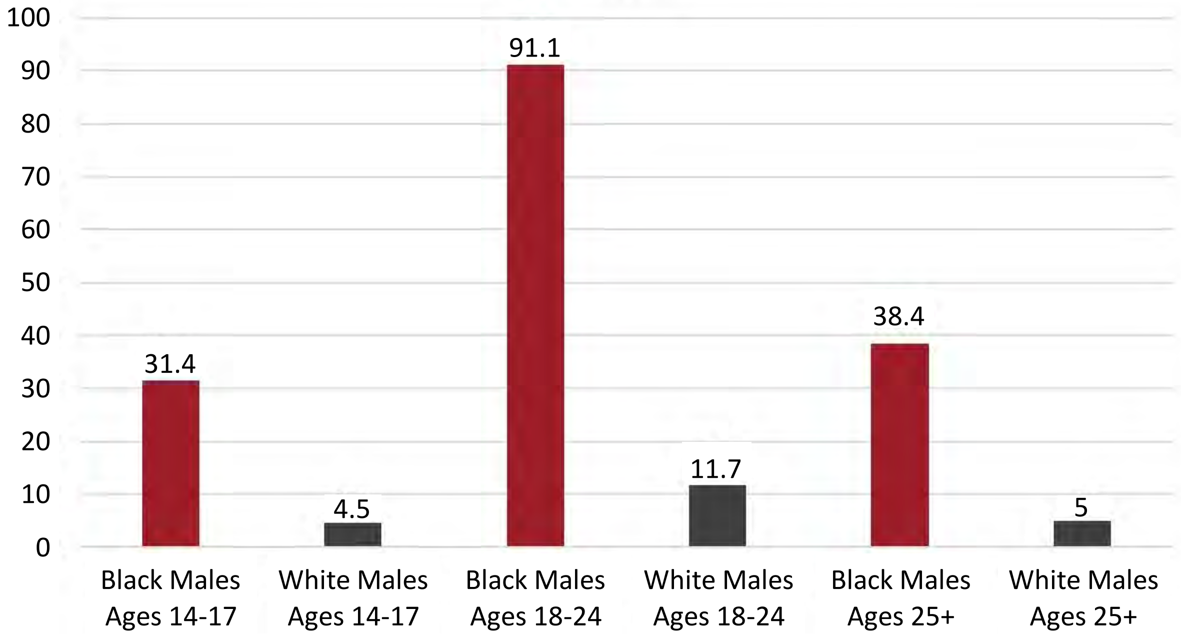
Violence Victimization	refers to the direct experience of violence in the form of a physical attack, injury or death
Witnessing Violence	refers to directly observing a violent act
Hearing about violence	refers to hearing about a violent act from someone else

Rates of fatal offending and victimization show stark disparities for young black males, although gaps have narrowed significantly since rates peaked in the early 1990s

Current disparities in the likelihood of homicide offending or victimization for black males compared to other demographic groups are quite large, with differences particularly pronounced for the group ages 18-24, or those in late adolescence and emerging adulthood. Black males between the ages of 18 and 24 were roughly 8.6 times as likely to be homicide offenders and 7.8 times as likely to be homicide victims as white males in that age group. Black males were also 17 times as likely to be homicide offenders and about 8 times as likely to be homicide victims as black females. Notably, black males ages 18-24 are also about 2.4 times as likely to be homicide victims and around 4.7 times as likely to be homicide offenders as black males older than 25. In fact, compared to both younger and older black males, those between the ages of 18 and 24 showed the largest disparities in homicide offending and victimization relative to white males or black females of any age.

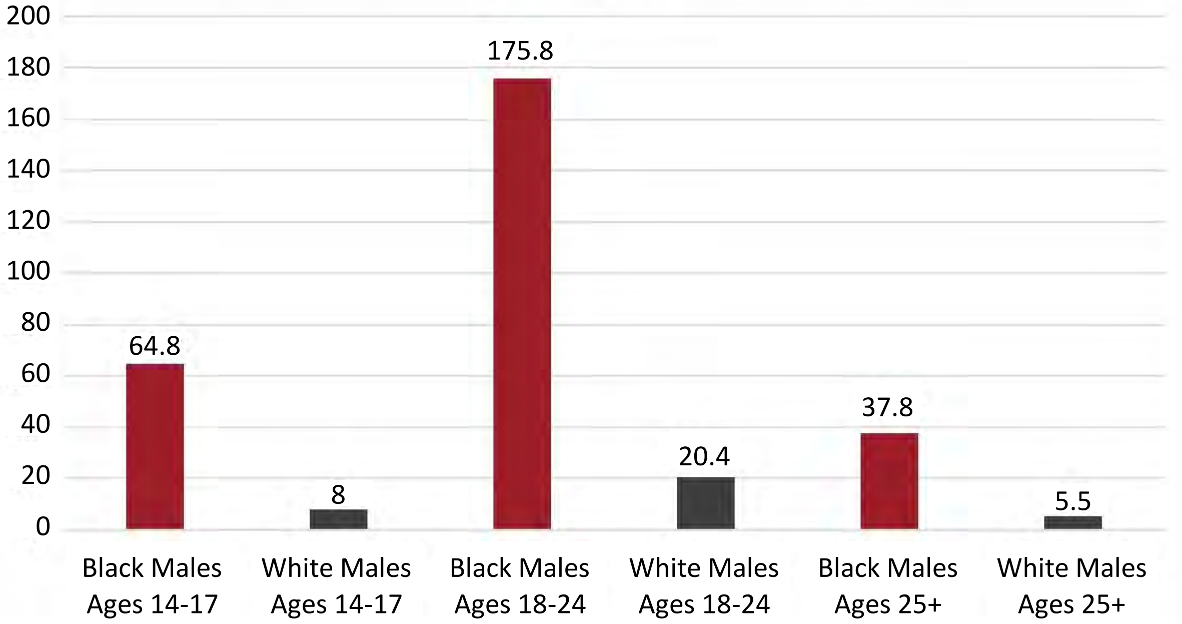
As can be seen in Figures 1 and 2, in 2008 black males ages 18-24 were substantially more likely to be homicide victims and offenders than either younger or older black males.

Figure 1. Homicide Victimization Rate for Males by Race and Age: 2008 (per 100,000)



SOURCE: Cooper and Smith (2011)[3]

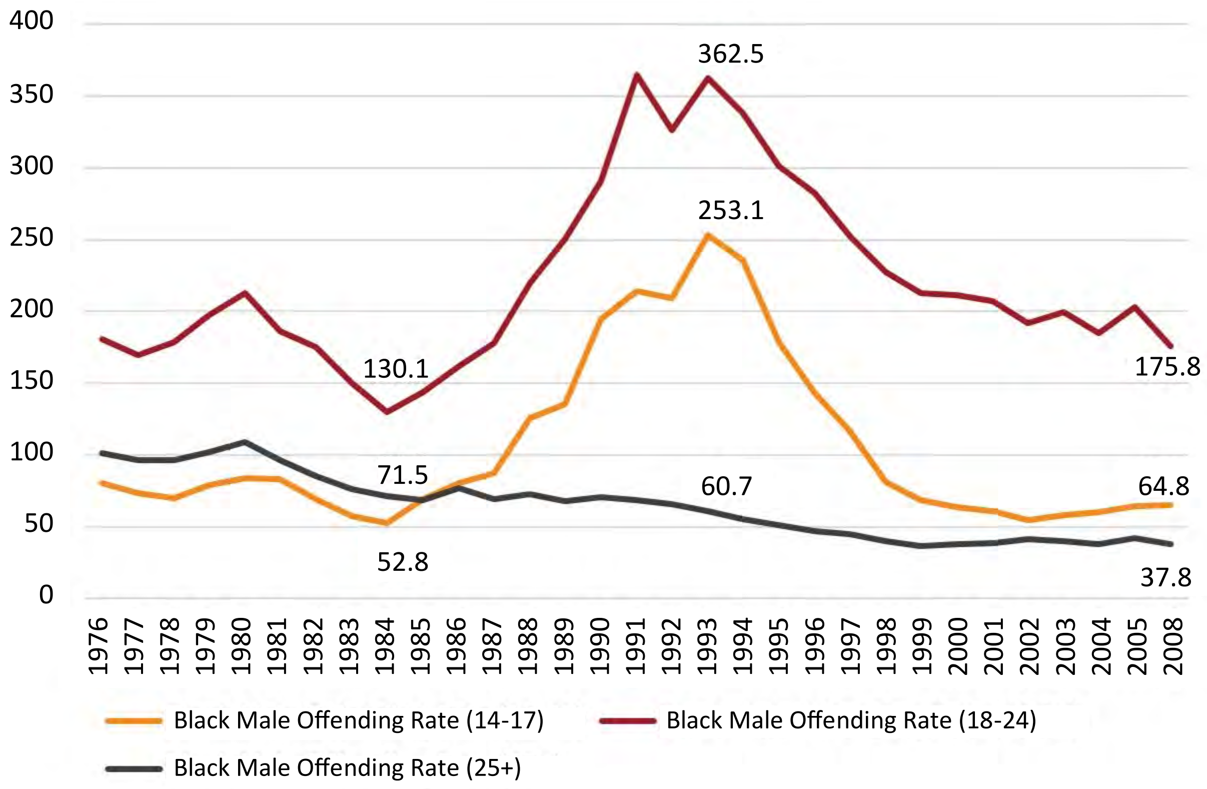
Figure 2. Homicide Offending Rate for Males by Race and Age: 2008 (per 100,000)



SOURCE: Cooper and Smith (2011)[4]

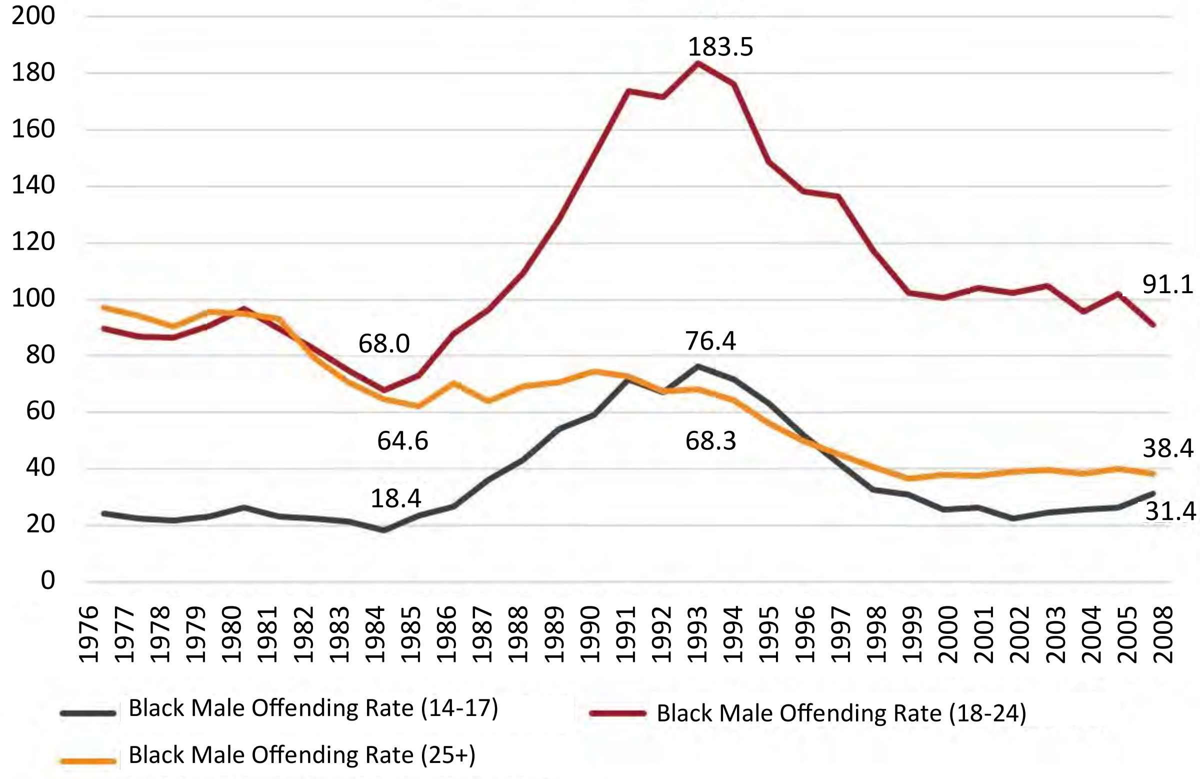
The past few decades have witnessed substantial shifts in homicide offending and victimization rates among black males, concentrated particularly among those ages 14 to 24. A homicide peak in 1980 was followed by a brief decline and then youth homicide underwent epidemic growth starting around 1985. The homicide rate subsequently peaked in 1991 and then began a substantial and prolonged declined starting in 1993 (see Figures 3 and 4). Black males over the age of 25, on the other hand, did not experience a similar growth in homicide rates. In fact, they saw their homicide offending rates begin a steady decline starting in 1986 with their homicide victimization rates showing a similar steady decline beginning around 1990. It is notable to point out that young black males ages 14 to 24 constitute roughly 1 percent of the U.S. population, yet they account for 16 percent of homicide victims and 27 percent of homicide offenders.[5]

Figure 3. Black Male Homicide Offending Rates by Age: 1976-2008 (rate per 100,000)



SOURCE: Fox and Zawitz (2008)[6] and Cooper and Smith (2011)[7]

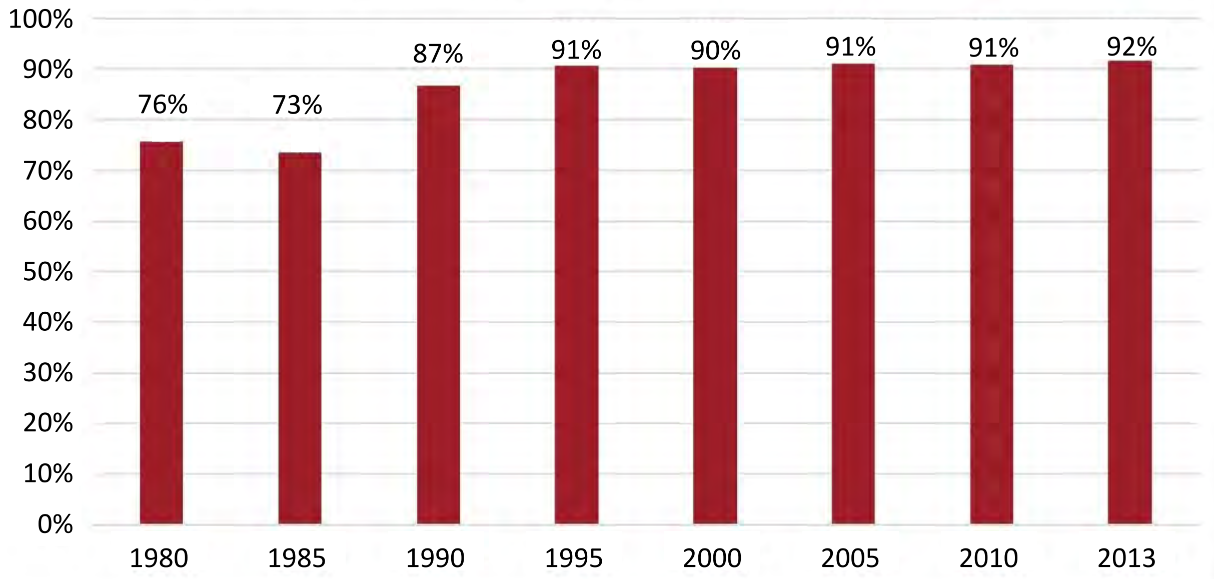
Figure 4. Black Male Homicide Victimization Rates by Age: 1976-2008 (rate per 100,000)



SOURCE: Fox and Zawitz (2008)[8] and Cooper and Smith (2011)[9]

As a corollary to these rates, the role of firearms also became much more pronounced in killings of young black males between 1980 and 2013, as shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Percent of Young Black Male (ages 18-24) Homicide Victims Killed with Firearms: 1980-2013



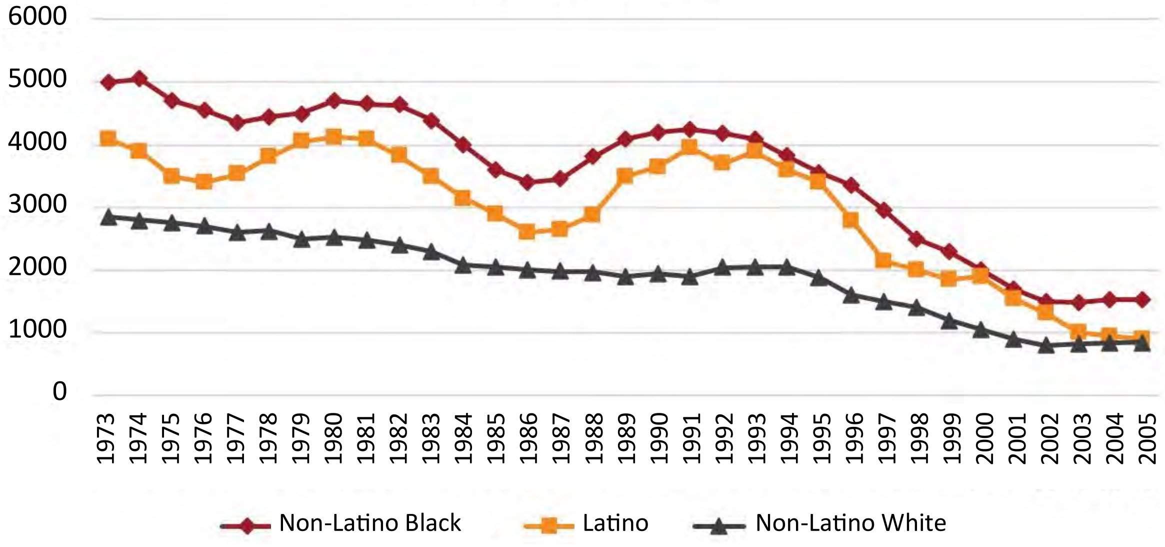
SOURCE: FBI Supplementary Homicide Reports 1980-2013[10]

The overall pattern of a rise and then subsequent decline in homicide offending and victimization for black males was a phenomenon that was broad in scope, reflected in changes in rates for cities across the entire nation. However, the timing of when homicide rates rose sharply and then declined varied substantially across cities.[11] For some large cities, including Chicago, Philadelphia, and Baltimore, the rise in homicide rates in the mid-1980s was not followed by a decline of equal magnitude after 1993. Although homicide rates have tended to decline in these cities, they have not returned to pre-1985 levels.[12]

Black males are significantly more likely than other males to be non-fatally violently victimized and the likelihood is most pronounced for young black males

The rates of non-fatal serious violent victimization among black males have shown patterns that are broadly consistent with the rise and fall of homicide offending and victimization rates over the past few decades.[1] Trend lines show that this type of violent victimization was quite elevated in the early 1970s before fluctuating modestly until the early 1980s, when it began to decline substantially before rising again to reach a new peak around 1992. During that year, rates of serious violent victimization for black males were more than double the rate for white males, with a gap of about 250 victims per 100,000. From 1992 until 2003, the serious nonfatal violent victimization rate declined precipitously for black males shrinking to less than a third of the 1992 peak. The gap between black males and white males also shrank, with a gap of roughly 80 victims per 100,000 remaining by 2003.

Figure 6. Male Serious Violent Victimization by Race/Ethnicity 1973-2005 (rate per 100,000)



SOURCE: Adapted from Lauritsen and Heimer (2010)[13]

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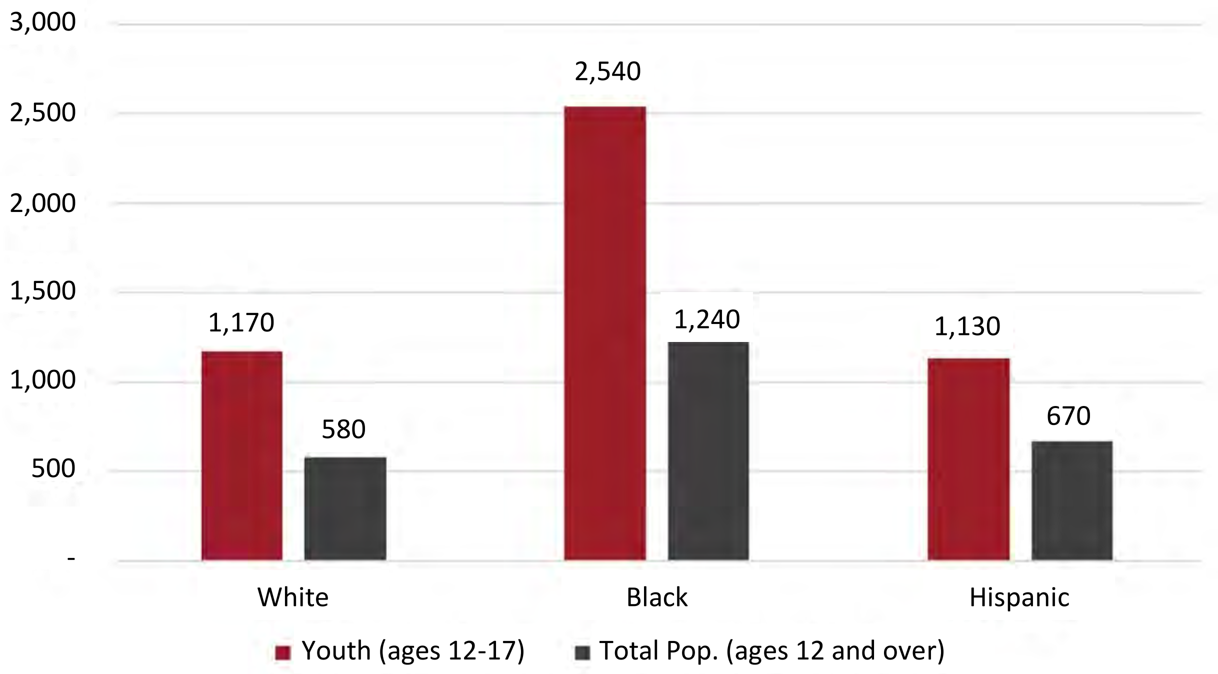
[1] According to the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) "serious violent victimization" includes rape, sexual assault, robbery, and aggravated assault.

Serious violence victimization is also notably concentrated among youth. Data shows that those between the ages of 12-17 are significantly more likely to be victims of serious violence compared to the overall population (see Figure 7). Within that segment, black youth were more than twice as likely as white or Hispanic youth to be victims of serious violent crime in 2010, and they were also more than twice as likely to experience serious violent crime as the entire black population over the age of 12. Although the rate of victimization by serious violent crime declined substantially (by 67 percent) for black youth between 1994 and 2002, there was no change in this rate between 2002 and 2010.[14]

Figure 7. Serious Violent Victimization Rates for Youth (ages 12-17) Compared to Total Population (12+) (2010, rate per 100,000)



SOURCE: White and Lauritsen (2012)[15] and Truman and Planty (2012)[16]

An area that shows some of the largest disparities for adolescent black males when compared to their white counterparts is in hospitalization rates due to firearm injuries. In 2009, the hospitalization rate for gun-related injuries for adolescent black males ages 15 to 19 was 13.1 times (148.71 per 100,000) that of rates for white males (11.33 per 100,000) and 3 times that of rates for Latino males (48.72 per 100,000).[17]

Rates of fatal and nonfatal violent victimization are far higher for young black males living in neighborhoods of high disadvantage

In their study of nearly nine thousand neighborhoods across 87 cities, researchers Ruth Peterson and Lauren Krivo chronicled an extensive "racial-spatial divide" by which primarily socioeconomic characteristics of neighborhoods, such as poverty and joblessness, explain much of the variation in violent crime across racial groups. The combination of racial/ethnic and economic segregation in America's neighborhoods is central to their finding that, "Violence is five times as high for the average African American neighborhood as for the typical white urban community. Further, only about one-fifth of African American areas have violence levels that are as low as those for 90 percent of white areas."[18]

A number of other studies echo these findings and note that neighborhood socioeconomic disadvantage strongly raises the risk of violent victimization, particularly among black males.[19] One study using in-depth victimization data drawn from 12 U.S. cities found that residential instability and perceived disorder—two common features of high disadvantage neighborhoods—were strong predictors of violent victimization of young males. Perceived disorder, in fact, was shown to be the strongest predictor of victimization for black males. This same study found that "for each unit increase in perceived [neighborhood] disorder," the odds of violent victimization increased by nearly 9 times for Black males.[20] It has further been shown that the type and severity of violence exposure varies significantly across neighborhood environments.[21] Studies demonstrate that the prevalence of neighborhood violence exposure among children and adolescents who reside in urban areas range from 50 to 96 percent, with longitudinal evidence showing that rates of exposure among these youth remain fairly constant over time.[22]

When violently victimized, black males are substantially more likely to be assaulted with a firearm or other weapon

When assaulted or robbed, black males are significantly more likely than white males to be confronted by an attacker with a weapon.[23] In fact, weapons are so central to the experience of violent victimization among black males that two separate studies found that the rise in violence in the late 1980s and its decline after 1993 occurred only for offenses involving gun violence.[24] Because attackers are more likely to victimize young black males with weapons, they are therefore more likely to kill them, thereby raising the overall lethality of violent encounters with black male victims. Studies show that this pattern persists even when controlling for the type of weapon used.[25]

Black youth are substantially more likely to witness serious violence compared to their white counterparts, and household income does not appear to buffer against the risk of exposure

A nationally representative study found that black adolescents were 1.7 times, and Latino youth were 1.5 times, as likely to witness serious violence as white youth. In the study, witnessing serious violence was defined as witnessing someone shoot, stab, rape, rob, or severely beat someone else.[26] Remarkably for African American adolescents, the prevalence of witnessing violence did not decline as household income increased. Black adolescents in households earning more than $50,000 per year in 2000 had roughly the same likelihood of witnessing violence as black adolescents in households earning less than $20,000. White adolescents in households earning more than $50,000 per year, on the other hand, were about half as likely to witness violence as white adolescents living in households earning less than $20,000.[27] This finding implies that household income does not buffer black adolescents from exposure to neighborhood violence.

A recent study by Patrick Sharkey may help explain this finding. He found that nationally the average black household earning more than $100,000 per year lives in a neighborhood with higher levels of disadvantage than the average white household earning less than $30,000 per year.[28] Given that violence has been shown to be so strongly associated with neighborhood disadvantage (as described above), middle class household income may not provide the same ecological protection from exposure to violence for black adolescents as it does for white ones. Simply put, black and other minority youth are considerably more likely to witness serious violence in their neighborhoods than their white counterparts, no matter their income levels.

Risk of violent victimization among black males is highly concentrated and transmitted through high-risk social networks

The risk of gun violence victimization is often described in epidemiological terms as operating like an infectious disease: gun violence is transmitted across individuals via pathways of friendship and affiliation relationships that link individuals and groups together into complex social networks.[29] This activity facilitates the diffusion of violence across neighborhoods and whole cities. Within the context of this idea, three separate studies have examined how social networks channel risk for gunshot victimization.

In one study conducted in Boston's Cape Verdean community, Andrew Papachristos and colleagues began by defining a co-offending network of 763 individuals who had a history of being arrested together. They found that an individual's relationship to members of this network shaped the probability that they would fall victim to gun violence. Specifically, they found that 85 percent of gunshot victims in the community were in this single social network that represented only 5 percent of the community's whole population. They further found that the risk of an individual within this network becoming a gunshot victim was strongly related to the percentage of his immediate associates who were themselves gunshot victims.[30]

A second study of a neighborhood in Chicago reached similar conclusions from data on individuals in a social network who had a past history of co-offending. The analysis showed a similar pattern of concentration of gun violence as seen in the Boston study. A social network of co-offenders accounted for 41 percent of all gun homicide victims, but just 4 percent of that neighborhood's population. The study concluded that the "closer one is to a gun homicide victim, the greater the risk of fatal gun victimization."[31]

A third study using six years of data on the entire co-offending population of the city of Chicago, representing 6 percent of the city's population, found that the network included 70 percent of all victims of nonfatal gunshot injuries over that six-year period. The study also found that the risk of gunshot victimization increased significantly with the percentage of individuals in one's network who were gunshot victims themselves.[32] In all three studies, gang members proved important network actors in passing "on violence within their networks via processes" consistent with "norms of retaliation and respect".[33]

III

The Costs and Consequences of Violence and Victimization

Section Overview

1. Economic Costs of Violent Crime
2. Aggression and Violence: Violence Begets Violence
3. Violence Exposure and Educational Outcomes
4. Violence Exposure and Mental and Behavioral Health

Apart from the devastating impact of violence on the well-being of young black male victims, it also inflicts trauma on their family and fellow community members. A large body of evidence now shows that a homicide or serious violent injury to a young black male creates catastrophic emotional and health repercussions that are not limited to their immediate family and friends. Rather, the entire community is shaken by the effects of that violence, with negative ramifications spilling over into an array of critical domains that are essential to the successful development of young people.

This section of the report will review evidence related to the economic costs of violent crime then delve into three areas where the spillover effects of violence are shown to have profound and lasting consequences.

Economic Costs of Violent Crime

Determining the financial costs of violence, especially murder, may seem like a morbid exercise: measuring a human life in dollar amounts is truly difficult to fathom. Yet, the enormous economic costs of violence cannot be ignored and must themselves be weighed along with the moral and social consequences of violence—if only to buttress the tremendous economic benefits to be gained by investing in violence reduction.

Numerous systematic attempts to estimate the cost of various forms of violent crime have combined to paint a sobering economic picture. Across four studies applying detailed methods for estimating the costs of various types of crime, the following average estimates were obtained[34]:

Violent Crime	Economic Cost
Homicide	$8.6 million
Rape	$218,000
Robbery	$67,000
Serious Assault	$87,000

When the costs of homicide are broken down into their component parts:

- Roughly 60 percent of the cost is due to lost quality of life for victims
- 30 percent of the cost accounts for the loss of productivity by victims
- 6 percent constitutes criminal justice costs
- 3 percent represents the lost productivity of the offender
- 1 percent represents the medical expenditures and lost property by the victim

Importantly, these cost estimates don't account for the spillover effects, or "collateral consequences", of violent crime. That is, they don't incorporate the cost to those who witness or hear about violent crime, which represents a much broader amplification of the profound impact of violence.

The remaining portion of this section delves into three major collateral consequences of violent victimization and the witnessing of violence by young people:

1. Increased risk of violence by victims and exposed youth
2. Damage to educational outcomes—both short- and long-term
3. Serious mental and behavioral health problems

Aggression and Violence: Violence Begets Violence

Exposure to community violence is one of the most deleterious experiences that a young person can endure. It can transform how they feel about the world around them, how they think and process social information, whether they form healthy relationships, and whether they succeed in school.[35] One of the most important consequences of exposure to violence is that "violence begets violence". A long-standing body of research demonstrates that children and adolescents who are exposed to community violence are significantly more likely to later become perpetrators of violence or aggression towards others.

That being said, it's important to note that the research designs in much of the extant literature are limited in very important ways. Significantly, most existing studies are unable to answer the following three essential questions:

1. Was a youth exposed to violence *before* they themselves became violent or aggressive? Cross-sectional studies are unable to establish which came first. Given that youth who engage in violence are very likely to be victims of violence themselves, it is essential to know whether violence exposure preceded violence perpetration or the reverse.

2. Since past violence perpetration is one of the strongest predictors of future violence perpetration, can the study control for whether youth have been violent in the past? Research shows that prior violence perpetration is one of the strongest predictors of future violence.[36] To determine whether it is violence exposure that leads to future violence perpetration, it is necessary for a study to control for past violence perpetration.

3. Given that several factors increase the likelihood of a young person becoming violent, can the study design control for these other factors to increase the strength of the assertion that violence exposure is indeed causally implicated in future violence perpetration?

The strongest generally accepted study design that could successfully address all of these questions is a randomized controlled trial that includes the tracking of changes in predictive factors and outcomes over time. This type of study would involve randomly assigning youth to treatment and control groups and then exposing those in the treatment group to violence and comparing their subsequent outcomes to those in the control group. This approach is obviously unethical and therefore unacceptable.

This leaves "observational" studies as the primary means utilized in the research literature for assessing the impact of violence exposure on youth. Observational studies don't randomly assign youth to treatment or control conditions, but rather observe which youth in a randomly selected sample are exposed to violence and which youth perpetrate violence. From that, statistical analysis is used to determine the factors that correlate with both of these occurrences.

For observational studies to successfully address the three questions listed above, they should meet the following criteria:

- They must be longitudinal: studies that record data for youth over time at regular intervals are necessary to establish that violence exposure came before the perpetration of violence or aggression.

- They must control for prior violence perpetration: prior violence perpetration is a very strong predictor of future violence perpetration; therefore, controlling for prior violence is critical to establishing whether a true relationship exists between violence exposure and subsequent violence perpetration.

- They must control for other risk factors: this includes controls for an array of other variables known from the research literature to be associated with an increased probability of violence perpetration or aggression, including socioeconomic, family, peer, school, and neighborhood factors.

- They must have sufficient sample sizes: sample sizes must be large enough to ensure that the relationship between violence exposure and subsequent perpetration is not simply due to chance. In short, it is necessary that studies have sufficient "power" to establish a reliable relationship between violence exposure and perpetration.[37]

After an extensive review of the literature, four studies can be seen to stand out for meeting the criteria listed above.

The first study uses longitudinal data drawn from the Mobile Youth Survey (MYS), a community sample of 2,164 African American adolescents in Mobile, Alabama that were surveyed in two waves of data collection taken in 2000 and 2001. The youth in this study were drawn from 12 high poverty neighborhoods within Mobile and thus represent a group at high risk of adverse youth outcomes. Controlling for a small number of risk factors as well as prior violent behavior, the study found that being threatened with a knife or gun or cut badly enough to need medical attention in the last 90 days, as well as being shot at during the past year, increased the likelihood that youth began carrying a gun for the first time by 110 percent.[38] Gun-carrying substantially raises the risk that a particular violent encounter will be of serious, or perhaps deadly, consequence. One limitation of this study is that it included a relatively small number of control variables, namely: age at first wave, sex, family structure, a fear of crime variable, and whether the youth was a gang member.

The second study to meet the criteria is based upon two waves of a nationally representative longitudinal survey of adolescents known as the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, or "Add Health" for short. The school-based sample in this study includes 5,003 adolescents that are roughly 45 percent youth of color. Net of several control factors[2], including prior violence perpetration and violence victimization, the study found that youth who had been seriously victimized—in the form of having a knife or gun pulled on them, being shot, being cut or stabbed, or getting jumped—were roughly 2.4 times as likely to perpetrate violence in the second year of the survey than youth who had not been victimized. More specifically, 52 percent of victims of violence in year 1 committed violence in year 2 compared to just 17 percent of youth who were not victims of violence in year 1.[39]

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[2] Control factors include: prior violent offending, violent victimization in 12 month's pre-exposure, gender, consistent drug user, new alcohol user, new drug user, level of physical development (e.g. physical maturation, body hair, bass of voice, etc.), depression, support from significant others, and household socioeconomic status

The third and fourth studies to meet the criteria are both based upon samples drawn from a longitudinal community survey known as the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods (PHDCN). Here, three waves of data were collected between 1995 and 2002 with approximately 2.5-year intervals between waves. The third study is based on a sample that consists of 1,067 adolescents who were between the ages of 12 and 15 at wave 1. Using 69 control variables, the study assessed whether witnessing violence—in the form of seeing someone else get attacked with a weapon like a knife or a bat, or seeing someone get shot in the preceding 12 months—increased the likelihood that youth became more aggressive. Indeed, the study found that youth who witnessed violence at wave 2 were nearly 50 percent more likely to exhibit clinical levels of aggression towards others. Further, witnessing violence at wave 2 predicted aggression in youth two-and-a-half years later at wave 3, demonstrating that witnessing serious violence leaves an enduring imprint on the aggressive proclivities of children.[40]

The fourth study also relies on data from the PHDCN survey, but it uses a larger subsample (1,517 adolescents) as well as 153 total control variables. Using a propensity score matching technique, the researchers estimate the causal effect of violence victimization and/or witnessing violence (i.e. being shot at or seeing someone shot or shot at) on subsequent violence perpetration in the form of: carrying a weapon, attacking someone with a weapon, shooting someone, shooting at someone, or being involved in a gang fight in which someone was hurt or threatened with harm. Controlling for all 153 variables, the study's authors conclude that being exposed to firearm violence roughly doubles the probability that a youth will perpetrate serious violence in the following two years.[41] While some have expressed doubt[42] over whether the design of this study warrants a conclusion that violence exposure has a causal effect on subsequent violence of the indicated magnitude, these studies taken together strongly suggest that there is indeed a causal relationship between serious violence exposure and subsequent violence and aggression, and that interrupting that cycle of violence is of paramount urgency.

Violence Exposure and Educational Outcomes

A growing body of research indicates that exposure to community violence in the form of direct victimization, witnessing violent acts or hearing about violence from others has both short- and long-term effects on educational outcomes for children and adolescents. This set of findings is particularly troubling given the critical role that educational outcomes play in later life success and the role that poor educational outcomes play in leading to pathways of adolescent crime and violence.[43]

Acute Effects of Exposure to Serious Violence on Academic Performance

Four powerful studies, based upon quasi-experimental designs, provide robust evidence that simply hearing about a homicide or violent crime committed near where a child or adolescent lives or attends school can cause an acute short-term decline in their academic performance. These studies take advantage of what are called "natural experiments" in where and when violent crimes occur and the immediate effect those violent crimes have on children residing or attending school nearby.

One study conducted in New York City assessed the effect of localized violence on the standardized test scores in English Language Arts (ELA) and Math for two groups of children and adolescents in grades 3 through 8. The first group in the study was composed of children who lived on a block where a violent crime took place within a week before they took the standardized tests while the second group was made up of children and adolescents that did not experience a similarly timed violent crime exposure.[44] The researchers found that having a violent crime occur nearby a youth's home within a week prior to taking a standardized test caused a significant decline in their English Language Arts test scores, but not their math scores. Further, the effects only applied to black children—perhaps because black adolescents and young adults are the predominant victims of violent crime in New York neighborhoods—and were similar in magnitude between both girls and boys. The effects were concentrated among elementary school students who registered declines in ELA scores equivalent to 30 percent of the black-white test score gap among elementary students. While the acute effect of community violence on test scores in this study was short-lived and faded within weeks, youth who are chronically exposed to community violence can see serious alterations to their academic trajectories over time.

A similar study was conducted in Chicago using two independent samples of children and adolescents ages 5 to 17.[45] The researchers found that the occurrence of a homicide on children's residential blocks within a week of taking standardized assessments caused a very large reduction in those children's vocabulary scores of half a standard deviation. If the homicide occurred within 4 days of the assessment, it reduced those children's vocabulary scores of about a half a standard deviation. This study also found that the acute effect of this type of violence exposure on cognitive assessments was short-lived.

A third study exploited a more unique natural experiment in assessing the acute effect of community violence on the academic performance of children: the Beltway sniper attacks.[46] For a period of 3 weeks in October 2002, a series of random shootings occurred in the Washington, DC metropolitan area and along Interstate 95 in Virginia that became known in the news as the Beltway sniper attacks. Ten random victims were killed and 3 were critically wounded, including a 13-year-old boy who was shot in the abdomen as he arrived at middle school. Because the timing and location of the Beltway sniper shootings were random, the study assessed the effect of the shootings on the standardized test scores of students taking proficiency exams during the three weeks that the shootings occurred. The researchers compared the standardized test scores of children attending schools close to shooting sites to those of students attending schools that were farther away. They found that the sniper shootings caused about a 5 to 9 percentage point decline in math and reading proficiency scores of third and fifth grade students in the affected schools. Importantly, these declines were concentrated in schools serving predominately racial minority and socioeconomically disadvantaged students.

The fourth study using a similar natural experiment research design as the prior three demonstrates that the effects of community violence exposure on cognitive performance aren't limited to older children and adolescents. A study in Chicago that was part of the Chicago School Readiness Project (CSRP)—a randomized controlled trial assessing school readiness at 18 Head Start sites—exploited the random timing of local homicides within close proximity to the homes of preschoolers to assess their impact on those children's vocabulary assessment scores.[47] The study found that a homicide committed proximate to a preschoolers' home reduced their vocabulary assessment scores by .33 to .80 standard deviations. Psychological distress among parents was found to be the likely pathway through which localized homicides impacted the test scores of the preschool students.

All four of these studies show that community violence has an acute negative causal impact on the cognitive performance of younger and older children as well as adolescents, particularly with respect to reading and vocabulary skills. While these effects appear to be short-term, the chronicity of violence exposure for children living in disadvantaged neighborhoods may portend longer-term negative academic consequences. Researchers in the second study described above that was based in Chicago estimated that as much as 15 percent of the African Americans in the study sample, "spend at least 1 month out of a year functioning at a low level purely because of local homicides. According to the same calculations, African-American sample members living in the city's most violent neighborhoods spend at least one quarter of the year, or roughly 1 week out of every month, functioning at a low level because of local homicides."[48]

Long-Term Effects of Exposure to Violence on Educational Outcomes

Research has consistently demonstrated that the risk of violent victimization is most highly concentrated in adolescence (see Figure 7).[49] Because adolescence is a critical developmental period that shapes trajectories of lifetime educational and employment outcomes, this is particularly troubling. Violent victimization during this period can alter lifetime trajectories, setting in motion pathways to a host of adverse outcomes. One of the most prominent pathways by which violence victimization undermines educational outcomes is through its effect on individual perceptions of agency and self-efficacy.[50]

A nationally representative study found that, after controlling for several factors, youth exposed to violent victimization experienced substantially reduced "educational self-efficacy," or reduced commitment toward schooling and the investment of time and energy in schoolwork, following exposure. Ultimately, the study concludes that victimization, "undermines academic performance, educational attainment, labor force participation, occupational status, and earnings in early adulthood."[51]

A second national study replicates these findings, showing that adolescent violent victimization significantly raises the likelihood of dropping out of high school and failing to attend college. The study also finds that the effects differ for males compared to females. Violence victimization has a stronger effect on dropping out of high school for boys, while the effect is stronger for girls with regards to college attendance.[52]

Importantly, youth don't have to be violently victimized for the effects of neighborhood violence to affect their educational outcomes negatively, as was demonstrated in studies on the acute effects of violence exposure described above. A recent study illustrates this problem with nationally representative data. In this case, the author finds that even when controlling for individual violence victimization, growing up in a neighborhood with a high prevalence of violence significantly increases the likelihood that an adolescent will drop out of high school.[53] Violence thus represents a critical mechanism by which disadvantaged neighborhoods contribute to negative outcomes for youth.

Violence Exposure and Mental and Behavioral Health

The research literature on the effects of witnessing violence and violence victimization on mental and behavioral health is vast and long-standing.[54] A recent meta-analysis of 114 studies on the effects of exposure to community violence on mental health has summarized several important conclusions from the literature.[55] Although there were insufficient studies to assess whether these findings varied by race or gender, the overall meta-analysis makes clear that exposure to community violence in the form of direct victimization or witnessing violence is significantly associated with:

1. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD): this can include disturbing thoughts and feelings as well as serious mental and physical distress
2. Externalizing symptoms: this includes deviant and aggressive behavior
3. Internalizing symptoms: this includes depression and anxiety

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Among all the many possible mental health effects associated with exposure to community violence, the development of symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder are the strongest in the literature. The effects of community violence on PTSD symptomatology were strong for both younger children and adolescents.[56] Further, parents who have been traumatized in the past are more likely to have children who develop PTSD symptoms when exposed to violence, linking the mental health effects of trauma across generations.[57]

Externalizing Symptoms

Community violence has a moderate effect on externalizing problems such as deviance and aggression, with the strongest effects seen in youth who are victimized compared to youth who only witness violence. The relationship between violence and externalizing behavior is stronger than that for internalizing problems. As the researchers note, youth exposed to community violence may be, "more likely to act out because of the effects of modeling of violence as an appropriate behavior…That is, youth chronically exposed to community violence may pathologically adapt to its effects by becoming emotionally numb. After a point of continual exposure to neighborhood violence, youths no longer react to such events, and rather expect violence and perceive it as normal."[58]

Internalizing Symptoms

Community violence has a small positive association with internalizing symptoms, with younger children more likely to show internalizing symptoms when compared to teenagers. In explaining this finding, the researchers noted that, "children may be less able to express their thoughts and feelings about community violence compared to adolescents, and therefore, less able to develop cognitive coping strategies to actively seek comfort and support from adults. Furthermore, parents may fail to initiative coping processes with their children because they underestimate the extent of their young children's exposure, or because parents believe that young children are not affected by events in their neighborhoods."[59] In short, young children may often silently suffer the traumatic effects of community violence exposure resulting in heightened anxiety and depression.

IV

The Vicious Cycle of Violence: Neighborhood Violence is a Central Contributor to the Cycle of Urban Disadvantage

Though drawn from a variety of sources, the evidence summarized in this report sends a clear, unified message: exposure to serious violence among black males and other youth in disadvantaged communities is alarmingly high, and this exposure profoundly undermines their cognitive, educational, and mental well-being as well as increases the likelihood that exposed victims will commit acts of violence in the future.

This extensive research intersects with a well-established body of literature on so-called "neighborhood effects" that demonstrates that neighborhoods of high disadvantage cause children who are raised in them to exhibit lower educational and economic outcomes.[60] For example, a quasi-experimental study of children in Chicago found that being raised in highly disadvantaged neighborhoods reduces black children's cognitive ability by a magnitude equivalent to missing an entire year of schooling.[61] A large experimental study known as Moving to Opportunity (MTO)—involving 4,600 low-income families with children living in public housing across five cities including Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York—provided housing vouchers allowing families from highly disadvantaged neighborhoods to move to ones that had lower levels of poverty, were less segregated, and were safer in terms of violent crime.[62] A recent examination of the effects of that experiment found that children that moved to better neighborhoods before the age of thirteen garnered an overall 31 percent improvement in job earnings by young adulthood.[63]

In light of these findings, research conducted separately by Douglas Massey, Patrick Sharkey, and David Harding strongly suggest that the critical mechanism behind the effect that neighborhood disadvantage has on educational and economic outcomes for children raised in those environments is *exposure to community violence*.[64] In fact, Sharkey asserts that violence is "interwoven with urban inequality and constitutes a central force behind the great urban divide in American cities: violence generates urban inequality and is generated by urban inequality".[65] To buttress this assertion, Sharkey reviews detailed findings related to improved educational outcomes of children in Chicago and Baltimore who benefitted from neighborhood relocation as part of the Moving to Opportunity experiment. He notes that MTO-participating children in cities with the highest levels of violent crime—Chicago and Baltimore—sustained the highest level of improvement in cognitive skills when they moved to safer neighborhoods. Detailed evidence shows that children moving from police districts and beats with the highest violence crime levels showed the greatest gains in test scores.[66]

Taken together, the findings from the literatures presented in this report amount to a powerful and salient statement that should galvanize efforts to reduce community violence across the nation. Community violence is not only destroying the bodies, but also the minds of our country's young black males. Furthermore, the effects of violence ripple outward affecting everyone in their community. Reducing violence and violent deaths among black males amounts to more than an effort to secure greater public safety, it goes to the very heart of securing greater opportunity for those living in the most marginalized communities in our nation.

V

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