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The National Child
Traumatic Stress Network



Victimization and Juvenile Offending

National Child Traumatic Stress Network
Juvenile Justice Working Group

This project was funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services
Administration, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

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From the

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National Child Traumatic Stress Network

www.NCTSNet.org

2004

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network is coordinated by the National Center for Child Traumatic Stress, Los Angeles, Calif., and Durham, NC

This project was funded by the
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMSHA)
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The views, policies, and opinions
expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of SAMSHA or HHS.

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Victimization and Juvenile Offending

Introduction

Children of all ages in the United States are increasingly being exposed to violence and victimization. While the types of violence and levels of exposure differ for children of different ages, rates of interpersonal violence and victimization of 12-to-17-year-olds in the United States are very high. In fact, Department of Justice statistics show that teenagers experience rates of violent crime far higher than other age groups do. Witnessing violence is even more common than victimization.

Violent victimization can have a number of deleterious and long-lasting affects on how teenagers see the world and the way they function socially, interpersonally, and academically. It can affect their behavior, their problem solving skills, and their ability to modulate their feelings and reactions, and it can eventually give rise to patterns of conflict and aggression toward others.

While the relationship of child maltreatment to later arrest and offending has been understood for a number of years, researchers are now beginning to better document and understand the significant connection between other forms of violent victimization and juvenile offending as well.

Judges, teachers, counselors, juvenile justice personnel, and other professionals need to understand the significant effect that victimization has on the behavior, attitudes, and functioning of adolescents, and what they can do to mitigate its effects.

Rates of Adolescent Victimization Are High

Over the past 10 years, a number of large adolescent and general population studies have confirmed the high prevalence rates of victimization and violence exposure among children and adolescents. For example:

- ☒ In 2002, the Department of Justice reported that the violent crime rate for adolescents ages 16 to 19 was over twice the rate for people ages 25 to 34 and three times the rate for adults ages 35 to 49 (Finkelhor and Dziuba-Leatherman, 1994).
- ☒ The National Survey of Adolescents, a general population survey of over 4,000 adolescents ages 12 to 17, found that 13 percent of females and 3.4 percent of males reported being sexually assaulted at some point in their lives, 21.3 percent of boys and 13.4 percent of girls reported experiencing lifetime physical assault, and 43.6 percent of boys and 35 percent of girls reported having witnessed violence (Kilpatrick et al., 2003b).

- ☒ Boney-McCoy and Finkelhor (1995) conducted a national telephone sample of over 2,000 youth ages 10 to 16 and found that over 35 percent reported having been the victim of an assault and another 5.4 percent reported an attempted assault.
- ☒ Lewis et al. (1997) found that as many as 91 percent of youth in low-income, inner-city neighborhoods have witnessed at least one incident of community violence.
- ☒ The National Women’s Study found that 62 percent of forcible rapes reported by adult women occurred before the age of 18 (Kilpatrick and Acierno, 2003).
- ☒ Schwab-Stone et al. (1995) reported that over 40 percent of the youth in an urban school district reported being exposed to a shooting or stabbing in the past year, and 74 percent reported feeling unsafe in one or more common environmental contexts.

Victimization Can Have Profound and Long-Lasting Effects

While some children survive victimization with relatively few adverse consequences, many studies show that victimization can disrupt the course of child development in very fundamental ways and can contribute to problems over the course of a life span. Numerous studies over the past 10 years have shown a clear relationship between youth victimization and a variety of problems in later life, including mental health problems, substance abuse, impaired social relationships, suicide, and delinquency (OVC, 1999; Kilpatrick et al., 2003a; Wood et al., 2002). Violent victimization during adolescence is acknowledged as a risk factor for violent crime victimization, domestic violence perpetration, and problem drug use in adulthood (Ford, 2002).

Observing violence—as opposed to being the direct victim of violence—also can severely traumatize a child and bring on a cascade of negative consequences. Research shows that childhood exposure to domestic and community violence, for example, can cause children to engage in aggressive behavior, suffer from problems such as depression and anxiety, have lower levels of social competence and self-esteem, experience poor academic performance, and exhibit posttraumatic stress symptoms such as emotional numbing and increased arousal (Colley-Quille et al., 1995; ABA, 2000; Osofsky, 1999).

Some researchers report that chronic environmentally pervasive violence, such as living in violent neighborhoods, affects children in ways similar to living in war zones. They develop symptoms such as anxiety, helplessness, futurelessness, numbness, and difficulties concentrating. Furthermore, children in such environments may become desensitized to threat and engage in high levels of risk taking and participate in dangerous activities (Schwab-Stone et al., 1995).

Adolescents may respond to traumatic victimization in ways that differ from younger children. Fears or memories of traumatic events may intrude and may trigger angry or avoidant responses. Adolescents may respond to their experience through dangerous reenactment behavior, recklessness, or protective aggression. Because of their age and stage of moral development, some adolescents experience feelings of shame and guilt about a traumatic event and some may express fantasies about revenge and retribution.

Adolescents understand issues of justice and accountability. A traumatic event, especially one that goes unaddressed, may foster a radical shift in the way an adolescent thinks about the world and his or her belief in safety, protection, and the social contract.

The Relationship of Child Maltreatment to Later Delinquency and Violence Is Clear

There also appears to be a significant relationship between victimization and later delinquency and perpetration of violence. A growing body of research indicates that victims of violence are more likely than their peers to also be perpetrators of violence, and that individuals most likely to be victims of personal crime are those who report the greatest involvement in delinquent activities (ABA, 2000; Shaffer and Ruback, 2002; Wiebush et al., 2001).

Much of the research on the relationship between victimization and later offending has focused on child maltreatment, and researchers generally have used two basic approaches to conduct the research. The first approach is to sample maltreated children and follow them to observe rates of subsequent offending. Studies using this approach have yielded consistent and profound results.

Cathy Widom's research, for example, has reported that people who experience any type of maltreatment during childhood—whether sexual abuse, physical abuse, or neglect—are more likely than people who were not maltreated to be arrested later in life, either as a juvenile or an adult. Being abused or neglected as a child increased the likelihood of arrest as a juvenile by 59 percent and as an adult by 28 percent, and for a violent crime by 30 percent. The abused and neglected cases were younger at first arrest, committed nearly twice as many offenses, and were arrested more frequently (Widom, 1995; Widom and Maxfield, 2001).

Data from the Rochester Youth Development Study show that a history of maltreatment significantly increases the risk of being arrested for violent, serious, and moderate forms of delinquency and the frequency of arrests, even when controlling for race, sex, social class, family structure, and mobility (Smith and Thornberry, 1995).

Of course, it is important to remember that the majority of maltreated youth are not arrested and do not report involvement in serious delinquency.

The second approach is to sample juvenile or adult offenders and measure the rate at which they experienced maltreatment in childhood. In numerous studies, delinquent and criminal populations have strikingly higher rates of childhood abuse and neglect than do members of the general population (ABA, 2000; Harlow, 1991; cited in Osofsky, 2001; Haapasalo and Kankkonen, 1997; Harlow, 1999; cited in Wiebush et al., 2001; Haywood et al., 1996; Menard, 2002; Ryan et al., 1996).

Research Also Connects Other Types of Victimization to Delinquency and Violence

Other studies have focused on victimization more broadly and its relationship to later violence or delinquency. These studies have looked at a variety of types of physical and sexual assault, rape, severe corporal punishment and discipline, as well as exposure to various forms of domestic and community violence.

Data from the National Survey of Adolescents (Kilpatrick et al., 2003b) is particularly striking:

- ☐ 47.2 percent of the sexually assaulted boys reported engaging in delinquent acts, compared with only 16.6 percent of those not sexually assaulted.

- ☒ The rate of girls who had been sexually assaulted and then committed delinquent acts was 19.7 percent, five times higher than the rate of girls who had not been sexually assaulted (4.8 percent).
- ☒ The percentage of boys who were physically assaulted and had ever committed an Index offense was 46.7 percent, compared to 9.8 percent of boys who were not assaulted.
- ☒ 29.4 percent of physically assaulted girls reported having engaged in serious delinquent acts at some point in their lives, compared with 3.2 percent of nonassaulted girls.
- ☒ About one third (32 percent) of boys who witnessed violence reported ever engaging in delinquent acts, compared with only 6.5 percent of boys who did not witness violence.
- ☒ About 17 percent of girls who witnessed violence reported lifetime delinquent behavior, compared with 1.4 percent of girls who did not witness violence.

Schwab-Stone et al. (1995) conducted a comprehensive survey with over 2,200 students in an urban school system. They found that students who reported committing violence or serious aggressive acts against others also reported significantly greater violence exposure.

DuRant et al. (1994) found that self-reported use of violence by black adolescents was significantly correlated with three indications of previous exposure to violence: self-reported exposure to violence and victimization in the community, degree of family conflict, and severity of corporal punishment and discipline. This study also looked at age, mental health problems, and other variables and found that previous exposure to violence and victimization was the strongest predictor of use of violence.

Several studies found that violence exposure was linked with adolescent criminal activity, including both general delinquency and Index offenses, even after controlling for demographic characteristics and protective factors (Brown et al., 1999; Menard, 2002).

Why Are Victimization and Committing Offenses Related?

Various researchers have studied this issue and come up with different explanations for the relationship. Some researchers point out that violent victimization and violent offending share many of the same risk factors (Shaffer and Ruback, 2002). Other researchers note that victims and victimizers share many homogenous social, situational, and environmental characteristics and lifestyles (Fagan, Piper, and Cheng, 1987).

Some researchers, especially those who study gang behavior, suggest that criminal behavior evolves in the context of a subculture and is learned through interaction with others, especially delinquent peers. Social learning theory suggests that violence may be learned through experiencing it or observing it and that it may be transmitted from one generation to the next in a “cycle of violence.”

Many Researchers Believe Trauma to Be an Explanatory or Contributing Factor to the Development of Aggressive Behavior

Some researchers believe that victimization and oppositional-defiance involve similar breakdowns in a child’s capacities required to regulate emotions and process social information (Ford, 2002). Others have cited the role PTSD plays in perpetuating violence, particularly through interfering in daily living, causing inappropriate reactions, fostering intrusive reliving of trauma, and avoidance (Steiner et al., 1997). Still others describe a pathway where violence exposure and pervasive feelings of not being safe develop into a state of chronic threat which in turn requires a youth to adjust his or

her behavior, feelings and self-concept and makes the youth more willing to use physical aggression (Schwab-Stone et al., 1995).

The question of whether or not victimization predicts offending or vice versa has not been addressed in many studies on the subject, but was explored by Shaffer and Ruback (2002). They found that, indeed, violent victimization is a warning signal for future violent offending. It is also a precursor to being a repeat victim of violence.

What Can Be Done to Short-Circuit this Cycle of Victimization and Subsequent Violence?

Target Interventions to those Groups Most Likely to Be Victimized

Neither victimization nor offending are normally distributed across the general population. Clearly, some groups are at higher risk than others for violent victimization, including minority adolescents (Kilpatrick et al., 2003b; Finkelhor and Ormrod, 2000), children living in single-parent families (Lauritsen, 2003), adolescents living in urban areas (Horowitz et al., 1995), children who have been victimized previously, children with disabilities (Charlton et al., 2004), and children living in disadvantaged communities (Lauritsen, 2003). Prevention efforts, public education efforts, and early intervention efforts are best targeted to these groups.

Improve Reporting of Youth Victimization

Numerous studies point to the fact that a majority of victimizations of juveniles, including serious violent victimizations such as aggravated assault, murder, forcible rape, and robbery, are not reported to police or other authorities (Lauritsen, 2003; Kilpatrick et al., 2003b; Finkelhor and Ormrod, 1999; Boney-McCoy and Finkelhor, 1995; Osofsky, 2001; Shaffer and Ruback, 2002). Contributing factors for not reporting may include adolescent concerns about personal autonomy, fears of being blamed or not taken seriously, fears of retaliation, fears of being punished for engaging in risk-taking behavior or associating with deviant peers, family concerns about involving their child in the justice system, and the perception of both youth and adults that offenses against youth are not real crimes. The justice system needs to increase youth reporting by emphasizing its interest in assisting juvenile victims, removing the disincentives to reporting, making staff more available and accessible, and changing the way people think about crimes against juveniles. Communities need to provide incentives to report, including information to help youth protect themselves from future victimization or from retaliation.

Intervene Early with Juvenile Victims

Violent victimization is a warning signal for future violent offending among juveniles and also a precursor to additional violent victimization (Shaffer and Ruback, 2002). This means that focusing counseling and other early interventions on victims and repeat victims is important. Given that there is some evidence to suggest that offending and subsequent victimization occur fairly soon following violent victimization, interventions may be most successful in preventing future offending and victimization if they are applied relatively soon after the initial victimization.

Screen Youth in Substance Abuse and Delinquency Programs for Violence and Trauma Exposure

Given the connection between victimization and both substance abuse and delinquency, adolescent alcohol and drug use programs and juvenile justice programs should screen youth entering for a history of violent assault and witnessing violence.

Increase Awareness that Various Kinds of Juvenile Victimization Are Crimes

Professionals must try to educate parents and their children about the importance of reporting victimization. Too many youth still believe that reporting is a sign of weakness or betrayal. Too many adults are still unaware of the profound ramifications of youth victimization.

Publicize the Availability of Crime Compensation Funds for Juvenile Victims

Communities need to do more to publicize the availability of crime compensation funds and supportive services for adolescent victims. They also need to expedite and simplify the processing of crime compensation awards for juveniles.

Summary

While most professionals agree that no single risk factor or experience leads a young person to delinquency (Wasserman et al., 2003), the chances of offending clearly increase when a teenager is a witness or victim of violence and experiences traumatic stress as a result. Being victimized increases the likelihood of committing later offenses and engaging in aggressive and violent behavior. It also increases the likelihood of being victimized again.

Protecting juveniles against violent victimization of all types needs to be a priority for community leaders, policy makers, and professionals. Along with preventing future problems like substance abuse, suicide, and mental health problems, reducing rates of victimization and responding early to young victims to offset the adverse consequences of victimization may actually lessen the severity of juvenile violence and crime in society as a whole.

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