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“I Live by Shooting Hill” – A Qualitative Exploration of Conflict and Violence among Urban Youth in New Haven, Connecticut

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Abstract

To elucidate urban youths’ perceptions of conflict and violence we conducted a qualitative study among minority urban youths in New Haven, Connecticut. We utilized the ecological framework to explore the multilevel nature of the findings, and triangulated results with a parallel quantitative study. We found risk factors for violence at multiple levels including lack of interpersonal anger management skills (individual level); parents not physically present in the household (relationship level); residence in crime and gang-ridden neighborhoods (community level); and socioeconomic inequalities between neighborhoods, as reflected by participants’ perception of the inadequacy of neighborhood resources to provide safety (societal level). Neighborhood resources were perceived as sparse, and police were not regarded as a protective factor (sometimes rather as racially discriminatory). Participants’ statements pertaining to feelings of isolation, racism, and violence without strong parental, neighborhood, and school support may impede prosocial attitudes and behaviors throughout adolescence and young adulthood.

Keywords

Conflict; violence; urban youth; qualitative research

Introduction

Youth violence is a significant and prevalent public health concern in the United States. In 2007, homicide was the second leading cause of death for young people ages 10–24 years,

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with 5,764 murdered.¹ In this age group, homicide is the leading cause of death for African Americans and second leading cause for Hispanics. In 2007 approximately one out of 10 murder victims were juveniles under the age of 18 years.² In 2008, adolescents and young adults aged 12–24 years had the highest rates of violent crime victimization.³ Youth 12–15 years were particularly vulnerable, sustaining higher rates of assault injuries than those aged 20–24 years and people aged 25 years and older. There was also little change in the demographic characteristics of victims in recent years: males, African Americans, and young people under the age of 24 continued to account for the majority of victimization from violent crimes.⁴ When assessing behaviors that contribute to youth violence, data gleaned from the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance ascertained in 2009 that 5.0% reported having missed school because of feeling unsafe; 27.1% had had their property stolen; 5.6% had carried a weapon at least once in the past month; 7.7% had been threatened or injured by a weapon; and 11.1% of youth reported having been in a physical fight on school property.^{1,4}

Understanding the underlying factors that increase the risk of children and youth becoming victims, perpetrators, and witnesses to violence is of paramount importance when designing appropriate violence prevention policies and intervention programs.⁵ An ecological framework is often used to examine factors that contribute to violence at the individual, relationship, community, and societal levels.^{5,6} At the individual level, a strong predictor of later risk-taking behaviors, aggression, and violence is exposure to aggression and maltreatment during childhood.^{7–9} Child and adolescent behavior, however, is not relegated to individual characteristics and experiences alone, but rather interact simultaneously in a number of social contexts, including family, peer, and neighborhood systems.^{5,10} At the relationship level, risk factors include problematic parental behavior and poor family functioning, low emotional attachment to parents or caregivers, and exposure to violence in the home.^{11,12} Additionally, when peer influences are negative, it may be difficult for children and youth to resist pressures to engage in risky behaviors. Furthermore, living in a neighborhood with a high concentration of poverty, transiency, family disruption, low community participation and social capital, limited economic opportunities, and increased availability of firearms places youth at risk for becoming violent offenders.^{10,13}

To address the problem of violence it is important to understand children and youths' perceptions and attitudes toward violence.¹⁴ Adolescent and children's experiences of aggression and violence vary by environmental and social context. Qualitative research that explores perceptions of violence and how it affects their daily lives can contribute greatly towards designing prevention program components to match more closely these experiences and subsequently modify negative behavioral outcomes.^{9,15,16} Studies suggest that violence is defined differently depending on who is observing or exposed (youth, parent, or community) and the level of closeness to the exposure (direct experience, witnessing, or hearing);⁶ thus, exploring perceptions and attitudes by youth is paramount. To illuminate youths' perceptions of violence and the impact of violence prevention programs on violence-related attitudes and behavior, we conducted a qualitative study among urban youth participating in violence prevention programs in New Haven, Connecticut. The primary aim of the study was to examine attitudes and perceptions of violence within the individual and social-environmental context, as well as perceived strategies for violence prevention.

Methods

We recruited participants from a parallel quasi-experiment which evaluated the impact of school-based peer mediation and conflict resolution intervention, emphasizing problem solving, anger management, and decision-making in an attempt to modify psychosocial processes found to be proximal causes of violence behavior.¹⁷ The conflict resolution

training, tailored to fourth and fifth grade students, reinforced prosocial behaviors and taught conflict management skills through didactic lessons and role playing. The peer-mediation program provided extensive training for middle school youth in which formal mediation skills were taught and practiced in a small group setting. During the 2007–2008 school year, a total of 191 fourth and fifth grade students participated in conflict resolution training,¹⁷ and 23 eighth graders participated in peer mediation training. These students were from three public schools in New Haven, Connecticut with a predominantly African American and Hispanic population (over 85%), and a high percentage (62%–85%) of students eligible for free/reduced lunch. Students who participated in the peer mediation and conflict resolution programs were approached in their classrooms, and asked if they were willing to participate in focus-groups aimed at exploring their perceptions of violence, and the impact of the programs on their violence-related attitudes and behaviors. Students expressing an interest were provided with information on the risks and benefits of the study, and were asked to sign an assent form. Prior to this, an information sheet with an elaborate explanation of the study was sent to all students' parents asking permission for their children to participate. Parents were encouraged to contact the researchers or school principal if they did not want their children to participate in the study. Ethical approval for the study was received from the Institutional Review Board of Griffin Hospital and from the Yale University School of Medicine Human Investigation Committee.

We utilized a purposeful sampling approach¹⁸ to capture the diverse characteristics of the target population, i.e., both male and female participants, all grades, proportionate race/ethnicity make ups, and all three participating schools. A total of 45 students of the 49 students approached participated in the study. None of the parents declined their child's participation in the study; however, four students did not assent, and thus they were not included. Of the 45 participants, 21 were female (47%), 20 were African American (44%), 22 Hispanic (49%), and three non-Hispanic White (7%). Nine were eighth graders, while the remaining were fourth and fifth graders. The nine eighth graders participated in two focus groups, while the fourth and fifth graders participated in seven focus groups. Thus, a total of nine focus groups, consisting of five participants (on average), lasting approximately 45–50 minutes (i.e., one academic school period) were conducted in participants' schools between March and June 2008. Focus groups were facilitated by two of the investigators, a community-based researcher (KS) and the assistant director of a community-based organization (BC). These investigators were not directly involved in implementing the violence prevention programs, and the students had not met them prior to the focus group sessions. The facilitators explained the objectives of the study and used a predetermined set of questions (see appendix), based on the literature^{9,19} and adapted to the aims of the study and its population. Focus groups were recorded via audio-tape and transcribed verbatim.

To increase the trustworthiness of the analysis two of the researchers (KS, ZM) scrutinized the data independently. Deliberations between researchers were held in order to develop and re-categorize themes, when necessary. Initial agreement was high (80% on themes), and minor disagreements were resolved through discussions until researching complete (100%) consensus. We used the framework approach²⁰ to analyze the focus-group data. This analysis procedure is an applied approach, which starts deductively from pre-defined objectives, and continues inductively when new themes emerge. In the first stage of the analysis we immersed ourselves in the data by reading the transcripts several times, listening to audiotapes, and listing key concepts and recurrent themes. This was followed by developing a thematic framework based on a priori objectives and emerging themes from the familiarization stage. Next, codes were assigned to the data and thematic charts were created. The final stage included mapping and interpretation of the analyzed data in relation to the original research objectives and the themes that emerged from the data.^{20,21}

Results

The following themes represent both majority (over 60% of themes across focus-groups) and minority (less than 40%) perspectives of the focus group participants. Many themes were shared by eighth grade and fourth/fifth grade participants, and are therefore presented jointly. The main themes that emerged from the data analysis process are: perceptions of neighborhood violence and delinquency; protective factors and coping strategies when dealing with neighborhood violence; the role of schools in protecting or enabling violence; and causes and solutions for conflict in schools and the community. All names used in supporting quotations are pseudonyms.

1. Perceptions of neighborhood violence and delinquency

Most participants believed their neighborhood was dangerous and many feared becoming victims of violence (e.g., fist fights, stabbing, shooting, robbery) (8th grade male): “I feel that my neighborhood is not a great place to live, there’s drugs being sold and there’s a lot of like jacking, mugging, stuff like that. I’m afraid if I go outside that something might happen to me... I’m not supposed to feel like that... I shouldn’t be afraid to walk outside”; and (8th grade female): “It’s crazy... you are in the hood and like... you walk on street... you go out and you die”; or (8th grade male): “It’s bad. People get robbed down there... shot, stabbed.” Though almost all concurred that their neighborhood was violent, some accepted this fact as part of life, were not fearful of the consequences of being out in the neighborhood, and were not intimidated by gang-related crimes. (Moderator): “... Is there a gang?” (5th grade female): “A lot of them... I’ve got used to seeing them [laugh]”; and (5th grade male): “Yeah, there’s the blood, there’s the hood, there’s the trey, there’s crips, there’s jungle kids... there’s always fights breaking out, guns, drug dealing... I’m used to it.” (Moderator): “Is this a safe neighborhood?” (5th grade male): “It’s my neighborhood. It’s my life.” Thus, neighborhood violence was attributed to gangs ruling the streets and drug-related crimes (4th grade male): “There’s a lot of gun shootings and all that stuff... sometimes there’s like gang people and... they do stuff they’re not suppose to do”; (5th grade male): “There’s a gang here... there’s always fights breaking out, guns, drug dealing”; and (5th grade male): “You walk outside you see a crackhead... drug delivery... sometimes you see prostitutes stuff like that... It’s bad stuff.” Additionally, participants reported a disparity in safety within and between neighborhoods (4th grade male): “My neighborhood is like half good and half bad... the good side there will be kids and all the good stuff... The other side you see drugs, people fighting...”; and (8th grade female): “It’s different when you take one turn and like a ghetto area and then you turn again, and all you see is just nice stuff like shops... stuff like that”; and (8th grade male): “No Blacks allowed in there, [as far as] they’re concerned.” (Moderator): “How does that make you feel?” (8th grade male): “It’s segregated, like ‘our hood’ and ‘your hood.’”

2. Protective factors and coping strategies when dealing with neighborhood violence

Individual strategies described by participants to cope with neighborhood violence included staying home, particularly during late hours of the night (5th grade male): “You stay at home, read your books, go to school, go back home, play safely, do the same thing all over again”; (8th grade male): “No one open the door after 8 o’clock”; avoiding dangerous people or groups (4th grade female): “At the end of my street... there’s a lot of bad bad people... there will be swearing and cussing and stuff and gun shots so I... try to stay away from them”; and avoiding joining gangs, using drugs, and staying in school (5th grade male): “They (belong to) different gangs... they... do this because they... feel cool being bad and doing drugs, but when it comes to real life... what they do? I would... stay away from drugs, stay in school, [and] do what’s right.” Additionally, most participants did not indicate that their parents were protective against exposure to violence, and noted that they

were not present in the household, particularly when arriving home from school (5th grade male): “[We] wait out in front of the door... for one of the adults to get home and open the door. So my mom... made keys... so that we could just let ourselves in.” Yet a minority of participants regarded parents (specifically mothers) as protective when faced with extreme danger (5th grade female): “This man, he tried to like kidnap my sister, but my mom she like called the cops and made sure we were safe and protected.”

Participants believed adhering to neighborhood norms and codes would protect against neighborhood violence (8th grade male): “You get shot for wearing the wrong colors in the wrong neighborhood”; and (8th grade female): “Yeah, like if you go into a different neighborhood and you got your flag on, you put your flag away... [otherwise] that’s like a show of disrespect, and you get shot”; or (5th grade female): “If you do a wrong sign in a different hood you get jumped or shot.” Others perceived their neighbors’ involvement in their lives to shield them from being victims of violence (4th grade male): “My neighbors help me out a lot... I was across the street one time and... these are kids that bother people a lot cause they just don’t like anybody... so they are bothering me they pushed me... and my neighbors... they came to help me,” or (5th grade male): “My neighbors are good... sometimes when me and my cousin are just waiting outside for my parents to come. She lets [us] inside to use the bathroom or lets us eat or get something to drink because she’s worried about us outside”; and (4th grade female): “My neighbors, they know my parents and my parents can trust them to take care of me whenever my parents are not able to get me from my bus stop.”

The presence of police in the neighborhood was perceived by some as a deterrent against violence (4th grade female): “...When I went to the hospital in February the police were able to be counted on.” However, many felt that police presence and protection was neighborhood-dependent (5th grade male): “I think that the cops can be depended in some neighborhoods... but then there is other places where the cops cannot be depended upon such as Jake’s neighborhood... It’s like the Hill, Bill, Trey... the cops can’t even go near them.” Others believed that the police not only did not protect them, but rather felt they discriminated based on race (8th grade female): “Like I just see cops, just because we are like Black... if we are jammin’ at somebody’s house they’re going to think we’re selling drugs or something bad... I see a lot of boys like put up against the wall for sitting on a porch... Not every kid in New Haven is doing something bad.” Some participants felt that violence in their neighborhood was an external factor that they could not control (8th grade male): “You see people junked around on corners... violence every day... you can’t stop it; you can’t do anything about it”; others stated that the only solution is to physically move to a neighborhood with less crime and delinquency (5th grade female): “We moved... because it was bad things happening outside... shootings, stealing cars... drugs, killings, and beating up people”; and (5th grade male): “When we moved to the hood I was really scared... I was scared somebody might break in, but now... in a different neighborhood, I can just relax and not be scared.”

3. The role of school in protecting or enabling violence

School was perceived by approximately half of the focus group participants as a safe-haven from outside neighborhood violence, and the teachers and principals as protective factors against school violence (4th grade female): “Sometimes [there are] like bad people trying to get into school. But I still feel safe because the security guards are like walking all over the school, and because in the school [no]... students get hurt”; (4th grade male): “[School is] just like a safe place to calm down... when I feel scared and I come here, the teachers always like cheer me up”; (5th grade male): “Mr. Martin [the principal] makes sure the person who started the fight is suspended or he will expel them”; (5th grade male): “Last year... this kid he wouldn’t... stop starting fights so... the principal stopped him from

coming to school... he was expelled and he had to go to juvie.” Others saw things differently (4th grade male): “The violence outside the school affects the violence in the school.” Some reported violence inflicted upon and by teachers and principals: (5th grade male): “People in Ms. Janavia’s class they still jeer at her... they cuss at her feet, they hit her... and last time they made her faint. She had passed out, the kids had been so mean she had passed out”; and (4th grade female): “Like the other principal... she sits there and just grabs you like ‘get against the wall I don’t know what you are talking about’ and she just sits there and yells at you... we just sit there and yell back at her...” Additionally, participants believed that their teachers’ aggression towards them resulted in their own aggression and a teacher’s ability to resolve conflict was regarded as a mitigating factor (4th grade female): “When teachers yell in our face for some reason we have to snap back at them... I don’t know why”; (4th grade male): “She [the teacher]... knows how to control students when they are like... in anger mode”; or (5th grade male): “She knows what they [the students] want and then she knows how to calm ‘em down.”

4. Causes and solutions for fights in schools and the community

Participants reported fights were caused primarily because of another student instigating the fight by teasing or being verbally or physically abusive to them or a family member within or outside of school (5th grade female): “This girl she talked junk to me so I talked junk back at her and then I fought her and her friends, like Sahara, ... and I got jumped”; (8th grade female): “If anybody touch her [my cousin] and it’s a girl, I’m going to fight her. Lose or win, don’t touch my princess. That’s somebody close to my heart.” Additionally, participants cited other students spreading rumors about them (either orally or via the Internet) as a cause of fights (4th grade male): “I actually started to fight because there was this guy... he kept telling fibs about me... so of course I’m going to give [it to] him”; (5th grade female): “We were about to fight and my friend... they put up embarrassing pictures on MySpace.” Moreover, participants cited their own inability to manage and control their anger when being provoked as a reason for initiating a fight (4th grade male): “I can’t really handle holding any anger when somebody talks about my mom or my family.” Fighting was also perceived as a means to maintain their “rep” which in turn protected them from future fights (8th grade male): “It’s like... with somebody in a fight... they not gonna back down from the fight cause it’s like... they got to protect their rep”; (8th grade female): “Somebody try to hit you and you do nothing they try to get you at home.” Other strategies employed as protective measures from school fights was surrounding oneself with friends who do not tend to fight, walking away when provoked, and reporting school violence to the teachers, principals, or adults (5th grade male): “There’s this kid and he used to start problems... I just ignored [him] and he got his consequences”; (5th grade female): “I just ignore them, or tell an adult about it”; and (8th grade male): “All my friends, specially Akeem, they never fight.” Additionally, participants acknowledged the school-based peer-mediation program as a means to resolve conflict before escalating to fights. Utilizing peers to mitigate conflict was perceived as an acceptable prevention measure (5th grade female): “The peer mediation [is] better than the grown ups because when kids talk to other kids... kids can kind of understand the language and say ‘ok maybe we shouldn’t do that’. But when kids talk to grownups they are frustrated.” However, the ability of peer mediation to actually resolve conflict and prevent violence was questioned by some (4th grade male): “It [peer mediation] didn’t work because he was saying sorry and shaking my hand and everything but then on the bus he tortured me”; and (4th grade male): “What’s the point of doing this [peer mediation]? ... You can’t stop hitting or something... no matter what you do.”

Discussion

The present study attempts to gain insight into urban youths' perceptions of violence and prevention strategies. Findings emerging from the qualitative analysis are consistent with the ecological framework,²² acknowledging that youth violence is affected by factors at the individual, relationship, community, and societal levels.^{22,23} Study results indicate that risk factors for violence exist at multiple levels such as lack of interpersonal anger management skills (individual level); parents not physically present in the household (relationship level); residing in crime and gang ridden neighborhoods (community level); and socioeconomic inequalities between neighborhoods, as reflected by participants' perception of disparity between neighborhood resources and safety (society level). Though these findings are supported by the literature,^{9,24} insufficient qualitative studies have assessed urban youths' perceptions of violence taking into account the multitude of factors impacting the phenomena within one study.^{25,26} For example, Howard et al. and Flores primarily assessed urban adolescents' perceptions of neighborhood violence and safety,^{25,27} whereas Johnson et al. primarily focused on gender-based violence.²⁶

In the current study, many focus group participants indicated that they did not believe police would protect them in their urban neighborhoods, and some felt discriminated against based on race. This prevalent perception is supported by literature linking hostility towards the police to violence-related outcomes, and perceived racial stereotyping by the police.^{13,28} Sheehan et al. found that some urban youth did not trust the police and perceived them as violent.²⁹ Present findings also stress the paramount role the school environment plays in youth aggression and violent behavior. While some teachers and principals were able to mitigate aggression and violence, others expressed aggression and used violence towards students. These findings suggest that schools from top administration down might need further training, monitoring, and evaluation to ensure that responses to youth are consistent with modeling non-violent behaviors.³⁰ Additional results indicate that parents were not always physically present in the households, yet parents trusted neighbors to care for their children in their absence. This is indicative of a high level of collective efficacy, a protective factor against neighborhood violence.⁹ Moreover, mothers were perceived by some as protective against neighborhood violence, particularly when facing extreme adversity. Molnar et al. found that most urban girls credited their mothers with keeping them safe and providing guidance.⁹ In contrast, Reese et al. found that urban girls and boys reported lack of emotional support as risk factors for violence-related behaviors.²⁴

Turning findings into action will necessitate taking participants' suggestions into account when designing and implementing violence prevention programs. Participants suggested numerous violence prevention strategies including: enhancing interpersonal skills pertaining to anger management, surrounding oneself with peers who do not tend to fight, and staying at home after school to avoid neighborhood violence. Adherence to neighborhood norms and neighbors' involvement in daily life were regarded as protective measures. Studies have found neighborhood social resources (e.g., collective efficacy) to be protective of neighborhood violence, particularly in low-income urban neighborhoods.^{9,31,32} Another suggested prevention strategy was physically to move to a safer and more affluent neighborhood. Though this suggestion is supported by economic experiments showing that youth moving to more affluent neighborhoods decrease their crime rates, it is an out-of-reach solution for many low-income households.^{9,33,34} Additional findings stress the importance of teachers' ability to mitigate students' confrontational behavior, as a means to minimize conflict in classrooms. Youth participating in school based violence prevention programs perceived these programs as an acceptable means to resolve conflicts; however, many doubted their actual effectiveness in preventing violence. This finding is consistent with our parallel quantitative study,¹⁷ indicating the school-based interventions' inability

significantly to change many violence-related outcome measures. Focus group participants suggested violence prevention strategies should be taken into account when designing and implementing future violence prevention programs for urban youth. These suggestions are consistent with the ecological framework,²² stressing the importance of multifaceted interventions at the individual, family, school, and neighborhood levels simultaneously.^{35,36}

This study has both strengths and limitations. A major strength stems from assessing urban youths' violence perceptions at multiple levels within a single study, while eliciting prevention strategies, which could provide invaluable information for program planners and researchers. Limitations, as with other qualitative studies, include the inability to generalize study findings to urban populations elsewhere. Furthermore, fourth and fifth grade students' perceptions might be overrepresented in the study's findings, because more focus groups were conducted among this age group. Additionally, participants were interviewed at one time point while participating in violence prevention programs (i.e., during the second half of the programs). Attitudes might have been affected by taking part in these programs, and might have varied during this period. Hence, to confirm these findings additional research is warranted among urban youth not enrolled in violence prevention programs. Nonetheless, this qualitative study illuminates and underscores the numerous factors affecting urban youth's perceptions of conflict and violence, and provides prevention strategies to be employed in future interventions.

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Appendix—Focus Group Questions and Probes

1. What is violence?

1.1. How does violence affect your life (if at all)?

Probes:

1.2. In your opinion, what factors could potentially lead to violence?

1.2.1. What role (if at all) does violence play in your own neighborhood? Is your neighborhood safe? Will your neighbors help if something bad happens?

1.2.2. What role (if at all) does violence play in your school?

1.3. Please describe a violence incident that you (or a friend/relative/neighbor) might have witness, heard about or been involved in.

1.3.1. What lead to this event?

1.3.2. What were the consequences?

1.3.3. Thinking back, were there ways that someone could have prevented or avoided this incident (having this escalate into violence)?

1.4. How do you tend to deal with conflict in your family? In your neighborhood? In your school?

2. What do you think of the peer mediation/ conflict resolution program?

2.1. How did this program change (if at all) your ability to deal with violence or any conflict (in school, at home, in your neighborhood)?

2.2 Has the program had any effect on conflict at school?

2.2.1. Do you like this program? (If so, or if not, please explain.) How about your Teachers or Principal or other adults in the school?

2.2.2. If you could make any changes you wanted in the program, what would you recommend (if anything) to improve the program?

3. Is there anything else you would like to say to us or talk about with us?