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Community Violence and Children’s Psychological Well-Being: Does Parental Monitoring Matter?

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Poor, inner-city children are exposed to inordinately high rates of community violence. Although the link between exposure to violence and adverse mental health outcomes is well documented, less attention has focused on factors that may buffer children from negative outcomes. Using a sample of 163 4th- and 5th-grade children, this study investigated whether children’s perceptions of parental monitoring moderate the relation between children’s violence exposure and their psychological well-being, as assessed by depression and hopelessness. Greater exposure to community violence was associated with more symptoms of depression and feelings of hopelessness. Moreover, parental monitoring buffered to a certain extent the relation between violence exposure and psychological functioning. Increased monitoring had a positive impact on the psychological well-being of children who were less exposed to violence; however, as violence exposure increased, the impact of parental monitoring was attenuated.

Researchers have identified violence as “a defining characteristic of American society” (Cicchetti & Lynch, 1993, p. 96), noting that the United States, with the highest homicide rate in the world, towers above other countries. Poor, inner-city children typically have few resources with which to dodge or escape the onslaught of violence permeating their communities. In an ecological–transactional model of community violence, Cicchetti and Lynch underscored the need to investigate how risk and protective factors interact and mediate adverse developmental outcomes. This study examined children’s perceptions of parenting behavior as a protective factor in the relation between poor children’s exposure to violence and negative psychological sequelae. The specific focus on parental monitoring stems, in part, from the conviction that monitoring, as Dishion and McMahon (1998) have proposed, can be an important target for clinical attention, behavioral interventions, and preventative efforts.

Children’s Exposure to Community Violence and the Psychological Aftermath

Empirical evidence documents that children living in poverty are subjected to extraordinarily high rates of community violence as both victims and witnesses (Richters & Martinez, 1993; Singer, Anglin, Song, & Lunghofer, 1995). Attending to these two subtypes of violence exposure—victimization and witnessing violence—is warranted given the experiential differences involved and reports of statistical differences in their frequency and associated sequelae (Bell & Jenkins, 1993; Fitzpatrick, 1993). Numerous detrimental outcomes are associated with children’s exposure to community violence, including externalizing behavior problems (Ceballo, Dahl, Aretakis, & Ramirez, 2001), general anxiety and distress (Hill & Madhere, 1996; Singer et al., 1995), and symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (Berman, Kurtines, Silverman, & Serafini, 1996).

Several studies also have found an association between violence exposure and depression (DuRant,
Getts, Cadenhead, Emans, & Woods, 1995; Fitzpatrick, 1993). Gorman-Smith and Tolan (1998) demonstrated that violence exposure was related to an increase in depression among African American and Hispanic male adolescents over a 1-year time period, even after controlling for prior depressive symptoms. Differentiating between types of violence exposure, Fitzpatrick found that African American children’s personal victimization had a direct association with depressive symptoms, whereas witnessing violence had no such impact. Additionally, it is not uncommon for children exposed to inner-city violence to express feelings of hopelessness, antisocial coping strategies, and pessimistic future expectations (DuRant, Cadenhead, Pendergrast, Slavens, & Linder, 1994; DuRant et al., 1995).

Parental Monitoring in Inner-City Neighborhoods

Although the link between exposure to violence and adverse outcomes is well documented, less attention has focused on the role that parental characteristics may play in buffering children from high levels of exposure to community violence. Little is known about what protects children from exposure to violence and what reduces their risk for negative psychological symptoms. Strict parental monitoring is typically indicated by reliance on regularly enforced curfews, tight supervision, and knowledge of children’s whereabouts, peers, and activities. Across numerous studies, weak parental monitoring emerges as a consistent predictor of antisocial behavior, delinquent activities, and poor academic functioning (Crouter, Helms-Erikson, Updegraff, & McHale, 1999; Dishion & McMahon, 1998).

Further, researchers have identified close parental monitoring as an important protective factor among children facing environmental adversities (Elder, Eccles, Ardelt, & Lord, 1995; Mason, Cauce, Gonzales, & Hiraga, 1996). Among parents living in neighborhoods that parents perceive as low in safety and security, Pettit, Bates, Dodge, and Meece (1999) found high levels of parental monitoring were associated with fewer externalizing problems among children. In essence, parental supervision may moderate neighborhood effects by regulating children’s exposure to community violence, negative neighborhood activities, and delinquent peers. Our study examines whether children’s perceptions of parental monitoring moderate the relation between exposure to violence and psychological well-being, as indicated by symptoms of depression and hopelessness. The key question addressed is whether parental monitoring will protect children who are exposed to urban violence from negative psychological outcomes. The hypotheses tested are illustrated in Figure 1.

Method

Sample

The sample consisted of 163 fourth and fifth graders attending two elementary schools located in an economically disadvantaged, high-risk neighborhood in Detroit, Michigan. Detroit’s crime rate remains well
above the national average. In 1997, the national violent crime rate (including murder, rape, robbery, and assault) averaged 634 crimes per 100,000 people in comparison to Detroit’s rate of 2,151 crimes per 100,000 people (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1997). In addition, the schools correspond to two census tracts with median household incomes of $14,257 and $15,057, respectively, and with 32% and 42% of the population living below the poverty line in 1989 (U.S. Census Bureau, 1990).

There were 73 boys and 90 girls in this sample, and the children had a mean age of 10 years ($SD = .87$). The children reported an average of 5.6 people living in their homes. Hispanics comprised the largest racial group with 100 children reporting a Hispanic identity. The majority of Hispanic children identified themselves as Mexican American. In addition, 33 children were of European descent, 26 children were African American, and 4 children did not provide a racial identification. Because of missing data, analyses were conducted on children with complete data ($n = 147$).

Procedure

Parental recruitment letters describing the study and consent forms were sent home with all of the fourth- and fifth-grade children in two elementary schools. Among the eligible students, 77% of the children in one school and 58% of the children in the other school returned signed consent forms. Questionnaires were administered to all children who returned consent forms. The children were interviewed in a small group format whereby graduate and undergraduate students read the questionnaires out loud to groups of two to five children. The children followed along on their own questionnaires, answering the questions as they went. Interviews were conducted at the schools and took approximately 2 hr. For children who indicated that they preferred to speak Spanish, the questionnaire had been translated and back-translated into Spanish, and these eight children worked with a bilingual graduate student who spoke and read to them in Spanish. At one school, participating children received a $20 gift certificate to Toys-R-Us; in the other school, children attended a pizza party.

Measures

The Survey of Exposure to Community Violence (Richters & Martinez, 1993) measures the frequency of lifetime exposure and victimization to different types of violence. Children were asked to report how many times they witnessed or experienced certain violent events on a scale from 0 (never) to 11 (almost every day). A scale of personal victimization ($\alpha = .81$) was created by adding children’s scores on 11 items that assessed personal experiences with violent incidents such as being beaten up or mugged, and attacked or stabbed with a knife. Another scale of witnessing violence ($\alpha = .84$) consisted of summing scores on 10 items that involve witnessing incidents like seeing someone else being attacked or stabbed with a knife. Higher scores on these scales reflect a greater frequency of exposure to community violence, as either victims or witnesses. Among a sample of 225 African American adolescents, DuRant et al. (1995) reported an internal consistency alpha of .85 and a test–retest reliability coefficient of .90.

The parental monitoring scale assessed children’s report of their parents’ supervision and awareness of their whereabouts, activities, and playmates (Small & Kerns, 1993). Children were asked to indicate how often 10 items were true for them and their parents. They responded to these items on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (almost always). Sample statements include the following: “My parent(s) know where I am after school” and “I tell my parent(s) who I’m going to be with before I go out.” Higher scores indicated greater parental monitoring, and this scale had an alpha of .84. The reliability for our sample is similar to that reported by Small and Kerns ($\alpha = .87$). It is important to note that although young children’s reports of parental monitoring are suspect, reports of parenting behavior among children in middle childhood have demonstrated predictive validity (Dishion & McMahon, 1998).

The Children’s Depression Inventory, a widely used instrument, measured children’s feelings of depression (Kovacs, 1985). In this measure, groups of three statements were presented, and children were asked to pick the statement that most closely describes how they have been feeling for the past 2 weeks. The items are scored from 0 to 2 and reverse coded as needed, in the direction of increasing severity. With total scores for this scale ranging from 0 to 52, the alpha was .87. Finch, Saylor, Edwards, and McIntosh (1987) found a test–retest reliability alpha of .82 for 108 children after a 2-week interval. In a sample of 215 children, Helsel and Matson (1984) found a highly significant split-half correlation with a coefficient of .89 and reported that all of the children in the depressed group scored significantly higher than the nondepressed children on each of the items in this measure.

The Hopelessness Scale for Children (Kazdin, Rogers, & Colbus, 1986) is a 16-item measure of children’s negative expectations about the future. Children are asked to indicate whether certain statements are true or untrue for them. Sample items include the following: “All I can see ahead of me are bad things, not good things” and “Things just won’t work out the way I want them to.” Items were reverse coded as needed so that higher scores reflect a greater degree of hopelessness. Scores ranged from 0 to 16, and the alpha for this scale was .62. Kazdin et al. reported that the scale was inter-
RESULTS

The children in our study reported high rates of exposure to urban violence; their lifetime exposure rates to selected types of violence are presented in Table 1. More than 25% of the sample reported that they had seen another person attacked with a knife, and a similar percentage had seen someone shot with a gun. Children’s rates of witnessing violence were higher than personal victimization when two very common items, regarding hearing gunfire, are excluded from the personal victimization scale ($t = 3.99, p < .001$). Still, experiences with personal victimization were strongly and positively correlated with experiences of witnessing violence ($r = .70, p \leq .001$). Generally, boys were more likely to be personally victimized by violence ($t = 3.29, p \leq .001$) and to witness violent incidents ($t = 2.19, p \leq .05$). Mean levels for victimization were 14.8 ($SD = 16.1$) for boys and 8.3 ($SD = 8.6$) for girls, and for witnessing violence were 13.0 ($SD = 16.8$) and 8.6 ($SD = 8.6$) for boys and girls, respectively. Additionally, children who reported more parental monitoring had significantly lower rates of personal victimization ($r = -.25, p \leq .01$) and witnessing violence ($r = -.17, p \leq .05$).

To test the hypothesis that parental monitoring would moderate the relation between exposure to violence and psychological well-being, as depicted in Figure 1, we utilized hierarchical regression analyses. Separate analyses were conducted for personal victimization and witnessing violence; these scales were not entered into the same regression equation to avoid problems with multicollinearity. The first pair of regressions, presented in Table 2, used personal victimization, parental monitoring, and the interaction between these variables as predictors of depression in the first equation and hopelessness in the second. In the first step of each regression, three demographic controls were entered: children’s age, sex, and race. Two dummy variables were created to control for children’s race, with an African American variable coded as 1 for African American and zero for all other races, and a Hispanic variable coded as 1 for Hispanic and zero for all others. The second step included the main effect predictors of personal victimization and parental monitoring. Finally, the interaction term between personal victimization and parenting was entered in the third step. The same analyses were conducted in a second pair of regressions, except that witnessing violence, rather than personal victimization, was used as a predictor. Predictor variables were centered when appropriate (Aiken & West, 1991).

Personal victimization was a significant predictor of psychological well-being, such that children who had more experiences with victimization reported more depression ($\beta = .47, p \leq .001$) and hopelessness ($\beta = .41, p \leq .001$). Also, children who reported more parental monitoring reported less depressive symptoms ($\beta = -.34, p \leq .001$) and feelings of hopelessness ($\beta = -.25, p \leq .01$). Further, evidence of moderation was found in that significant interactions occurred in both models, predicting depressive symptoms ($\beta = .27, p \leq .05$) and feelings of hopelessness ($\beta = .30, p \leq .05$).

To explain these interactions, correlations between parental monitoring and psychological well-being were computed for children experiencing low versus high amounts of personal victimization. Children with victimization rates below the median of 8.0 were placed in a low victimization group and those with scores above 8.0 were placed in a high victimization group. Although greater parental monitoring was significantly related to lower depression scores in the low victimization group ($r = -.48, p \leq .001$), there was no significant association among children in the high victimization group. Among children with the most victimization experience, monitoring had no significant impact on psychological well-being. In contrast, among children who experienced less victimization, parental monitoring did provide a buffer from depressive symptoms as well as feelings of hopelessness. Similarly, greater monitoring was significantly associated with less hopelessness ($r = -.25, p < .05$) in the low victimization group, whereas monitoring and hopelessness were not associated in the high victimization group. These interactions may be a function of sex differences in exposure to violence rates. However, because we did not find any differences in the effects of
Witnessing violence was significantly related to depression in the predicted manner ($\beta = .22$, $p \leq .01$). As before, parental monitoring was associated with less depression and hopelessness, but the interaction terms were not significant in the two regressions that used witnessing violence as a predictor.

### Discussion

This study’s findings are in accord with previous studies demonstrating that poor, inner-city children are exposed to high rates of urban violence (Bell & Jenkins, 1993; Singer et al., 1995). Witnessing community violence was more common than personal experiences of victimization by violence. In keeping with other research, boys reported exposure to higher levels of neighborhood violence, both as victims and as witnesses, in comparison to girls (Bell & Jenkins, 1993).

As expected, experiences with personal victimization and witnessing violence were associated with reports of depressive affect and feelings of hopelessness (DuRant et al., 1995; Fitzpatrick, 1993; Gorman-Smith & Tolan, 1998). In contrast to Fitzpatrick’s findings, however, we did not detect different relations between different kinds of violence exposure and depressive affect. In addition to personal victimization, the more common experience of witnessing community violence was also associated with greater depressive symptoms in this study.

Several researchers have identified strict parental monitoring as a trademark of efficacious parenting in high-risk neighborhoods (Elder et al., 1995; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Mason et al., 1996). Indeed, our results suggest that more monitoring is associated with reduced levels of both personal victimization and witnessing violence among children. Moreover, greater parental monitoring was directly linked to fewer symptoms of depression and hopelessness. Children facing the challenges of dangerous neighborhoods may view parental monitoring as a sign of parental care and concern; that belief may understandably benefit children’s emotional well-being. More generally, parental monitoring relies on good parent–child communication and a positive parent–child relationship (Crouter et al., 1999; Dishion & McMahon, 1998).

It is important to note Stattin and Kerr’s (2000) critique of parental monitoring measures, such as the one used in this study. These authors note that traditional measures of parental monitoring rarely ask about parental efforts to actively track and supervise their children. Rather, most measures, ours included, inquire about parents’ knowledge of their children’s activities. Hence, “parental monitoring” may actually reflect children’s comfort and desire to share information with their parents (Kerr & Stattin, 2000; Stattin & Kerr, 2000). For parents, children’s honest disclosures and

### Table 2. Hierarchical Regression Analyses Predicting Psychological Well-Being With Personal Victimization

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor Variables</th>
<th>Depression</th>
<th>Hopelessness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 1</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.20*</td>
<td>–.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex (0 = male; 1 = female)</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>–.08</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$F = 1.98$ $R^2 = .05$</td>
<td></td>
<td>$F = .36$ $R^2 = .01$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 2</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.17*</td>
<td>–.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>–.02</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal victimization</td>
<td>.33***</td>
<td>.25**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental monitoring</td>
<td>–.22**</td>
<td>–.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$F = 6.86$ $R^2 = .23$</td>
<td></td>
<td>$F = 2.50$ $R^2 = .10$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 3</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.16*</td>
<td>–.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>–.02</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Victimization</td>
<td>.47***</td>
<td>.41***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Monitoring</td>
<td>–.34***</td>
<td>–.25**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victimization × Monitoring</td>
<td>.27***</td>
<td>.30*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$F = 6.97$ $R^2 = .26$</td>
<td></td>
<td>$F = 3.12$ $R^2 = .14$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: $N = 147$.

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.
sharing of information may allow them to more effectively monitor and set limits. Far from a simple, unidimensional variable, parental monitoring is thus a complex and fluid construct, carefully balancing input from both members of a dyadic relationship. Future research must heed the call to investigate active parental efforts at surveillance.

This study’s results further suggest that greater monitoring and knowledge of children’s activities can to a certain extent buffer children from the effects of personal victimization. Parents who engage in more supervision have a positive impact on the psychological well-being of children who are less personally victimized by violence. As children’s victimization increases, however, the influence of attentive parental monitoring is attenuated. Thus, experiences with many incidents of victimization may have a cumulative, deleterious impact on children, an impact that may be so severe as to negate the influence of effective parenting strategies. Ultimately, an onslaught of environmental dangers may undermine even the best parenting strategies that skillful parents have to offer. This is consonant with findings reported by Gorman-Smith and Tolan (1998) and Gorman-Smith, Tolan, and Henry (1999). Gorman-Smith et al. compared highly impoverished, “underclass” communities with less destitute, urban neighborhoods. In the latter communities, family quality characteristics mediated the impact of stressors on delinquent behavior, whereas parenting practices could not ameliorate the influence of environmental stressors in the poorest, most at-risk neighborhoods. As in our study, environmental stressors may thereby reduce the potency of well-functioning family processes and high quality parenting practices.

Although many studies on exposure to violence and children’s mental health are conducted primarily with samples of inner-city, African American children, this study was based on a multiethnic sample of fourth and fifth graders, with a large constituency of Hispanic children. As seen here, the detrimental effects of exposure to community violence are present for all children living in high-risk neighborhoods, irrespective of their racial background. In essence, neighborhood risk factors may yield a more potent effect than more proximal, demographic characteristics. Likewise, Pinderhughes, Nix, Foster, Jones, and the Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group (2001) found that racial differences in parenting behavior disappeared when neighborhood factors were considered. In sum, our results reinforce the necessity of studying families in their environmental context to more fully understand family processes and developmental outcomes for children.

The cross-sectional nature of our data cannot confirm a direction of causality in our results. Our study also relies on self-reported data, introducing the disadvantages of monomethod bias. However, we should not completely discount children’s reports of parenting behavior, because some researchers have critiqued the use of parent-reported monitoring as likely influenced by social desirability biases (Dishion & McMahon, 1998). Additionally, a small sample of convenience limits the generalizability of our findings. Finally, the participating children did not represent a randomly selected sample; however, given that violence is not a randomly distributed problem in American cities, randomness criteria may be less pertinent for a study such as ours (Fitzpatrick, 1993).

References


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