DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 421 589 UD 032 441

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TITLE Exposure to Community Violence: Incidence and Correlates among Inner-City and Suburban Adolescents.
PUB DATE 1998-02-00
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research on Adolescence (San Diego, CA, February 26-March 1, 1998).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adolescents; Behavior Patterns; *Correlation; *High School Students; High Schools; Inner City; Social Environment; Suburban Schools; *Suburban Youth; *Urban Youth; Victims of Crime; *Violence
IDENTIFIERS Psychosocial Factors; *Witnesses to Violence

ABSTRACT

Psychosocial correlates of exposure to violence are explored to gain insight into how adolescents are affected in areas of school-based adjustment, and also whether specific groups of youth are affected more than others. Data were gathered as part of a study on academic adjustment across two groups of adolescents: one from a Northeastern inner-city school and one from a high school in an affluent suburb. Participants were 493 high school sophomores, 226 of whom were in the urban school. Self-report questionnaires, teacher ratings of classroom behavior, and grades were collected for all participants. A checklist was used to measure exposure to community violence and to derive witnessing and victimization subscales. An index of drug involvement was then developed. The two groups reported remarkably similar levels of self-reported delinquency and involvement in drug dealing. Suburban adolescents reported significantly more illicit substance abuse than the urban students. Inner-city teens had witnessed more community violence, but suburban teens were just as likely to report victimization as were their urban counterparts. The only difference was on having been shot or having been shot at. Suburban teens who reported high victimization were more likely to be using illicit drugs than their inner-city counterparts. It may be that the suburban teens are putting themselves in risky situations at school, but it is more likely that they are traveling to other communities where they are likely to be victimized in conjunction with their high-risk activities. The conclusion of the study suggests that urban teens are exposed to violence at least in part because of their environment, while suburban teens are exposed more as a function of their behavior. (Contains four tables, three figures, and seven references.) (SLD)

Exposure to community violence: Incidence and correlates among inner-city and suburban adolescents

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Exposure to community violence:
Incidence and correlates among inner-city and suburban adolescents

The focus of this paper is on two issues that bear on adolescents' exposure to community violence: "who?" is exposed, and "so what?" for those who are exposed. As to who is exposed, data show that in spite of improving national crime statistics, the prevalence of community violence is much higher in the inner cities than elsewhere. Inner-city adolescents, then, are at greater risk for exposure. However, we also know that exposure is not restricted to this group. Data from the Children's Defense Fund 1994 Yearbook show that crime, for example, is on the rise in the suburbs (Children's Defense Fund, 1994).

As to "so what?", existing research on violence exposure suggests that witnesses and victims suffer from negative sequelae. We explore psychosocial correlates of exposure in order to gain insight regarding how adolescents are affected in areas of school-based adjustment, and also whether or not specific groups of youths are affected more than others.

The data presented here were gathered as part of a larger investigation on academic adjustment across two groups of adolescents: one from a Northeastern inner-city school, and the other from a high school in an affluent suburb 20 miles away. We thus have the opportunity to learn more about and to compare risks associated with exposure to violence in these two very different communities.

Specifically, the questions we asked were :

1) **How do suburban and inner-city adolescents compare on violence exposure, drug involvement, and delinquency?** The tendency is to assume that inner-city children are exposed to much more community violence, are at far greater risk for problem behaviors, and are getting into much more trouble than are suburban youth.

Some evidence suggests that although inner-city teens are exposed to more violence, suburban teens are also affected.

2) **Second, what are the psychosocial correlates of witnessing and victimization?** We will explore internalizing (specifically, depression and anxiety) and externalizing problems (including illicit drug use, self-reported delinquency, and involvement in drug dealing), as well as school performance in relation to exposure; and

3) **Third, do the psychosocial correlates of violence exposure vary as a function of gender and school?** It could be that inner-city adolescents and boys report more negative correlates because they are exposed to more violence. Conversely, suburban teens and girls may exhibit a greater negative impact due to the novelty, and thus greater salience, of exposure to community violence.

Participants in this research were 493 high-school sophomores, with a mean age of 16 years. Two-hundred twenty-six participants (123 girls, 102 boys) attended a public school in the inner-city, and the other 267 (144 girls, 121 boys) were from a public suburban school.

We collected self-report questionnaires, teacher ratings of classroom behavior, and grades from school records, all of which were part of a larger study on psychosocial and academic adjustment across the groups of adolescents. All measures had sound psychometric properties of reliability and validity.

We used a checklist which was adopted from Richters and Martinez to measure exposure to community violence, and from this we derived witnessing and victimization subscales. The events for both these subscales were the same—only the stem changed. For example, "I have *seen someone* threatened" for witnessing, and "I have *been* threatened" for victimization. Participants endorsed TRUE or FALSE for each of these items, reflecting whether they had

'ever' been exposed, and it was made very clear to them that witnessing did not include seeing things on television. Cronbach's alpha for this sample on the victimization subscale was .65, and for witnessing, .76.

We developed an index of drug involvement, based on three related items from the violence exposure checklist. These three items related to the sale, use, or distribution of illicit drugs (knowing someone, seeing someone asked to, and having themselves been asked to participate in these activities). Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .73.

Adolescents from the 2 schools had virtually identical gender and age distributions. However, as shown in Figure 1, the ethnic distribution was quite dissimilar across the two sites. Census Bureau statistics indicate that the mean income for the greater inner-city area was around $28,000, and for the suburban area was $63,000. Free and reduced lunch data from each school were also quite different: 86% of the students qualified in the inner-city school, versus 1% in the suburban school.

Before addressing our first question of how the schools compare on violence exposure, we explored three indices of risky behavior that might help to put their violence exposure in context. As shown in Table 1, the two groups reported remarkably similar levels of self-reported delinquency and of involvement in drug dealing (which includes seeing dealing going on and having been asked to deal). Between 70 and 80% of both groups of youths endorsed at least one of the three drug-dealing items.

Note that suburban adolescents reported significantly *more* illicit substance abuse than the urban children. This recalls findings by Graham (1996) of higher substance use among Caucasian as compared to African American adolescents, even after taking other variables such as SES into account. In addition to an ethnic explanation, findings from a study of Midwestern

junior-high school students (Lucas & Gilham, 1995) showed comparatively high use among suburban youth. Also note, however, the inner-city group was also using illicit substances: 30% of the urban group reported having used at least one illicit substance within the past year, as compared to nearly 40% of the suburban group. Data on the specific illicit drugs represented by these reports are shown in Table 2.

Witnessing. Overall, the inner-city teens reported having witnessed significantly more community violence than their suburban counterparts. This is as we might expect: the inner-city school students do live in the inner-city, which we know to be a more violent environment. Because we thought that the types of violence that each group of adolescents might have seen could well be different, we compared their responses at the item level. As shown in Table 3, there were significant differences on all but one item, which was having seen someone threatened.

The percentage of children that endorsed these items were fairly large in both schools. For example, for inner-city versus suburban groups, respectively: seen someone arrested, 85 versus 67%; seen someone beaten, 71 versus 44%; seen someone shot or shot at, 35 versus 12%; and seen someone threatened, 66 versus 62%. Witnessing violence, then, appears to be a community phenomenon: inner-city teens are probably exposed more as a consequence of living in a violent environment.

Victimization. The picture is quite different when we consider victimization. Suburban adolescents were just as likely to report victimization as were inner-city teens: as seen in Table 4, the only difference was on having been shot or shot at. This is a little surprising. Of course the frequencies are much lower than for victimization, but are still considerable; for example, again

comparing inner-city versus suburban: being arrested, 18 versus 16%; being beaten, 9 versus 6%; being threatened, both 30%; and being shot or shot at, 12 versus 5%.

How is it that suburban high-school sophomores are being victimized? We will return to this question once we have further presented our results. Even in light of literature that supports higher drug use among suburban youth, these rather surprising findings of similar levels of victimization in suburban and inner-city teens may be greeted with skepticism: how do we know that the suburban teens aren't exaggerating to hide the fact that their lives are all too mundane? We looked to three sources of evidence to explore this possibility, and they all support that the data are to be believed: first, our alphas are good for the exposure scales we derived; second, the overall pattern of univariate correlations across all of our measures support valid measurement; and third, correlations with a "Lie" scale from our Anxiety measure indicated that the respondents were answering truthfully.

To address our second question, on psychosocial correlates of exposure, we conducted multiple hierarchical regressions. The results, presented in Table 5, are for equations that controlled for the effects of gender, age, the child-parent ratio at home (as a proxy for supervision), and school (inner-city/suburban). Both witnessing and victimization were related to delinquency: youths who were exposed to community violence were involved in delinquent activities. This can be seen as evidence of a clustering of problem behaviors: children who are delinquent are putting themselves in harm's way, and here that is reflected in higher levels of both witnessing and victimization. As has been noted by others such as Mary Schwab-Stone and colleagues (1995), and Terrie Moffitt et al. (1996), children who are involved in antisocial activities are often drawn into violent situations. So, even though inner-city teenagers are likely

to be exposed just as a matter of course, living where they do, involvement in delinquent activities are placed in harm's way more often, and are more likely to see violence than others.

Victimization, but not witnessing, was also linked with depression and anxiety. Although we do not have the prospective data that would allow us to more accurately suppose cause and effect, we can speculate here that the impact of victimization is greater than that of witnessing, and is reflected in psychological distress. One of the most surprising things here is that, given the evidence of psychological distress, these students' grades did not seem to suffer.

Besides delinquency, witnessing was associated with higher illicit drug use and poor grades. Why is witnessing uncorrelated with distress? It could be that, because youths report seeing more than they report actually being victimized, witnesses are more 'hardened' to the impact of violence. Alternatively, witnesses may use much more denial of their psychological distress in order to deal with the effects of heightened exposure: because they are exposed more often as victims, they may feel the need to actively deny that it affects them in order to continue to function in a violent community. Victims, however, as a group, do not have these defenses, and they report negative affective states.

We interpreted significant interaction terms to explore the roles of gender and school in predicting effects of exposure. As seen in Figures 2a and 2b, gender-by-victimization interactions predicted both depression and anxiety, indicating that girls who reported having been victimized more reported higher levels of psychological distress than did victimized boys. Possibly, adolescent girls might tend to react more emotionally to a range of experiences. Or, echoing the explanation posited above, given that we do have data showing that boys are more likely to be victimized than are girls, boys could be relying on denial of their distress as a coping mechanism.

A significant school-by-victimization interaction revealed that suburban teens who reported high victimization were more likely to be using illicit drugs than their inner-city counterparts. This provides evidence that being victimized for suburban teens is linked not just to risky or delinquent behaviors, but specifically to drug use. When we discussed some of these results with the suburban school officials, they anticipated the relatively high levels of drug use, but they were surprised about the exposure findings. As these data suggest, a danger of drug use that needs to be acknowledged is the risk of being victimized by violence.

Conclusion

To return to the question of "How are suburban high-school sophomores being victimized?", these data on drug use help to offer a likely explanation. While it could be that victims are putting themselves in risky situations in school, it may be more likely that they are traveling to other communities where they are likely to be victimized in conjunction with their high-risk activities. The context for exposure, then, is their *behavior*.

These results have implications for how we think about exposure to community violence among suburban and inner-city adolescents. Perhaps most salient of our findings are those suggesting that suburban high-school sophomores are reporting levels of victimization similar to those reported by their urban age-mates.

We have evidence here for Ruby Takanishi's assertion that "policies must be directed toward *all* [adolescents], not just those who are defined as being in need, deficient, or problematic." (Takanishi, 1996, p. 260). These findings might also echo national trends cited by the Children's Defense Fund 1994 Yearbook: crime is on the rise in the suburbs. But more specifically, the data should alert suburban school faculty and staff to this clustering of risky behavior, particularly among high school students who are using illicit drugs. Teachers, parents,

and guidance counselors of suburban teens should be made aware of alarming trends in incidence of victimization.

While policy makers now tend to argue for a "one policy or program fits all" approach, these data lend support for a more differentiated approach to service provision. Urban teens in this sample are exposed to violence at least partly as a function of their environmental *context*, while suburban teens are exposed more as a function of their *behavior*.

The data also converge, however, on one plausible intervention strategy: extant data show that there is a high association between latchkey status and substance use among adolescence, and between unmonitored time and exposure to violence (Richards, Viegas, Sims, & Lassai, 1998). For both of the groups in our investigation, these data support the development of after-school activity programs: for urban youth, to keep them not only from getting into trouble, but to keep them out a potentially violent environment on the streets; and for suburban youth, to give them real alternatives to drug use, and to offer them a place to go so that they do not end up in situations that compromise both their safety and their future.

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Table 2. Percentage of urban and suburban participants who endorsed using specific Illicit substances.

DRUG	URBAN	SUBURBAN
Cocaine	0	3%
crack	0	2%
LSD	.5%	10%
Pot	27%	39%
Inhalants	3%	9%

Note: Data are for 'used at least once' in the last year.

Table 1. Problem behaviors among inner-city and suburban adolescents.

Scale	Inner-City	Suburban	
Self-reported Delinquency	18.79	18.88	ns
Drug Involvement	1.93	1.94	ns
Illicit Drug Use	0.84	1.71	***

Table 2. Percentage of urban and suburban teens who endorse using specific illicit substances

Drug	Urban	Suburban
Cocaine	0	3%
Crack	0	2%
LSD	.5%	. 10%
Marijuana	27%	39%
Inhalants	3%	9%

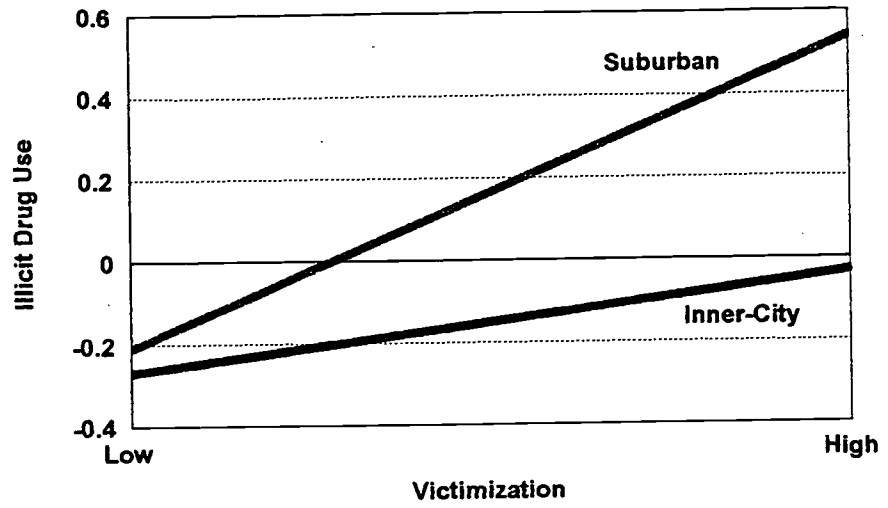
Table 3. WitnessingSubscale: group mean comparisons on individual items.

I have seen someone...	Inner-City	Suburban	
...chased	0.64	0.37	***
...arrested	0.85	0.67	***
...hit by nonfamily	0.89	0.76	***
...beaten/mugged	0.71	0.44	***
...carry a gun/knife	0.82	0.73	*
...knifed	0.18	0.08	***
...seriously hurt	0.46	0.34	**
...shot/shot at	0.35	0.12	***
...threatened	0.67	0.62	ns
Overall Witnessing	*5.57*	*4.13*	***

Table 4. Victimization Subscale: group mean comparisons on individual items.

I have been...	Inner-City	Suburban	
...chased	0.16	0.19	ns
...arrested	0.18	0.16	ns
...beaten/mugged	0.09	0.06	ns
...knifed	0.04	0.04	ns
...seriously hurt	0.07	0.04	ns
...threatened	0.3	0.3	ns
...shot/shot at	0.12	0.05	**
Overall Victimization	*0.97*	*0.85*	*ns*

Figure 3. Interaction of Community and Victimization Predicting Illicit Drug Use, indicating that suburban adolescents who report higher levels of victimization also report higher levels of illicit drug use, while their inner-city counterparts remain at relatively low levels of drug use.



$F(4, 463) = 7.23$, $p<.01$

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