

# Commentary

## Us V. Them: Remnants of Urban War Zones

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**Sunday September 14<sup>th</sup>, 2015:** *“A father of three was shot to death near his home in the Auburn-Gresham neighborhood on Chicago’s Southside. Ashton Simpson, 36, was gunned down Sunday night ... just nine houses away from his own.” (ABC, 2015, September 14)*

**Tuesday September 16<sup>th</sup>, 2015:** *“A 17-year old boy was shot dead as he answered a knock on the door of his family’s home in the Calumet Heights neighborhood on the South Side on Wednesday, according to relatives and police... Johnson [victim’s grandmother] said Armonni Nelson [victim] was an honor roll student in high school but dropped out because he was afraid to go to school and was taking online courses.” (Brisco & Williams, 2015)*

**Thursday September 18<sup>th</sup>, 2015:** *“A civilian employee of Chicago Police Department was shot and killed in the city’s Morgan Park neighborhood. John Buckner’s daughter said he was unloading groceries from his brand new Dodge Charger with his wife and 11-year-old grandson... Police say three teenagers rode up on bikes and opened fire before riding away.” (ABC, 2015, September 18)*

The aforementioned tragedies were of my loved ones in my hometown, Chicago, IL. Occurrences like these contribute to what is said to be a total of 500 shooting deaths in Chicago in 2016.

The definition of poverty in developed nations is “lack of income and productive resources sufficient to ensure sustainable livelihoods, hunger... lack of access to education and other basic services; increased morbidity and mortality from illness... unsafe environments; and social discrimination and exclusion” (Raphael, 2013, p. 5). Tenets of this definition are present in many distressed neighborhoods among the nation’s largest and often most prosperous cities. This level of deprivation can also be observed in war zones of developing nations within Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East. Comparing the environments American children live in to those of children living in developing nations is meant to highlight the utter destitution and the need to provide American children with remediated support and intervention.

The key tenet of the definition of poverty that I will focus on is “unsafe environments; and social discrimination and exclusion,” as it pertains to communities with pervasive violence. Both Black American children and children living in warzones of developing nations, experience a proportionate degree of violence (Purcell, 2006). It follows that the young men who committed the crimes mentioned above, and others like them, live a life of poverty, and have been subject to social discrimination and exclusion by their communities and the larger society. However, not all children and families in distressed and segregated neighborhoods respond in a similar manner. There are those who rise above, are resilient, ascribe to middle class values, and model these values in their behavior (Fortner, 2015). The focus of this article is on those who lose hope and exhibit maladaptive behaviors.

This article will discuss how society is fractioned into an “Us. v. Them”: the former being mainstream society, individuals who ascribe to middle class values, and exclude and discriminate against the latter, individuals who participate in criminal activity that threaten the middle class quality of life. Mainstream society responds to “their” behavior through policies and practices meant to control individual behavior, rather than providing rehabilitative support and addressing structural injustices that foster this behavior. Likening poor American kids’ exposure to community violence to that of former child soldiers and war affected children in war zones, I highlight that the violence is at a level that can no longer be ignored. I urge policymakers, school administrators, and teachers to separate the youth from their infraction, and attribute their behavior to systemic issues that wrought the present community violence. If this view were to be adopted in schools and communities, tragedies, like the ones presented above, may be abated.

### **Making the Case for Compared Experiences Among International Children Child Soldiers and American Youth**

The youth in developing nations, specifically in Africa, and the Black children living in impoverished war zones, share a number of detrimental experiences of equivalent magnitude. These experiences include the level of exposure to traumatic events, ability to cope and make meaning of their circumstances, extent of environmental poverty, and relationships with school. In the presence of these factors, it is important to note that not all children exhibit antisocial behavior or fall victim to their environments (Wessells, 2006).

#### **Poverty**

Poverty is an environmental factor that imparts a degree of vulnerability to violence exposure, and more opportunity to get involved in nefarious activities. Brett and Specht (2004) note that poverty is the most common feature of war zones. In a study of former Congolese child soldiers, 61% of the 300 children surveyed stated that their family had no income, and more than half had at least six or more siblings. American children, living in distressed, low-income neighborhoods, are also exposed to a significant level of poverty (Berman, Kurtines, Silverman, & Serafini, 1996).

On its own, poverty is not a direct cause of exposure to violent crime. Nonetheless, its presence within a community can exacerbate present conditions, making community inhabitants more susceptible to participate in criminal activity. Additionally, poverty influences access and quality of schooling, which in turn can determine whether or not a child persists in school.

### **Exposure to Violence & Traumatic Stressors**

Traumatic stressors are described as events or environmental factors that trigger a stress response (DSM-V, 2013). According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, a traumatic event is described as a threat to personal integrity, death, or violent or serious injury. Exposure includes singular or repeated encounters, having witnessed or directly experienced the event, or learning of a family member, or friend's experience (DSM-V, 2013). In these specific traumatic events lies the parallels in the experiences of American children in urban war zones and children living in developing nations war zones.

A study in the Democratic Republic of Congo discussed the findings of a trauma-focused cognitive-behavioral therapy intervention on 24 former child soldiers who had been diagnosed with PTSD (McMullen, O'Callaghan, Shannon, Black, & Eakin, 2013). These young men were, on average, thirteen years old. Respondents were asked to identify the type of trauma they had witnessed, fallen victim to, or committed. Forty-eight percent of treatment and control respondents witnessed death of a parent, 34% had been shot with a bullet; 62% had observed murder, and 48% experienced the death of a parent. Similarly, Wilson et al. (2013) conducted a study of Black American teens awaiting trial. Of his participants, 13% witnessed a family member being assaulted, 77% observed someone being beaten, shot, or killed, and 74% were told of the death or serious injury of a loved one. Per these statistics, and similar observations made by Bell & Jenkins (1991), violent American communities are turned into "veritable warzones" (p.171).

### **Relationship with School**

During the time that young people spend in school, their experiences with violence, and their subsequent reactions, shape how they identify with school. Exposure to violence contributed to 36% of school delinquent behavior for Black high school females and 27% for Black high school males (Jenkins & Bell, 1994). Comparably, child soldiers stationed in Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, and Colombia expressed that their involvement in violent acts was due to their exposure to traumatic events, and community gang presence. This in turn prompted their expulsion or disassociation from school (Brett & Spect, 2004). In both cases, their environmental response precipitated in delinquent or deviant behavior. When children exhibit this deviant behavior, they are often met with punitive authoritative force, rather than one that provides restorative justice (Seydlitz & Jenkins, 1998). This strict response was mandated by the Safe Schools Act of 1994 (Civic Impulse, 2016). Accordingly, schools were required to implement zero tolerance policies that ordered immediate suspension or expulsion for all gun and drug related infractions.

## Resilience and Making Sense

It is necessary to note that not all children, both in America and in those in developing nations, make sense of extreme poverty and violence in the same way. Children may respond to their adversity passively or actively engage with it to maintain control (Wessells, 2006). War affected children and child soldiers may avoid thinking of the witnessed violent or traumatic events to cope. Children involved in wars in Mozambique and Bosnia employed similar strategies (Wessells, 2006). For Black American children, Jones (2004) found that children who had witnessed a stranger or someone they knew being killed, persevered due to a strong sense of formal kinship support and spirituality.

## Violence Begets Isolation

In the section above, I compared the widespread traumatic experience of war-affected children in developing nations, to those of children living in impoverished communities across the United States. This level of violence is relatively isolated within these and similar communities, and is not prevalent in mainstream society. The conditions of these poor communities are a result of racialized and discriminatory practices and policies, as stated by Wacquant (2013), thus inciting exclusion and isolation. It follows that youth would find solace and community among gang members, and other individuals who have similarly been excluded from their communities.

In this section, I will discuss how society's response to violence and criminal activity present in distressed communities leads to isolation.

## Perception of Crime and Violence

Within communities that were racially segregated, middle and working class Black families lived next to poor Black families. The success and wealth accumulation of these three classes represents the difference in how each class made sense of segregation, institutional discrimination, and racism. Middle and working class Black families ascribed to middle class values, and the *underclass*, as Coombs (as cited by Fortner, 2015, p. 152) suggests, "... released from hoping about a future, lives by its wits and for today. Everything is to be ripped off. Every person is a potential mark." The difference in class, as well as behavior and values, to which the poor of underclass ascribe, contributes to an "Us v. Them" phenomenon.

From this point, society's view of crime is that of "zero sum" (Garland, 2001, p. 180): the rights of mainstream society are competing with those of the criminals. Rather than provide rehabilitation and welfare for the poor or offenders, mainstream society's response is one that is punitive and intended to control behavior. "Culture of control," (Fortner, 2015, p. 18), causes children to be further separated from mainstream society. They are cemented in the "Them." The culture of control emphasizes the inclination of people to participate in risky and violent behavior. Consequently, they are controlled with restraints (Garland, 2001). This precipitates into stigmatization, heavy policing, zero tolerance school discipline policies, and severe punishment for victimless crimes. These crimes may be big or small, where the quality of life is the victim, and must be preserved.

Stigmatizing offenders, rather than restoring the offenders' behavior, can be seen as counterproductive, and dissuade any hopes of reintegration, and development of the confidence to improve their behavior (Garland, 2001). Once having committed a crime, the rights of a member of society are no longer considered valid. As Garland (2001) suggests, "we already assume a social ... divide between 'us', ... middle-class victims, and 'them', the dangerous undeserving poor. By engaging in violence, ... they reveal themselves for what they are: the 'dangerous other' ... 'Our' security depends upon their control" (p. 182). Similar logic is applied to the policies that govern the penal system, and school discipline policies. Once an infraction or crime has been committed, the perpetrator must be isolated from mainstream society, and permanently labeled, even after facing a consequence (Garland, 2001).

### **Influence on Children**

Enter into a modern day school in a distressed neighborhood, and you will find zero tolerance discipline policies. Per the Safe Schools Act of 1994 (Civic Impulse, 2016), public schools were required to implement policies that would address drug use, gun violence, or possession of a gun or other weapon, with automatic suspension or expulsion. Schools were also encouraged to address other behaviors they deemed disrupted classroom learning with similar consequences. This flexibility was quite subjective, and often included infractions that could have been remediated with a less severe consequence. When young people misbehave in the classroom, schools respond using punitive consequences rather than restorative practices. Accordingly, these young people identify less with the school culture and more with their violent behavior, and the sources that motivate their behavior (i.e., their communities). In recent years, school districts around the nation have modified their discipline policies to limit the number of days students can spend away from school. However, these reforms are not always intended to be restorative and rehabilitative, to address the root causes of such behavior (Capatosto, 2014).

Similar to society's response to child sexual offenders, whose crime and identity can be publicly accessed and whose crime follows them (Garland, 2001), children are labeled, and these labels follow them throughout their school years. This has extreme implications for how and what the child identifies with, the vision they have for their futures, their level of personal efficacy, and the level of impact they have on society and their communities. There are also grave consequences for their academic performance and capabilities.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The life chances of the young people who occupy these marginalized war zones, both stateside and internationally, will continue to worsen with their living conditions. The disciplinary policies that govern our schools emphasize individual behavior, rather than structural problems that create the environment in which this behavior manifests. Policymakers should provide schools with resources to make available the human capital to address the social-emotional issues children have that guide their behavior. For teachers, when addressing minor infractions that, nonetheless disrupt instruction, they should ask, "What is happening in this child's life to cause them to respond in this way?" rather than control or arrest

the students' actions and freewill. This approach can initiate the remediation and support they need. Even further, this can bridge the gap between the Us v. Them.

The culture of control that Fortner (2015) and Garland (2001) discuss is the ground upon which most disciplinary practices are built, both inside and outside of schools. This logic simply places a bandage over the wound rather than addressing the source of concern. How we respond to children who exhibit maladaptive behavior is crucial to reversing adverse effects, both short and long term. I am urging that educators, school officials, policy makers, and legislatures look at the children who display deviant behavior as children and not as delinquents. When we view them as children, we can provide them with treatment to their symptoms and provide preventative, coping strategies to deal with their perilous life circumstances. We must seek to understand each child's truth and circumstance.

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