

The Link between Poverty, the Proliferation of Violence and the Development of Traumatic Stress Among Urban Youth in the United States to School Violence: a Trauma Informed, Social Justice Approach to School Violence

Portia D. Rawles, Adjunct Professor, Norfolk State University

Abstract

This paper presents two premises regarding school violence in urban America. First, that traumatic stress among urban youth in the United States is a key factor in the development and exacerbation of school violence in urban areas. Secondly, an efficacious approach to the resolution of school violence cannot be achieved without addressing this factor. This discourse explores these two premises within the context of two phenomena. The first phenomenon is the development of traumatic stress as a consequence of the lack of social justice in urban areas, which promotes a culture of poverty and subsequent increased exposure to violence and maltreatment among youth. The second is that such increased exposure to violence fosters the vulnerability of youth to engage in aggressive and violent behaviors in the school setting. Interrelated concepts of economic inequality, maltreatment and violence, traumatic stress theory, childhood development, attachment theory and risk and protective factors will be included in this discourse.

Introduction

Social Justice in the most simplistic terms is defined as the concept of justice on a social scale. According to Rawls (1971), within the social justice framework, injustice represents situations in which an individual's freedom or ability to be equal is violated or where fairness is lacking (Coates 2007). Thus, the idea of social justice has evolved to include the ideas of: economic egalitarianism, human rights, and equality of opportunity and outcome. Yet, despite the concept's rich legacy of development and expansion by scholars and politicians, for many in society it continues to be an illusion. This is particularly true in the inner city, urban areas of America.

Many of these urban communities, during the early history of the nation were thriving neighborhoods that encompass business, social and cultural opportunities. However, the phenomena of industrialization, the great migration of African Americans from rural Southern communities to Northeastern and Midwest cities, white flight, suburbanization, urban renewal and the more recent influx of Spanish-speaking immigrants to these communities due to kinship networks resulted in a synergistic impact of transforming these areas into neighborhoods that mainly contain African Americans and Hispanics (Lamb 2005; Roediger 2005; Reynolds et. al. 2001; Wilson 1996; Massey and Denton 1993). These urban areas in America have evolved into communities where the least valued and often most exploited citizens of America dwell and where the denial of social justice; in particular, economic inequality and inequality of opportunity is the norm. Such circumstances are a reflection of the social system of status, which continues to exist and is legitimized by the formation of system justifying beliefs (Rawles 2006).

The consequence, of this lack of social justice, in urban areas is the propagation of a climate of poverty that engenders an environment of powerlessness, disinvestment and deprivation. Economically disadvantaged youth living in urban areas experience a disproportionate number of inequities, and suboptimal physical, environmental, familial and social conditions in comparison to children with sufficient financial resources (Evans and English 2002). One of the greatest travesties of poverty, for inner city youth is the increased exposure to violence, as a result of these negative consequences of poverty on the various ecological levels of urban communities.

There is a substantial body of literature, which clearly demonstrates that children and adolescents living in poor urban areas experience greater incidences of violence, whether as witnesses or victims. (Paxton 2004; Okundaye 2004; Self-Brown 2004; Buka et. al. 2001; Mazza and Reynolds 1999; Duncan 1996; Pastore, Fisher and Friedman 1996). Drug trafficking, vacant and dilapidated structures, unemployment, lack of commitment to learning by youth, substandard housing, chaotic, crowded and noisy households, experiences which routinely occur in urban areas have all been linked to the increased occurrence of shootings, murders, sexual assaults, youth violence, intimate partner violence, school violence and child maltreatment (Carpenter and Nevin 2010; Redwood et. al. 2010; Okundaye 2004; Paxton 2004; Evans and English 2002 Pastore, Fisher and Friedman 1996; Duncan 1996).

According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2010), school violence is a subset of youth violence. School violence involves “harmful behaviors that may start early and continue into young adulthood that occurs on school grounds or on the way to school. It includes bullying, slapping, punching, weapon use and rape.” School violence in American urban areas has over time and under adverse SES conditions, become a fixed phenomenon and continues to be a serious concern for municipal and school officials as well as for community leaders (National Center for Children Exposed to Violence 2006). Despite an overall decline in victimization rates of students ages 12–18, from 1992–2005 nationally; illegal drugs, bullying behavior, weapons and the presence of gangs at school continue to remain a problem (National Center for Education Statistics and U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics 2007). In a later report published in 2009, highlighting school crime and safety statistics from 2007–2008, ten percent of teachers in inner city schools were threatened with injury more often than teachers in town or rural schools. In 2007, ethnic minorities report being more afraid at school or on their way to school (University of Virginia 2007). This finding is not surprising given that ethnic minorities are the majority population of urban areas and school violence occurs more often in urban schools.

It is theorized that urban youth’s excessive exposure to violence, the resulting traumatic stress and its emotional, cognitive, behavioral and social aftermath is a crucial mediating psychological process that is responsible for the ongoing, significant quantity of school violence in urban areas. This paper explores the role of traumatic stress in school violence and implications for educational and curriculum based preventative measures. This exploration will

be framed within the context of complex trauma and its implications for psychosocial development among urban youth and their vulnerability to aggression.

Poverty and Violence

The absence of social justice in urban areas large and small, subjugates children to a climate of poverty denying them access to opportunity, and equal opportunity to develop the talent, skills and abilities, which society values and rewards. This climate of poverty is often reflected generationally, among the members of poor urban communities in which multiple generations might be living under a single roof; with grandparents, parents and children residing simultaneously in these communities.

The consequential negative effects of poverty, on the lives of urban children include: family turmoil, unstable, overcrowded, noisy and chaotic households, increased exposure to toxins, ambient pollutants, increased incidence of depression, less social support, inferior schools, single family, female-led households, increased hopelessness, parental mental illness, inferior day care and municipal services, increased infusion of illegal substances from external communities, drug trafficking and gangs, less access to books and computers, significant presence of vacant and dilapidated structures, drug and alcohol abuse by caregivers, unsafe neighborhoods, less parental involvement in school activities and substandard housing. (Christopher 2008; Evans and Kim 2007; Evans 2004). The synergistic influence of these various conditions are the increased prevalence of domestic violence, intimate partner violence, child physical and sexual abuse or neglect and community violence in the form of rape, muggings, drive by shootings and homicides. Researchers have found that 93.6% of all inner-city youth have been exposed to some type of violence during their lifetime and 80% of children living in the inner city have witnessed ongoing community violence such as seeing a dead body, observing drug deals and hearing gunfire (Sheidow et. al. 2001; Overstreet et. al. 1999; Berton and Stabb 1996). A study of 6th through 12th graders in the inner city found that 35% worried that they would not reach old age, rather they would fall victim to violence (e.g., homicide) (Jenkins, Wang and Turner 2009; Garbarino 2001). This is not surprising, for the many risk factors that lead to intimate partner violence, child sexual or physical abuse and community violence and the consequences of poverty observed in urban areas are identical (Black, Heyman and Smith Slep 2001a; Black, Heyman and Smith Slep 2001b; Black, Smith Slep and Heyman 2001; Heyman and Smith Slep 2001; Black, Heyman and Smith Slep 2001c; Schumacher, Smith Slep and Heyman 2001).

Violence and Traumatic Stress

We now recognize that increased often multifaceted, chronic, and complex exposure to various forms of violence among urban youth is associated with the development of traumatic stress, PTSD and sub-threshold traumatic stress symptomatology (Margolin & Vickerman 2007; Lynch 2003; Margolin and Gordis 2000; Rossman, Hughes and Rosenberg 2000). These multiple and chronic exposures to violence are considered complex traumas (Cook et. al. 2005).

According to van der Kolk (2005, 402), “complex trauma is the experience of multiple, chronic and prolonged, developmentally adverse traumatic events most often of an interpersonal nature and early life onset;” such as sexual abuse, physical abuse, neglect, community violence, and domestic violence. Urban youth are much more likely to encounter some form of violence, oftentimes well before they have developed the psychological and physical means to cope with it (Redwood et. al. 2010; Evans and English 2002). Consequently, these violent events denote multiple physical and psychosocial stressors that interfere with the psychosocial and neurobiological development of children and adolescents in the community and ultimately, predisposes them to the development of psychological deficits, dysfunction and disorders through the trajectory of complex traumatic stress (Evans and Kim 2007; van der Kolk 2006; Kinniburgh, Blaustein and Spinazzola 2005; Beers and De Bellis 2002). Often at the core of the dysfunction produced by complex trauma is insecure attachment.

Attachment is the means by which humans learn to regulate internal states. The development of secure attachment is mediated by a child’s ability to anticipate their caregiver’s response to them. Increasingly over the past three to four decades in the US, there has been a significant increase in the numbers of homes in economically depressed communities in which, the primary caregiver is a single mother with a history of abuse or trauma and dysfunction in the family of origin. Within such family systems, the primary caregivers are often unable to be emotionally and psychologically present. When complex trauma occurs in this setting it thrusts a child whose brain and neurological systems are still developing into a state of survival, in which they are prevented from investing their energy into developing various competencies within the context of secure attachment (Block et. al. 2005; van der Kolk 2005; Kerr, Black and Krishnakumar 2000). The outcome will be severe psychological and physiological dysregulation and disruption due to insecure attachment via complex trauma and the resulting complex traumatic stress. It is this outcome of dysregulation and disruption in multiple domains, in conjunction with exposure to complex traumas of a violent nature that makes the adolescent or child more susceptible to aggression and violence (Moretti et. a. 2006; Pelcovitz, Kaplana and Derosa 2000; Rossman 2000; Schwartz and Proctor 2000).

Traumatic Stress and Urban School Violence

The research indicates that complex trauma among youth disrupts biological processes, self-concept, information processing, affect regulation and behavioral regulation. Consequently, traumatized urban youth with excessive exposure to violence are thrust into a vicious cycle in which these various disruptions and dysregulations interact and counteract each other, making them more vulnerable to engage in maladaptive coping strategies when confronted with the challenge of managing the demands of their urban school environment. This challenge is exacerbated by the reality that a large percentage of their schoolmates are struggling, as well with the aftermath of trauma because they tend to reside in the same neighborhood. Thus, within urban school settings you have a microcosm that contains a large number of traumatized youth whose disrupted information processing places them at a vantage point of fear, insecurity, poor

judgment and decision-making, their disrupted self-concept makes them vulnerable to hopelessness and complacency, their emotional and behavioral dysregulation propels them towards explosiveness, aggression, impulsiveness and oppositionalism (Nebbitt, Lombe and Williams 2008; Zyromski 2007). The culmination of this phenomenon, in urban school settings is disrupted interpersonal relationships that are expressed as defiance, disrespect, aggression and violence towards school officials and schoolmates (Shahinfar, Fox and Leavett 2000).

According to a Lleras (2008), students are more likely to experience hostile school climates in large, high poverty schools. Also, low socioeconomic status (SES) schools in comparison to high socioeconomic status (SES) schools report greater disciplinary referrals for violence and problematic classroom behaviors at the elementary, middle and high school levels. This situation is compounded by the social environment of poor, urban neighborhoods, which reinforces a devaluing of human dignity and welfare. According to Gellman and Waack 2006, 561) “school violence has been defined as a public health and safety condition that often results from one’s individual, social, economic, political and institutional disregard for basic human needs.”

Additionally, school leaders report significant psychological distress associated with the school violence they witness such as: helplessness, hopelessness, self-doubt, sense of failure, fear and negative view of the educational profession and students (McAdams & Foster 2008). This finding provides support for the supposition that many school leaders and teachers as well, may be experiencing at some level, depressive and/or traumatic stress symptomatology. Such psychological distress potentially creates a situation in which school officials’ efficacy in implementing prevention and intervention school violence programs and strategies are hindered by the own mental health issues.

Trauma-Informed Intervention

The American Psychological Association (APA) and the Center for Disease Control and Prevention suggested best practices for the prevention of youth violence entail a social-cognitive theoretical approach. This report identifies the necessary components for school-based youth violence prevention programs. These components include: interactive participation to teach students the application of skills and values in daily life situations; fostering of relationships between students, staff and families; reward for positive behaviors and total school involvement (Thornton et. al. 2002; Twemlow 2001; DuRant, Treiber and Getts 1996).

A meta-analysis of various school violence intervention programs found that a multi-systemic level of intervention and early intervention are warranted due to the multiple risk factors that youth at risk for violent behavior experience (Scheckner 2002). Thus, school violence prevention, intervention programs in urban, high risk school and neighborhoods environments should be designed to intervene developmentally and ecologically to mitigate various risk factors while promoting protective factors on the family, community, individual and school levels. Such programs should be implemented on the pre-kindergarten, elementary, middle and high school levels (Tolan, Gorman-Smith and Henry 2004). The significant

mediating nature of complex trauma and traumatic stress in the proliferation of urban school violence demands prevention and intervention programs that utilize socio-cognitive, systemic approaches that are trauma informed. A trauma informed approach to urban school violence prevention and intervention is one that considers the role of trauma in the development of school aggression and how it influences every aspect of the youth and the systems that they co-exist within. It is postulated that this developmental nuance of urban school violence will hinder the efficacy of school violence intervention and prevention programs that are not trauma-informed in nature. A meta-analysis of 16 studies investigating school bullying interventions found marginal efficacy among the various programs and in some cases adverse effects (Merrell et. al. 2008). None of the programs investigated by the 16 studies were trauma informed.

In meeting this criterion of trauma-informed, the formulation of interventions and prevention programs within the context of the Attachment, Self-Regulation and Competency (ARC) model is proposed. The ARC model provides a component-based framework for intervention that acknowledges the neuroscience aspects of traumatic stress on youth. “The framework is grounded in theory and empirical knowledge about the effects of trauma; recognizing the core effects of trauma exposure on attachment, self-regulation, and developmental competencies” (Kinniburgh, Blaustein and Spinazzola 2005, 425). Within the scope of the ARC model and a social-cognitive and systemic framework, it is proposed that school violence prevention programs assume an educational and therapeutic methodology (Nickerson and Spears 2007), which entails psycho-educational, experiential and mental health interventions at the student, teachers/school administrators, familial and community levels. The overall goals of the program should be towards developing a school environment that is safe and conducive to learning; the display of pro-social behaviors by students, teachers, school administrators, staff and security staff; and academic emphasis among students, teachers, school administrators, staff and security staff. To achieve these goals, the objectives of the programs should be: Students’ and school officials’ self-regulation, safety, mastery, relational engagement and integration of traumatic experiences and positive emotional enhancement; increase social support for students; parental involvement and increase family cohesion and communication.

Conclusion

A host of social, political, cultural, and economic factors help to contribute to a generational culture of poverty within many major urban communities in the USA whose devastation manifests itself in excessive community, family, and school violence that poor, urban youth must endure. This increased and chronic exposure to community, family and school violence represents complex trauma. This complex trauma results in the increased manifestation of traumatic stress and PTSD among urban youth. In recent years, school violence has declined. Yet, school violence continues to be a major concern in poor, urban areas. The foremost solution to this problem involves an effort to ensure social justice for this population. The role of traumatic stress, in the perpetuation of urban school violence must be considered in this solution, and address by school and city officials, if they hope to effectively resolve this issue. For many,

this will require a significant and possibly uncomfortable paradigm shift. Yet, to ignore this crucial element will be detrimental to the future stability and prosperity of our nation, with the long term consequences being the unfortunate overrepresentation of impoverished and traumatized urban youth that will become; impoverished, traumatized, mentally ill, uneducated and possibly violent adults. Our school systems, neighborhoods, communities, and country will suffer the negative consequences of our continued inattention to this phenomenon and outcome, primarily because persons living in these conditions were unable to escape the unfortunate circumstances of their environment.

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