

**The Psychological Effect of Exposure to
Gang Violence on Youth:
A Pilot Study**

by

Sarah Kelly, RN, Ph.D.; Debra Anderson, RN, Ph.D.;
and Ann Peden, RN, DSN

Abstract

This study examined the psychological consequences to adolescents' exposure to gang violence in their neighborhood. This descriptive pilot study was conducted through personal interviews of youths from a community center. Five youth participated in interviews. Most were males, living in single parent homes. Three different categories emerged (emotional implications, personal experiences, and activities and socialization). These youth had different experiences with gang violence that affected their emotions. Their personal experiences influenced their socialization with others. Understanding the influence gang violence has on youth' development necessitates further research.

Introduction

Gang violence is a serious problem currently plaguing communities throughout the United States (US) (Allender, 2001; Grossman & McNair, 2003; Pizarro & McGloin, 2006). From 1998 to 2003, it is estimated that 373,000 violent victimizations were committed by gang members (Department of Justice: Office of Justice Programs [OJP], 2005). In 2004, the National Youth Gang Survey (NYGS) found that 29% of cities with a population of more than 2,500 reported issues with gang violence. Further, more than 80% of large cities (population more than 50,000) reported problems with gangs. It is estimated that there are currently 760,000 active gang members representing 24,000 gangs in cities throughout the US. In addition, many law enforcement officers (47%) believe that gang violence is on the rise (OJP, 2006). The presence

of gang violence and the effect it has on the community highlights the growing need to address this public health issue.

Several studies have included gang violence as a form of community violence (DuRant et al., 2000; Farver, Xu, Eppe, Fernandez, & Schwartz, 2005). Researchers have found that exposure to community violence can influence adolescents' psychosocial development (Farver et al.; Finkelhor, Ormrod, Turner, & Hamby, 2005; Goguen, 2005; Veenema & Schroeder-Bruce, 2002). However, the lack of focused research on youth' exposure to gang violence in the community and the effect it has on their mental health development is a major concern. Therefore, the purpose of this pilot study was to examine the psychological consequences to youth of exposure to gang violence in their community.

Gang Violence

In order to understand the influence gang violence has on youth, it is essential to understand and define gang violence. There has been an inability to develop a concrete definition of gang violence (Nader, May, Decker, Minor, & Wells, 2006; Peterson, Taylor, & Esbensen, 2004). However, Huston, Anglin, and Pratt (1994) provide a comprehensive definition of gang violence stating that it is "any of a number of crimes in which either the victim or the suspect is an active gang member and the crime occurs as a result of that membership" (p. 324).

Joining gangs is an attractive alternative for youth who lack parental supervision and want to feel connected to others (Allender, 2001; Swetnam & Pope, 2001). Wanting to belong to a group can lead many to engage in illegal behaviors. Societal problems (poverty and unemployment) encountered by gang members can also motivate them to engage in criminal behavior (Kyriacou, Hutson, Anglin, Peek-Asa, Kraus, 1999)

In addition to enhancing their own economic status through criminal activity, gang members look to enhance or protect their status in the gang through violence (Grossman & McNair, 2003, Horowitz, 1987; Rosenfeld, Bray, & Egley, 1999). They engage in violence to promote their reputation (Grossman & McNair) and protect their "turf" (Winton, 2004). Further, gang members feel respected by others for the illegal behaviors they have participated in to promote their gang and their social standing in the gang (Grossman & McNair). The need to promote their economic and social status has influenced gang members' participation in violence with little concern for the effect it has on those living in the community.

Youth' Exposure to Community Violence

The violence inflicted by gang members has a ripple affect throughout the community (Mycek, 1997). People of varying backgrounds are affected physically, mentally, and/or financially (Farver et al., 2005; Mycek; Ordog, Shoemaker, Wasserberger et al., 1995). Youth are one group of victims that are at a distinct disadvantage when

dealing with gangs and violence.

Youth exposed to violence in the community can develop externalizing behaviors (Barkin, Kreiter, & DuRant, 2001; DuRant et al., 2000). Barkin, Kreiter and DuRant examined the influence that past exposure to community violence had on 702 adolescents' intent to engage in violence. The researchers found that past exposure to violence had a positive influence on adolescents' desire to join a gang. Boys who were exposed to violence had a stronger intent to use violence and join a gang when compared to girls, although the difference was not statistically significant.

Similar results were found when DuRant et al. (2000) examined 722 adolescents' exposure to community violence. Of these adolescents, more than 700 reported exposure and those exposed to violence had a stronger intent to engage in violence. Many (n = 291) feared that they would not live past their 25th birthday because of the violence in the community. Furthermore, adolescents' intent to engage in violence was directly related to their interest in joining a gang. This and other studies cited above suggest that exposure to violence can influence adolescents' aggressive behavior and their participation in illegal activities.

In addition to externalizing behaviors, adolescents exposed to community violence can develop internalizing symptoms (Farver, Natera, & Frosch, 1999; Hill & Jones, 1997; Mazza & Reynolds, 1999). Farver, Natera, and Frosch (1999) explored the experiences that 64 youth and their mothers had with community violence. Mothers identified that more than 95% of the youth were exposed to gun shootings in their community. Further, they also acknowledged that exposure to violence led to the development of different distress symptoms among these youth. Problems with nightmares, bad thoughts, being easily scared or frightened, feeling safe, and hyper-vigilance were common among those youth who had witnessed violence in the community. These problems also affected their ability to socialize with their peers.

Mazza and Reynolds (1999) explored the relationship between adolescents' (N = 94) exposure to community violence and the development of mental health disorders. Adolescents' exposure to violence was related to the development of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). PTSD was associated with depression and suicidal thoughts. Although, there was no direct relationship between exposure to violence and depression or suicidal ideations, the different mental health problems associated with community violence can influence adolescents' development. Although exploring the effects of community violence on youth is important, it is necessary to differentiate it from gang violence. Community violence encompasses different forms of illegal behavior; whereas, gang violence is a specific type of community violence. Differentiating between community violence and gang violence is necessary in order to understand the influence gang violence has on youth's mental health and the methods used to treat adolescents' exposure to gang violence.

Methods

Design and Sample

A qualitative descriptive study was used to examine the psychological consequences to youth exposed to gang violence in their community. Potential subjects were recruited from one community center in Louisville, Kentucky. According to Robert Walker (n.d.) Kentucky is home to many ethnic gangs. Louisville is also the largest populated city in Kentucky (Department of Commerce: U.S. Census Bureau [US Census], 2005) with a known history of gang violence (A. Williams, personal communication, November 7, 2006).

Eight at-risk youth from a community center were invited to participate in this study. The inclusion criteria for subjects were: 1) exposure to gang violence within the past two years and 2) ages 8 - 18. Exclusion criteria included: 1) inability to speak English, 2) exposure to other types of violence (child abuse and domestic violence), 3) belonging to a gang, 4) being a ward of the state, and 5) any medical condition that inhibited participation.

Measure

In addition to obtaining demographic data, a semi-structured interview guide was used for data collection (see Appendix A). The interview guide for this study included questions focused on youth' experiences in the community and with gang violence. The youth were asked 5 open-ended questions: 1) what type of activities do you participate in, 2) tell me about your experiences in your neighborhood, 3) tell me about your experiences with gangs, 4) talk about how those experiences have affected your school and family life, and 5) how have these experiences with gangs affected your participation in neighborhood activities?

Procedure

Approval to conduct this study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Kentucky. Permission was obtained from Louisville's Metro Parks Department to collect data at the community center. Community center employees worked with the researcher to identify youth who had been exposed to gang violence. The employees instructed the potential subjects to speak with the researcher if they were interested in participating in the study. For those youth who expressed interest in the study, arrangements were made to obtain parental consent.

In addition to obtaining parental consent, parental informational sessions were held at the community center. Informational flyers were posted throughout the community center and given to the potential subjects to take home. The informational sessions were used to give parents and legal guardians the opportunity to ask questions related to the proposed study.

After parental consent and child assent were obtained, personal interviews were scheduled with each subject. The interviews were

conducted at the community center in a private room where distractions were minimized. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and was audio-taped. At the completion of the interviews, the data were transcribed verbatim. Data trustworthiness was established through member checking and peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, n.d.).

Data Analysis

The sample characteristics were analyzed through descriptive statistics. In addition, content analysis was used to analyze the transcribed data. Through the use of content analysis the responses were coded. Several codes emerged from the transcribed data. Using a data display table, similar codes were grouped together. From the groupings different categories emerged. The data were managed through the ATLAS ti software program (Berlin, Germany).

Findings

Characteristics of Sample

Seven youth (87%) participated in the personal interviews. However, two youth expressed their wish not to have their information included in the finding. Therefore, the final sample consisted of five (N = 5) African American youth living in single-parent homes. Their average age was 11 years (SD = 2.2). Most adolescents were male and in the fifth grade (see Table 1). Each youth described himself/herself as a good student.

These youth live in single-parent homes. Each had a different reason for living with only one parent/legal guardian. For example, one's father was in prison, while another's father was killed in 2003. Living with one parent/legal guardian can be a challenge. Four of the five youth (80%) expressed the belief that their parent/legal guardian was strict. However strict they believed their parent/legal guardians to be, all of the subjects stated that they had a good relationship with them.

Three different categories emerged from the findings: 1) emotional reactions, 2) personal experiences, and 3) activities and socialization. Each category was composed of several codes. The codes [e.g. feelings after exposure to gang violence and feeling safe in the community] were used for the first category, emotional reactions. The second category, personal experiences also had several codes [e.g. witnessing violence towards others, and hearing gang members discuss illegal behaviors]. The codes for the third category, activities and socialization included playing outside and participation in community and extracurricular activities.

Emotional Reactions

These youth have experienced situations that have affected their emotional status. Further, they have strong feelings about how violence in the community has affected their safety and security. One boy stated that he "*kind of*" feels safe in his neighborhood. He also said at "*nighttime I'm scared...my mom made me take out the trash and I'm*

scared to go out there.” His feelings about the community are shared by others. One suggested that she did not feel safe in her old neighborhood. She indicated that her *“mom doesn’t want to live up here like no more,”* because of the violence. When asked about feeling safe in the community another youth indicated *“no,”* he did not. Yet another stated that *“sometimes”* he feels safe in the neighborhood. One youth expressed concerns for her safety in the neighborhood. She stated that *“no”* I don’t feel safe in the neighborhood.

In addition to their feelings about the community, youth exposure to gang violence affected their emotions. Different emotions were expressed by these youth. One indicated that if the violence was directed towards a friend, she would be angry or mad. Further she worried about gang violence stating:

“yeah probably, like probably, like say if it’s somebody, it’s a kid like that I know that’s best, that somebody, if my like my best friend is one of their best friends, it’s my friend and that gang goes to that person and I find out and then I’m going to be mad because it’s one of my friends, friends and she’s my friend so actually, yes, it’d make me worried about it... it’s just kind of strange to know that like you’re like at the young age and thinking about doing some stuff to people that you barely don’t even know about...”

She further indicated that *“I watch myself every time I walk to school because I walk to school by myself, I just watch, I watch my back every time... I’m anxious and I really want, I want to get in the, in the, school...”* because she is unsure about what is going to happen. Another student stated that he was *“worried.”* The fear of getting shot was a concern for one student. She stated that *“I was scared and I thought I was going to get shot”* after witnessing the violence.

Feeling worried and scared are not the only emotions that youth can experience after witnessing gang violence. Two youth expressed feelings of sadness after the exposure to violence. One boy stated that he felt *“sad”* for the little boy who had been victimized by the gang. Another boy also indicated that he felt *“sad”* for the boy that was beat-up. However, he stated that he was not concerned or worried about himself, *“...because one of them, one of them, like two or three of them is my cousins,”* referring to the gang members that were involved in the violence to which he was exposed. These youth were exposed to different forms of gang violence that influenced their emotional reactions.

Personal Experiences

All of these youth had a wide range of experiences with gangs and gang violence. One stated:

“me and my friend... and, we was walking down in, on Muhammad Ali and this group called, this gang called ..., they had jumped this, this one boy and me and... seed it but we

didn't do nothing, we didn't say nothing"

Yet another student described an experience with gangs that he encountered:

"...this gang named...and then they like jumped this old man and then the old man's son, he was he was so mad and stuff, like just mad. He's like he's going to get them back and stuff. So like I'll be hearing, I'll be hearing like, they're staying like in the gang misfortune's like going to come to them and stuff since they keep on hurting all these people. Like at the skate park they're just dead, people have died...I'll be seeing it."

Youth witness gang violence in different areas. One was exposed to gang violence in the alley behind her house. She stated: *"in the neighborhood that I live in now, somebody got shot by in the alley..."* Further, she said that in the neighborhood that she used to live in *"we had a whole lot of violence there. I've seen fights, like one person against two people."*

Exposure to gang violence can occur through various situations. One said: *"I saw some, some boy get tied up with these two little boys and it was in the morning."* In addition to seeing gang violence, hearing gang members discuss what they have done is an experience reported by one youth. She stated: *"oh well, they just talking about how, like what they're going to do..."* to people. Each youth had different experiences with gangs and gang violence and these influenced their socialization with others.

Activities and Socialization

Many youth participated in activities at school and at the community center. One adolescent stated that he participates in *"track and basketball"*. Activities such as *"gymnastics and cheerleading"* and *"kickball"* are common athletic events that these youth enjoy. Although they participate in different activities, their socialization within the community can be influenced by their exposure to gang violence.

As one noted:

"it affected how I go outside now. The only, the only time I will go outside is if I have to go down to my auntie's house to drop something off; that's the only time I go outside."

Another stated *"I stay inside."* She reported that she is only allowed outside when her mom or another adult is present.

A majority of the youth' time is spent at the community center – after school, on weekends and holidays, and during the summer. Many suggested that their experience with gang violence does not influence their socialization with others in the community because of their involvement with the community center. One stated *"the gangs, it don't, it, it doesn't, it doesn't interfere with me. I came here (referring to the community center)..."* Further, she participates in several activities organized by the community center. The experiences youth had with gang violence had differing effects on their activities and socialization with others in the community; however, most youth identified the community

center as a place where they could participate in activities and socialize with others and feel safe.

Discussion

In this pilot study, five open-ended questions were used to examine youth' exposure to gang violence and the influence it has on their development. There were similarities among the youth who participated in the study. However, each had different emotional reactions to and personal experiences with gang violence that influenced their activities and socialization with others.

Emotional Reactions

Youth can experience a range of emotions in response to violent situations. Feeling safe in the community is a concern for the youth interviewed in this study. Four youth indicated that they had some reservations about their safety in the community. From "kind of feeling safe" to "not feeling safe," these youth expressed their concerns about their community. These feelings are not uncommon among other youth who were exposed to community violence (DuRant et al., 2000; Erwin, 2002).

Youth experiences with witnessing violence have led to concerns about their safety in the community. DuRant et al. (2000) found that many adolescents who are exposed to community violence were concerned for their safety; acknowledging the belief that they would not live past their 25th birthday. Similar results were found in a study of 225 adolescents exposed to violence. Exposure to violence was found to have a negative impact on adolescents' belief that they would live past their 25th birthday (DuRant, Getts, Cadenhead, Emans, and Woods, 1995). Erwin (2002) found that adolescents' exposure to violence led to their feeling afraid and unsafe in the community. Further, countries other than the U.S. have had issues with community violence and adolescents fearing for their safety. Usta and Farver (2005) conducted a study examining community violence in Lebanon, Beirut and found that many adolescents expressed concerns for their safety while playing outside. However, it should be noted that Beirut has a history of being a "war torn" area.

Contrary these findings, Howard, Kaljee, and Jackson (2002) examined 37 adolescent perceptions of community violence and found that when asked "do you feel safe in your neighborhood (p. 61)" a majority of adolescents felt safe in the community. However, those who felt safe were more likely to carry a weapon. In another study, researchers found that many (n = 38; 61%) adolescents living in Colorado Springs, who were exposed to gangs were never or rarely concerned for their safety (Stoll, Dukes, & Smith, 1997). Youth feelings about safety and security in the community are legitimate issues that warrant further research.

Exposure to gang violence had emotional implications for these youth. The youth interviewed in this study expressed different emotional reactions to their exposure of gang violence. Most of them discussed how

they developed internalizing symptoms. They expressed feelings of sadness for the victim, worry, nervousness, being scared, and anger towards others. These findings support previous research that found adolescents' exposure to violence influenced the development of internalizing symptoms (Martinez & Richters, 1993; Rosenthal, 2000).

Martinez and Richters (1993) found that young adolescents who were exposed to community violence displayed more symptoms of anxiety and depression than did older adolescents. Older adolescents were more likely to display symptoms of anxiety and depression when they knew the victims. Witnessing community violence can also be predictive of anger, anxiety, and dissociation among adolescents (Rosenthal, 2000). Although these studies have shown a predictive relationship between exposure to community violence and internalizing symptoms, Grant et al. (2005) found a weak connection between adolescents' exposure to community violence and the development of internalizing symptoms.

Surprisingly, a few of those interviewed for this study lacked concern for their safety after witnessing the violence. For one this can be attributed to the relationship he had with one of the gang members involved in the incident. He may have felt protected from harm because he was related to one of the gang members. However, the lack of concern for ones' safety may also suggest that youth have become desensitized to the gang violence in their community. This supports Osofsky (2004) suggestion that chronic exposure to community violence leads to children's desensitization. Lacking any emotional reaction to the violence could influence development and cause further harm to mental health. The youth in this study experienced different situations that could influence their emotional development.

Personal Experiences

Gang violence occurs in communities throughout the US. Kyriacou, Hutson, Anglin et al. (1999) found that gang members engage in different forms of violence (homicides, attempted murders, and assaults) in the community. Youth in this study were exposed to different forms of gang violence in the community. Situations ranging from hearing gang members discuss their illegal behaviors to witnessing shootings are personal experiences that these adolescents were exposed to in their community. The violence witnessed by these youth is reflective of the different forms of gang violence reported by Kyriacou, Hutson, Anglin et al.

In addition, these experiences that the youth were exposed to add support to previous studies focused on adolescents' exposure to community violence (Foster, Kupermine, & Price, 2004; Kliwer, Lepore, Oskin, & Johnson, 1998; Zavaschi, Benetti, Polanczyk, Soles, & Sanchothene, 2002). The researchers in each of these studies found that over 50% of those adolescents surveyed were exposed to gang violence, muggings/physical assaults, and hearing gun fire. Although these studies are not specific for gang violence, they describe different forms of

community violence that adolescents are exposed to.

Gang violence is just one of many different forms of violence that youth encounter in the community. However, gang violence is a very specific form of violence that differs from other types of violence and treatment for youth exposed to gang violence may be different from those exposed to random acts of community violence. Therefore, distinguishing youth experiences with gang violence from community violence needs to be further investigated.

Activities and Socialization

There were differing opinions as to the influence that gang violence had on the participation in activities and socializing the youth in this study had with others. Several youth in this study expressed that gang violence did not influence their activities, where as, some believed that it did. A few suggested that their exposure to gang violence influenced their decision to play outside. They felt safer inside their home. Staying inside is a common method used by youth to avoid the violence in the community. However, avoiding contact with the community can impede their development (Howard, Kaljee, & Jackson, 2002) and socialization. In addition to staying inside, having adult supervision while playing outside was necessary for at least one youth.

Participating in school sponsored athletic events and extracurricular activities were common for these youth. Several youth suggested that their exposure to gang violence did not influence their participation in these various activities. However, many of these activities occurred within the confines of the school or community center and were supervised by adults.

Although some youth believe that their participation in these activities was not influenced by gang violence, they may be unaware of the affect that different methods (adult supervision and activities sponsored by the school and community center) used to minimize their exposure to violence had on their participation. The presence of adults at school and community based sponsored programs are one way to minimize youth exposure to gang violence. So, in essence, their participation in activities may have been influenced by the presence of gang violence in the community.

Participating in activities and socializing with others is an important aspect of a child's development. Many of these youth were able to participate in activities at school and the community center. However, the presence of gang violence in their community had an affect on their socialization.

The youth in this study have been exposed to various forms of gang violence that influenced their emotions. Their emotional reactions had varying implications for their participation in activities and socialization with others. The different responses that these youth had to the exposure of gang violence could have a lasting impression on their psychological development. Therefore, understanding the influence that gang violence has on youth development is essential and necessitates

further research.

Limitations

There were several limitations to this study. The cultural differences between the researcher and the subjects could have influenced their participation and responses in the study. The use of a one-time interview also was a limitation. However, one can still learn a lot in a 30 minute interview. The two youth who requested not to participate in the study after completing the interviews limited the sample size and the interpretation of the results. Further, the small sample size did not provide for a saturation of rich data. However, this was a pilot study and the sample size was not expected to be large.

The age range of the youth further limited the generalizability and interpretation of the results. Children who are eight and nine years old may have different views and perceptions of gang violence when compared to adolescents aged 11 and older. In addition, the use of a convenience sample from the community center could have biased the results of the study. All of these youth had experiences in the community that resulted in their participation in the center. The lack of multiple sources for data also limits the interpretation of the results. Further, the qualitative nature of this study limits the generalizability of the results. However, using a qualitative descriptive study allowed for rich descriptive data.

Future Research

Exposure to gang violence resulted in many different experiences for these youth. The exposure to gang violence resulted in their need to feel safe in the community because of the violence. Their reactions indicated a variety of mental health issues that could be problematic if left untreated. For the participants in this study a variety of experiences exposed several areas for future research. Implications for future research include a larger study focused on exploring adolescents' exposure to gang violence and the influence it has on their mental health development. Further, investigating adolescents' exposure to gang violence and the different options available used to treat those who have been exposed to gang violence is another area for research. In addition, examining adolescents' perceptions of why gang violence occurs and how it can affect their ability to socialize in the community is another area to explore.

Other possibly research studies include comparing parents and adolescents' perceptions of their exposure to gang violence and the influence it has on adolescents' psychosocial development. Exploring the differences in adolescents who have been exposed to gang violence and adolescents who have not been exposed to gang violence in the community to determine if there are any differences in their mental health development is another area for focus. Further, research focused on examining the differences between gender (male and female) and their exposure to gang violence and mental health development is important.

Another research study includes distinguishing the effects of gang violence from non-gang violence. Further, in order to decrease youth exposure to gang violence, exploring the different methods used to decrease the violence and its effectiveness is another area to research.

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Table 1: Sample Characteristics (N = 5)

<i>Characteristics</i>	<i><u>n</u></i>	<i>%</i>
<i>Sex</i>		
Males	3	60%
Females	2	40%
<i>Educational Level</i>		
2	1	20%
4	1	20%
5	2	40%
8	1	20%

Appendix A

Data Collection Tool for Pilot Study

.Demographic Data-

1. How old are you?
2. What is your race?
3. What is your gender?
4. What grade are you in?
5. How often do you attend school each week?
6. Do you consider yourself a good student?
 - a. What grades do you make in school?
7. Do you participate in school activities?
8. Do your parents live together?
 - a. Tell me about your parents/adult supervisor?
 - i. Do you get along with them?
 - ii. Do you find them to be strict?
9. Do you have friends who live in your neighborhood?

Open-ended Questions

1. What type of activities do you participate in?
 - a. In school and outside of school.
2. Tell me about your experiences in your neighborhood.
 - a. Do kids play outside after school and on the weekends?
 - b. Are you allowed outside without any adult supervision?
 - c. Do you feel safe in your neighborhood?
3. Tell me about your experiences with gangs.
 - a. Have you ever witnessed any gang related violence?
 - b. If so, what did you see?
 - c. How did it make you feel?
4. Talk about how those experiences have affected your school and family life.
5. How have these experiences with gangs affected your participation in neighborhood activities?

About the Authors

Sarah Kelly, RN, PhD is a lecturer at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, School of Nursing. Email address: sekelly@uncg.edu

Debra Anderson, RN, PhD is an Associate Professor at the University of Kentucky, College of Nursing

Ann Peden, RN, DSN, is a Professor at the University of Kentucky, College of Nursing.