

# CO-VICTIMIZATION OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN CHILDREN WHO WITNESS VIOLENCE: EFFECTS ON COGNITIVE, EMOTIONAL, AND BEHAVIORAL DEVELOPMENT

Bambade H. Shakoor, MS, and Deborah Chalmers, BS  
Chicago, Illinois

**This article reports the prevalence of violence and co-victimization among African-American youth in Chicago. Results of a violence screening survey were compiled on 1035 school children, aged 10 to 19 years. Police crime statistics are compared to illustrate the magnitude of the problem of youth and violence. Results indicate that 75% of the participating boys and 10% of participating girls had witnessed the shooting, stabbing, robbing, or killing of another person in their own lives. The survey itself did not identify the effects of co-victimization on the participants. Previous research is incorporated in the development of tentative hypotheses for intervention in public schools.**

**Key words** • co-victimization • violence • post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) • child abuse

Co-victimization is the experience of directly observing the violent assault of another person, including:

incest, sexual abuse, sexual assault, aggravated physical assault, armed robbery, arson, and murder. Previous authors have reported the prevalence of violence and victimization among African-Americans in inner cities.<sup>1</sup> These studies discussed only the prevalence of violence and victimization in adult populations. Other studies on children and violence described the effects of violence and co-victimization on behavior, development, and emotional well-being.<sup>2-8</sup> This article presents the results of a violence screening survey completed by 1035 African-American youth from several Chicago public elementary and high schools. The survey was part of the continued effort of the Community Mental Health Council to provide primary prevention programs to reduce the incidence of black-on-black homicide within the African-American community. Five high schools and two elementary schools participated in the survey and classes on violence prevention.

To determine the need of secondary intervention for persons who witnessed or experienced violence, the violence screening form was administered to a non-random sample of students from each school. All participating schools were "community schools," where the students in attendance lived in that particular school district and were not preselected. Selection for participation in the various classes depended on the class or activity. Nevertheless, our findings reflect the

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From the Leadership Development Institute and Community Mental Health Council. Requests for reprints should be addressed to Ms Bambade H. Shakoor, Leadership Development Institute, 2137 W 54th St, Chicago, IL 60609.

experiences of the students surveyed and the results were consistent with other reports on African-American youth and violence in Chicago.

In 1986, Chicago's rate for violent crimes was 22.9 per 1000. This rate is twice the national average. Other areas of the inner city heavily populated by residents of Chicago Public Housing Developments had rates as high as 79.5 per 1000 (*Chicago Tribune*, June 12, 1987:1). Of the 762 murders committed in 1986, 28% of perpetrators were identified as black youths under the age of 20. Of the 982 aggravated assaults, 57% were committed by black youths under the age of 20, as were 38% of the 938 criminal sexual assaults.<sup>9</sup> Not only do black youths represent a disproportionate number of the perpetrators of violence, but they also are overrepresented as victims. In 1987, 691 murders were committed in Chicago.<sup>10</sup> Blacks accounted for 71% of murder victims, with 35% being under the age of 20. Children witnessing violence is not a new phenomena, but has been neglected. Several studies have focused on children who witness family violence, but very few studies have addressed the more encompassing problem of children who witness community violence in the inner city.

In the spring of 1986, a shooting incident at an elementary school in Winetka, Illinois focused the attention of health care professionals on children who witness violence. Recent media reports have been comparing the experiences of inner city children to those of children from war zones such as Belfast, Ireland, or Israel. The validity of the comparisons is reflected in the violent crime rates of various parts of the city of Chicago where the rates are 6 times higher than in other parts of the United States. Unfortunately, this recent interest in violence in the inner city has taken an ill-fated turn. A recent headline in a daily newspaper stating: "Violence Threatens to Turn Innocent Kids Into killers" (*Chicago Sun-Times*, June 11, 1989:43) captured the thoughts and views of some "experts" in fearing what effects these occurrences may have on the societal majority.

African-American youth co-victimized by the poverty and violence of the inner city are seen as potential threats to society first and as victims last or not at all. Violent behavior is only one of the possible side effects of co-victimization. Other possible effects that must be equally explored and considered are: impaired school performance and judgment, vulnerability and high risk for substance abuse, victimization, and emotional disturbance. It is the responsibility of African-American health care professionals to emphasize the importance

of holistic Afro-centric interventions and research related to the investigation and treatment of co-victimization in youth and offer alternative viewpoints and recommendations.

## METHODS

The first adolescent population screened by the Community Mental Health Council (CMHC) was a summer recreational camp. A total of 433 boys and girls aged 13 to 16 years, completed Victimization Screening Forms; 31% of the boys and 39% of the girls had experienced the murder of a close friend or relative. Further questioning of the youth revealed that a large percentage had actually witnessed murders or other violent events. These results prompted the authors to develop a more sensitive and precise screening form to identify children who have directly witnessed or experienced violence.

The Violence Screening Form became an integral part of the community education workshops. Principals, school counselors, and teachers would contact CMHC and request workshops on violence prevention for their students. The demographic makeup of the schools was listed in a local newspaper article (*Chicago Sun-Times*, October 20, 1989:4). School 1 had 265 high school subjects, composed of 44% low-income families. The students participating in the class and survey were from coed health classes. School 2 had 92 high school participants in a school composed of 49% low-income families. They were also members of a coed health class.

School 3 (25.1% low-income families) had 82 students from a self-contained transitional program for high school students at risk of dropping out. School 4 had 54 students from a high school that primarily serviced residents of Chicago Housing Authority developments where the violent crime rate was 31.9 per 1000. The school population was 56.9% low-income families. The workshop and survey participants were involved in the school book club.

School 5 had 54 eighth-grade participants and is located within a Chicago police district cited as having the highest number of homicides and violent assaults in the city. School 6 had 312 participants. The survey was completed by all students in fifth through eighth grade. Students did not receive a violence prevention workshop, but the school was identified as having the highest number of in-school arrests of students for any Chicago public elementary or high school.<sup>11</sup>

School 7 had 172 participants from the Afro-American history and law classes of a particular school instructor. Half (50.9%) the students in this school are

from low-income families, as the school is located within the immediate vicinity of two public housing high-rise developments that have violent crime rates of 43.5 and 72.0 per 1000 residents. The violent crime rates for the various public housing developments were listed in an article on the increasing rates of violent crime in Chicago housing developments (*Chicago Tribune*. June 12, 1987:1).

A short survey composed of 12 questions was distributed to students at the beginning of the classes or workshops. Students were informed of the presenter's desire to measure the number of students having experienced or witnessed various forms of violence. They were informed that their responses would be anonymous and confidential. Names were not written on any of the surveys. Students also were told that they had the right to refuse to participate if they chose by simply not completing the survey. The exact number of non-participants is unknown, but very few students refused. The questions were read aloud to benefit those who might have had difficulty reading. Questions were not interpreted or discussed. Immediately upon completion, questionnaires were folded and collected by presenters.

## RESULTS

### Gender Differences

The surveys indicated that 75% of boys and 70% of girls surveyed had seen someone shot, stabbed, robbed, or killed. Of the 400 subjects who witnessed the shooting of another person, 45% were girls and 55% were boys. Of the 557 subjects witnessing robberies, 52.6% were boys and 47% girls. Fewer subjects (348) witnessed stabbings, with 51% of the witnesses being boys and 48.5% girls. Of the 1004 persons screened for witnessing murders, 236 (23%) had been witnesses, with 57% being boys and 43% girls.

### School Differences

The results from school 5 indicated experience with violence that exceeded all other schools; 85% of these students, who were all eighth-grade students, witnessed some sort of violent crime. The schools located near the public housing developments with high rates of violent crime might be expected to have the higher rates of co-victimization. Further research is needed to determine the true rates and their correlation with risk factors.

### Age Differences

The age of students ranged from 10 to 19 years (mean: 14.6). The median age was 15 years and the mode, 16. The 16-year-olds had the highest percentage

of participants witnessing shootings, robberies, stabbings, and killings. The most frequently witnessed form of violence for all age groups was robberies (55.1%). Twenty-two percent of the 10-year-olds and 60% of 19-year-olds had witnessed shootings. Only 44% of the 10-year-olds witnessed robberies, while for 19-year-olds, the rate was 70%. Twenty-six percent of the 10-year-olds and 30% of the 19-year-olds witnessed murders. Stabbings were distinctly different. Forty-one percent of the 10-year-olds had witnessed stabbings, while only 30% of 19-year-olds did.

## DISCUSSION

Cognitive and behavioral effects, as well as emotional influences, are the major developmental changes possibly resulting from co-victimization of youth. The magnitude and duration of the various types of effects depend greatly on the type and number of victimizing experiences in addition to the person's age, environment, and emotional state at the time of occurrence.

### Cognitive Effects

Achievement in African-American inner city schools falls far behind suburban schools and middle-class communities. The dropout rates for African-American youth is higher, standardized test scores lower, and attendance poorer. A *Chicago Sun-Times* article (October 20, 1988:4) indicated that the participating high schools had between 31.5% and 55.5% of their students finishing high school within 4 years.

Kunjufo, in his discussion of the conspiracy to destroy black boys, draws a direct correlation between age, school achievement, and "street time."<sup>12</sup> Street time was measured as the number of unsupervised hours youths spend in activities outside of the home, school, or community organizations. The older black boys became more disinterested or uninvolved in academic pursuits, resulting in lower achievement test scores as they got older. Street time and poor achievement tend to exacerbate the problems of delinquency and truancy, which influences students to dropout, thus having more "street time."

Research conducted by Eth and Pynoos on psychic trauma in childhood identifies "deleterious effects on cognition, memory, school performance and learning."<sup>2</sup> These problems are identified as possible results of co-victimization in childhood. It is possible that the measures of violence and co-victimization in youth are not just measures of violence, but also may correlate with poor school performance and learning, which are symptoms of psychic trauma in youth.

Although we cannot make a definite conclusion about the causes of low performance and achievement of African-American youth in Chicago, we have formulated a tentative hypothesis: co-victimization has a negative effect on school performance. A counselor at one of the elementary schools participating in this survey referred 10 African-American male students for counseling for behavioral, learning, and emotional problems. After completing her evaluations and social histories, she discovered that all students had witnessed or experienced the violent killing of a close friend or family member. She provided the students with individual and group counseling, tutoring, and support. Within the first school year, all students made remarkable improvements in their academic performance.<sup>11</sup>

We do not have such information on our participants, nor have they been provided with interventions of any kind. If school children were regularly screened for violence and co-victimization in conjunction with immunization and health screening in first, fifth, and ninth grades, results could be correlated with school performance and referrals made for proper interventions that would enhance the development and achievement of the child by healing the scars of co-victimization.

The American Academy of Pediatrics, recognizing the negative effects of television violence on children's school performance, has recommended schools recognize, remedy, and prevent unhealthy lifestyles and practices within the lives of children. In other areas they recommend child screening to identify those at risk for developmental or social delays that could result in lasting harm without early intervention.<sup>13</sup> This early identification and intervention is dependent on the knowledge and understanding of school health and social service staff, who will need specific training and sensitivity to complete assessments, provide crisis intervention, and make appropriate referrals. Our first recommendation is to provide periodic screening of school children for violence and co-victimization histories. This information should be used with the additional psychological, physical, IQ, and achievement tests given to children experiencing difficulties in school performance.

### Emotional Influences

Dora Black<sup>14</sup> found that children exposed to disaster were twice as likely to develop psychological disorders. Hymen et al<sup>15</sup> found that witnesses in close physical or psychological proximity to violence or disaster are at risk for developing stress disorders. In addition to the findings of psychological disorder and stress, Terr's studies of the children of Chowchila revealed emotional

influences such as persistent fear, anxiety, lack of trust, impaired cognitive functioning, and some lasting personality changes.<sup>4</sup> One factor both Terr and Black found important to the healing process was discharge of emotions.

The emotional discharge or expression in African-American youth is limited by the socioeconomic conditions of impoverished areas. Drugs and alcohol are far more prevalent and are promoted and encouraged with greater regularity and availability than counseling or support. Sexual behavior and violence also are promoted through the media as helpful modes of expression. Law enforcement officers, teachers, and in many cases, parents of these youth, may be less tolerant of emotional expression of youth. These aspects of the African-American community are not the choices of the community residents; they are consequences of inner-city life. If African-American youths lack the adequate expression of emotions built up by co-victimization and violence, the results are "survival fatigue."<sup>16</sup>

The unemployment rate for African-American youth is higher than for any other group. Violent crime rates and victimization rates are higher. Substance abuse and unwed pregnancies are high.

The major burdens of our urban society is bearing down on African-American youths who are ill-prepared to protect themselves. They are struggling to cope in a hostile environment over which they have very little control, and the options available lead to drug abuse, violence, and poverty. Bell identified the term "survival fatigue" as the negative effects of racism, poverty, and frustration of blacks in a white world.<sup>16</sup> He compared this to the combat fatigue of the war veterans who were struggling to cope in a hostile environment over which they had very little control. If youths with emotional disturbances or problems with substance abuse were identified and further evaluated to determine histories of violence and co-victimization, this information could be used in making appropriate referrals for counseling and support. This information would also aid health care professionals in recognizing the symptoms of violence and co-victimization as being such and spare African-American youth the stigma of permanent labels for symptoms such as: behavioral disordered, emotionally disturbed, drug addict, or teen alcoholic. Symptoms erode with treatment. Labels such as the ones given to African-American youth within the school system tend to be permanent.

### Behavioral Problems

The relationship between post-traumatic stress disorder

der in youth and aggression was identified in Terr's and Eth and Pynoos' studies of disaster victims and child witnesses to violence.<sup>4,8</sup> The most frequently observed behavioral problem in school children was fighting and aggressive behavior. Green and Berkowitz's study on aggression after observing violence offered an explanation for the relationship between the two.<sup>5</sup> Frustration was said to produce an arousal state when combined with highly salient aggressive cues, which results in a predisposition for violence and aggression.

Dodge's studies on social cognition and children's aggressive behavior described intentional behavior as being the precipitant to negative outcomes that resulted in aggressive retaliation.<sup>17</sup> These studies are consistent with the descriptions of fighting and aggression in school children. Most fights are a result of the combination of an attitude, negative statements, gestures (implied or real), and retaliation. Frustration, television violence, interpersonal violence in the home, or community violence provide the arousal and stimulation. Previous studies suggest a relationship between frustration and observation of violence and aggression.<sup>5,6,18</sup> There seems to be a "cycle of violence" in the African-American community, and both the residents and observers are having difficulty determining where it begins.

Although the beginning is uncertain, the end is definite. Black-on-black violence must be stopped at each point that it exists. School children should be screened for violence. They should be identified and referred for intervention and support, not for labeling and exclusion. Schools must do their part to eliminate violence within the schools. Classes and workshops similar to those reported by Prothrow-Stith should be provided to teach youth conflict resolution, stress management, and frustration tolerance.<sup>18</sup> These measures will assist students in developing alternative behaviors and lifestyles devoid of violence.

## CONCLUSIONS

Although there has been previous research on African-Americans, victims and co-victims of violence, and children and violence, very few studies have focused on the problems of African-American youth with violence and co-victimization. We have presented the results of a recent survey of elementary and high school children from several Chicago public schools and discussed the implications of our results. Recognizing the high rates of co-victimization in African-American youth, we developed three recommendations by combining the results of our study with the research of previous authors. These recommendations are:

- periodically screen school children,
- identify at-risk children early for behavioral disorders or emotional disturbance and refer them for intervention and support, and
- break the cycle of violence in schools through programmatic structure and education on violence prevention and conflict resolution.

With the understanding of the specific limitations of this particular survey, we encourage further research and investigation of the possible effects of co-victimization on the development of African American youth. We encourage the use of an Afro-centric perspective that takes into account the lifestyle and environment of the inner city with its racial discrimination and frustrating conditions that promote the occurrence of negative outcomes. This perspective is important if one is to avoid blaming the victims with permanently disabling identifications.

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