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Community Violence Among Young People

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Defining 'community violence'

There are three categories of violence: self-destructive, interpersonal and collective; community violence falls under the category of interpersonal violence. Community violence is defined as violence that occurs between individuals or groups, who may or may not be known to each other. Generally, it occurs in public places and consists of violence in youth, random acts, rape and sexual assault by strangers, and violence in institutional settings such as schools, workplaces, prisons or nursing homes. The term violence refers to behaviours of a physical, sexual, psychological, and/or neglectful nature. Physical assault is the largest form of physical violence and may involve pushing, grabbing, kicking, biting, hitting (with fists), choking and/or the use of a weapon to stab or shoot the victim.

What are the issues?

Violent crime is a preventable social and health issue, which can often be predicted. Many injuries result from acts of community violence, spanning from physical injuries to serious psychological and physiological health problems. (Bruising is reported as the most prevalent physical injury that follows sexual and physical assaults). Furthermore, changes in social and leisure activity participation, altered sleeping patterns and neglect from certain interpersonal relationships are all potential consequences of violence induced fear, anxiety and physical injury. Lost productivity and absenteeism from work are two of the largest economic costs in society that result from experiencing violence. In order to reduce the risk of injury and prevent community violence, interplays between individual, relationship, social, cultural and environment factors need to be targeted.

Episodes of community violence occur at intolerable rates in Australia and rank as one of the leading distresses for residents. Despite the impression (from police) that many cases are not reported, violence among young people is considered in the top visible forms of violent crime within Australian communities. It is a high concern for young people, general community members and stakeholders. Parks, shopping centers, public transport, night clubs, pubs and late night food outlets are the more likely locations that community

violence incidents occur; similarly, situations where one is isolated, at night, on weekends and alone are the more vulnerable environments.

Effects on the individual from exposure to community violence

In addition to physical injury, community violence can directly affect internalising and externalising behaviours, as well as inhibiting academic functioning in youth. Exposure refers to exposure as a victim, witness, perpetrator and vicarious exposure (hearing about another's experience as a victim of community violence). The three main reported effects to internalising behaviour include PTSD, physiological functioning and other internalizing symptoms. Externalising behaviours and problems that may arise as a result of exposure to community violence include aggressive behaviour, impaired interactions with other community members, and alcohol use. Both poor academic achievement and functioning have also been linked as a direct consequence of community violence.

Symptoms associated with altered internal behaviours are listed in the table below.

PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder)	*Intrusive imagery and thoughts, bad dreams, disturbed sleep, upset, jumpiness or feelings of aloneness.*
Physiological functioning	*Upper respiratory illness (cold/flu), sleep difficulties, irritability, concentration problems, hypervigilance, exaggerated startle.*
Internalising symptoms	*Depression, anxiety, intrusive thinking (reliving/nightmares), sadness, suicidal idealation/attempted suicide, avoidance (thoughts/people/places/amnesia/diminished interests/detachment/numbness) or other psychological distress.*

Epidemiological overview

- **Men** are at greater risk of exposure to violence than women.
- Those aged **18-24** years are the most likely age group to experience violence.
- **Unmarried** men and women are reported to experience more exposure to violence than those in registered or de facto marriages.
- **Unemployed** at greater risk to employed individuals.
- Physical assault is the largest form of physical violence.
- Most cases of sexual violence are sexual assault (sexual violence includes sexual assault, attempted sexual assault and threatened sexual assault).
- For men, they are more likely to be physically assaulted by a stranger than an acquaintance; however, women are more likely to know the perpetrator (this is the same for women who are sexually assaulted).
- Men are more likely to be assaulted by a male and in a public space or licensed premises; if they're assaulted by a female, it is more likely to be in the home environment.
- Women are more likely to be assaulted by men and in the home (or another person's home) environment, regardless of the perpetrator's gender.

- Influence of alcohol and other certain drugs increases the chance for violent incidents to occur due to other biological and social factors.
- Most people who experience violence are likely to have endured more than one single occurrence.
- For those who have experienced violence in the past 12 months, they are more at risk of experiencing stalking or harassment in that same time period than others who have not experienced violence.

Risk factors for community violence exposure

A developmental-ecological model with five identified areas of risk for community violence has been constructed. The five risk areas include: community and neighbourhood contextual factors, family and household contextual factors, relationships with parents and caregivers, relationships with peers and personal characteristics. According to young people, those risk factors associated with 'family and household' and 'relationships with parents/caregivers' were considered the more significant risk factors. Those associated with 'community and neighbourhood', 'personal risk factors' and 'relationships with peers' were also significant too.

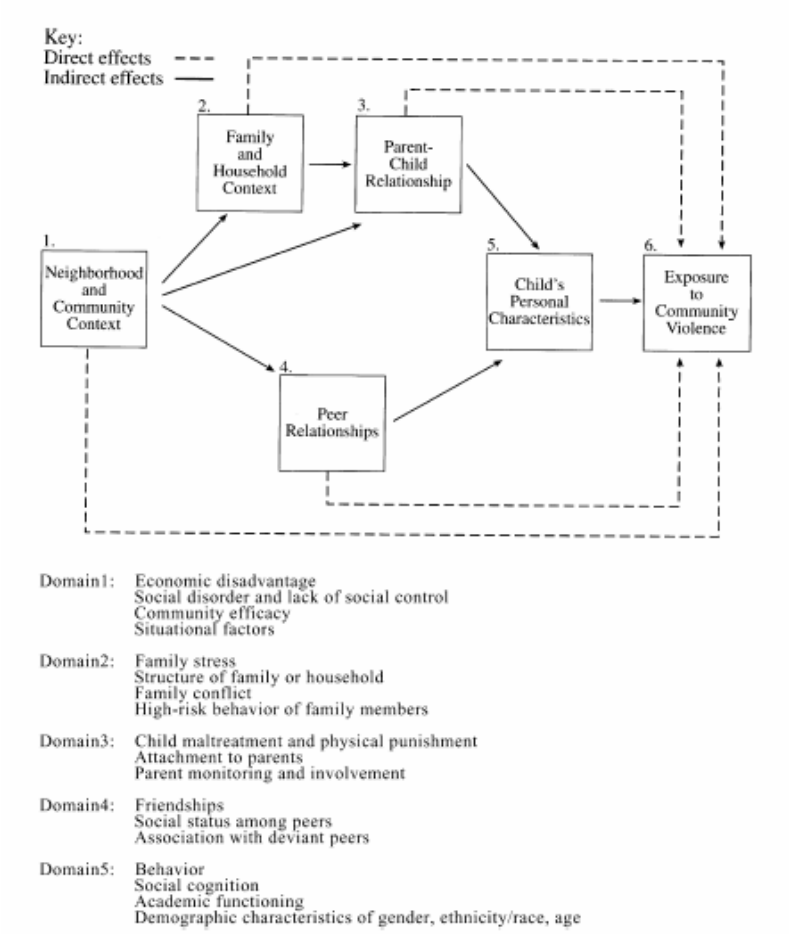

Fig. 1. A developmental-ecological model that represents hypothesized direct and indirect paths among five ecological domains and risk for exposure to community violence.

What is ICCWA's position and recommendations on the issues?

Violent crime is predictable and preventable. Measures for prevention rely on collaborative and multi-sectorial approaches which include political and financial support. Below are suggestions from focus groups which are supported by youths, communities and stakeholders associated with community violence.

✓ *Necessity for early intervention strategies with families and young parents*
In order for other strategies to be effective, early intervention strategies must also be implemented. Proposed strategies include those to assist parents of difficult youth, promote the importance of monitoring and controlling children, and encourage stronger family relationships and parental involvement.

✓ *Greater visibility of police*
Young people support police intervention strategies, especially, increasing visible police presence on foot as opposed to just police vehicles. This demonstrates a more proactive as opposed to reactive approach to violent crime. Additional proposals include developing a special stream of police dedicated to dealing with community violence in youth. Police education programs within schools could focus on the legal and personal consequences of community violence and how behaviours impact others.

✓ *School based strategies*
There are three important aims behind developing school based strategies. These include encouraging relationships with parents, fostering environments that encourage young people to remain in the education system, and educating youths on how to deal with community violence. In addition to family involvement, school-based strategies may link police involvement too.

✓ *Organized community activities*
A high risk factor for community violence exposure includes those communities that lack sufficient activities for their youth. Therefore one suggestion is to designate specific areas within the community that young people can participate in activities. Venues may be cheap or free to attend; and activities should be valuable to participants, provide opportunities for entertainment and vary in nature.

✓ *Involvement of young people*
Ideas to promote young individuals to become involved within their communities may include opportunities for volunteering and becoming involved with issues relevant to themselves. Another idea is to encourage young people to organize and run their own community groups related to current personal interests.

✓ *Structural strategies*
Structural strategies relate to infrastructure. For example, increased lighting in dark areas where people already frequent, and the provision of emergency telephone boxes.

✓ *Recommendations from a World Health Organisation report (Krug et all 2002)*

1. Create, implement & monitor a national action plan for violence prevention
2. Enhance capacity for collecting data on violence
3. Define priorities for, & support research on, the causes, consequences, costs & prevention of violence
4. Promote primary prevention responses
5. Strengthen responses for victims of violence
6. Integrate violence prevention into social and educational policies, & thereby promote gender & social equality
7. Increase collaboration & exchange of information on violence prevention
8. Promote & monitor adherence to international treaties, laws & other mechanisms to protect human rights
9. Seek practical, internationally agreed responses to the global drug trade & the global arms trade

Who's responsible for what?

Different interventions rely on the input from many different personnel and organizations within society when developing new initiatives. For instance, all three levels of government will have certain roles to perform, especially the local governments. Young people must be involved in the development and execution of programs; schools have an important support role; police and parents are considered essential; and local businesses should be offering funding for interventions within their communities.

Useful Links & References

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