



University of Pittsburgh
Office of Child Development

Path To Violence

Seeds of Delinquency And Violent Crime Are Planted In Childhood

Youth violence is a grave problem in the United States.

Murder rates alone shows how grim the picture is.

Homicide is the leading cause of death among teenage males. Juvenile homicide arrests among 10-17-year-olds nearly doubled between 1985 and 1995, rising from 5.7 to 11.2 arrests per 100,000 children. Murder, rape, and aggravated assault arrests combined increased by almost 64%.

However, the most recent FBI Uniform Crime Report shows juvenile arrests for violent crimes fell by 6% from 1995 to 1996. Even so, large numbers of children under age 18 were arrested: 2,074 for murder, 3,768 for rape, and 52,766 for aggravated assault in 1996.

Children aren't born criminals. Anti-social behavior, aggression, and violence are learned.

What contributes to violence among children is not a mystery. Factors that put children at risk are well-studied. And many can be changed.

The bad news is the risks are many. They're found at home, in neighborhoods, and in schools. They influence children in complex ways. And solutions that do not address them – incarceration or prosecuting juveniles as adults – do little to prevent violence.

Psychological Traits

When researchers look at characteristics in a child that might predict later violent behavior, early signs of aggression, hyperactivity, attention deficit, and risk taking are among the ones they find the most troubling.

A history of aggressive behavior as a young child is one of the more common traits found among people who've committed acts of violence. From such a history, a reasonably accurate prediction can be drawn by age 8 about how aggressive a child is likely to be in adolescence and adulthood, including whether he or she will exhibit criminal behavior.¹

School Failure

Violent children are usually beset by several problems, but most delinquent youth have problems in school.

More than 80% of serious delinquent youth report having one or more school problems. School failure, low literacy, and repeated behavior problems in school are among the more factors that predict later delinquency.

In one study, 20% of the 11-year-old boys whose teachers rated them low academic achievers were convicted of violent crimes as adults, compared to less than 10% of the other students who were tracked.²

Research also suggests that dropping out of school, truancy, and a low commitment to learning contribute to teen-

age violence and arrests for violent crimes.

Schools, themselves, may contribute. Overcrowding can create an atmosphere conducive to aggressive behavior. So can imposed conformity and policies that are met with student anger, resentment, and rejection. Student who enter junior high or middle school, find an imposing facility, less personal relationships with teachers, and tougher academic standards. It couldn't come at a more difficult period in their lives.

Adolescence

Adolescence is a period of great change, biologically, emotionally and socially at both school and home. Failure to cope with the stresses of early adolescence has serious short-term consequences.

Not surprisingly, sharp increases in delinquency and crime begin when children reach 13 or 14 years of age.³

In addition, other troubling behaviors – school alienation and dropout, drug abuse, and teenage pregnancy, for example – begin to escalate during adolescence.

Poverty

In study after study, growing up poor is seen as increasing the odds of violent behavior. The reasons are numerous.

Poor neighborhoods are beset by a high turnovers of residents that threatens

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their stability. Poor neighborhoods are more likely to be disorganized than more affluent communities. Residents tend to feel less attachment to community. Crime rates are often high.

Low family income is also associated with other factors that can contribute to a child developing anti-social characteristics, including large family size, family discord, and low levels of parental education.

Poverty also heightens the risk of perinatal complications, such as prematurity and low birth weight, which are associated with behavior problems at 5-7 years of age and delinquency at age 18, especially when coupled with family dysfunction.

Family Factors

In addition to low income status, several other family factors are related to aggressive behavior in children, including a history of crime among parents, abuse and neglect, and poor parenting techniques, such as failing to set clear expectations for behavior.

Families of aggressive children tend to reinforce aggressive behaviors and fail to promote appropriate behaviors by not teaching compliance and non-aggressive ways to solve problems. Extreme family conflict, uncaring parenting, harsh physical punishment, and ineffectual discipline are also associated with delinquency and crime.

Lax supervision is a strong predictor of conduct disorder and delinquency, problems that often involve violence. Meanwhile, more and more adolescents are going without the full-time supervision of a parent. Families with children who lack full-time supervision increased from 37% in 1970 to 57% in 1990.⁴

Media Violence

Children, especially those who are

poorly supervised, are exposed to violence across a range of popular entertainment mediums.

Researchers, for example, find strong links between violence on television and aggressive behavior. Violence on television can influence a child's character and personality, including the willingness to commit violence. A steady diet of TV violence can lead to indifference toward violence committed against others. It also contributes to a "mean world" syndrome of heightened mistrust and an exaggerated view of the prevalence and the appropriateness of violence in the real world.

Guns

Firearms are increasingly found in the possession of youth. A 1990 survey

by the National Center for Educational Statistics indicated that 1 out of 5 eighth grade students have seen a weapon at school.

Guns are also being used to kill more young people. Handgun-related juvenile homicides approached 2,000 victims in 1994, nearly four times the number of juvenile handgun murders reported in 1984.

Violence among children is a national dilemma. It is complicated by the fact that so many characteristics and circumstances contribute to a child developing aggressive and anti-social behavior.

The good news is that intervening early in childhood can reduce the chances of children veering down a violent path.

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Co-Directors: Christina J. Groark, PhD.; Robert B. McCall, PhD. **Associate Directors:** Carl N. Johnson, PhD.; Mark S. Strauss, PhD.

background Editor: Robert B. McCall, PhD.; **Writer:** Jeffery Fraser (412) 731-6641, e-mail: Fraser53@msn.com

Office of Child Development, University of Pittsburgh, 2017 Cathedral of Learning, Pittsburgh, PA 15235; fax: (412) 624-1187