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# Community Violence in Context

## Risk and Resilience in Children and Families

Eugene Aisenberg

Todd Herrenkohl

*University of Washington*

Although some community violence research has examined the context of community violence, including the social, economic, and structural organization of neighborhoods, more needs to be learned about family, school, and community-level factors that may promote and lessen the incidence and prevalence of community violence. In addition, further research is needed on various social, environmental, and contextual factors hypothesized to protect youth from exposure. This article (a) reviews and examines the relation between neighborhood context and risk of violence exposure, (b) reviews current literature on predictors of community violence and mental health and behavioral consequences for children and families adversely affected by community violence, (c) examines sources of resilience and community strengths that extend beyond the individual, (d) discusses the contributions and limitations of current conceptualizations of risk and resilience, and (e) highlights directions for future research. Information from this review can inform community and government efforts to lessen community violence through prevention and treatment.

**Keywords:** *community violence; resilience; mental health; neighborhood; risk factors; protective factors*

Community violence persists as a major public health problem in the United States despite considerable attention from researchers, policy makers, law enforcement officials, and community-based organizations. Research reveals that adolescents are at higher risk for community violence exposure than are youth of other age groups (Voisin, 2007). In the National Survey of Adolescents, a study of adolescents ages 12 to 17, more than one third of girls and nearly one half of the boys reported having witnessed at least one act of community violence in their lifetime (Kilpatrick, Saunders, &

Smith, 2003). Results from the National Youth Survey, a representative study of 1,725 adolescents, showed that nearly 70% were victims of violent crime as adolescents (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2002). Despite a recent general decline in officially recorded crime, studies suggest that the prevalence of community violence and exposure among adolescents remain very high (e.g., Stein, Jaycox, Kataoka, Rhodes, & Vestal, 2003).

Research has demonstrated that exposure to community violence significantly contributes to the morbidity and mortality of adolescents (Cheng et al., 2003). Also, studies have identified exposure to community violence as a major risk factor for the development of emotional and behavioral problems among young people (Horn & Trickett, 1998; Lynch & Cicchetti, 2002a; Ozer & Weinstein, 2004), including the later perpetration of violence (Halliday-Boykins & Graham, 2001; National Child Traumatic Stress Network Juvenile Justice Working Group, 2004). In the National Survey of Adolescents, about one third (32%) of boys who witnessed violence reported having engaged in delinquent acts at some point in their lifetime, compared to only 6.5% of boys who had not witnessed violence. Systematic efforts to prevent exposure, and to intervene with those who have been exposed are needed to improve the life chances and well-being of those living in settings particularly vulnerable to community violence.

To prevent community violence and its effects, it is crucial to look beyond the individual to understand the nature and experience of those directly and indirectly affected. To date, research has primarily focused on individual-level risks as targets of violence prevention. Only limited attention has been directed to family, school, and community factors (Herrenkohl, Chung, & Catalano, 2004). Research on the context of community violence, including macro-level factors such as the social, economic, and structural organization of neighborhoods, has lagged behind that of individual correlates and outcomes of violence, although recent advances in some research are notable (Yates, Egeland, & Srouge, 2003). A major gap in the literature is the identification of protective factors—factors that buffer the effects of risks to children, including violence exposure—that primarily reside within the social settings of family, school, and community. The lack of research on these factors has slowed the development of strengths-based prevention programs that address context over individual risks.

## **Risk and Protective Factors for Violence Exposure and Perpetration of Violence in Youth**

A first step in preventing children's exposure to community violence is identifying salient risk and protective factors. When intervening to prevent

adverse consequences among youth already exposed to violence, a similar model applies. For example, it is important to identify factors that serve to increase a youth's risk of further victimization, and range of adverse outcomes, including the perpetration of violence as a learned behavior. Within this review, we examine what is known about factors related to community violence exposure, particularly those factors that extend beyond the individual. We also discuss areas for further research and conceptual development. To start, we examine the relation between neighborhood context and risk of violence exposure. We then examine mental health and behavioral consequences for children and families adversely affected by community violence. We also examine sources of protection (resilience) and community strengths to highlight those factors that could be targeted in strengths-based prevention and intervention efforts. Throughout the article, we comment on the contribution and limitations of current conceptualizations of risk and resilience and highlight directions for further research.

## **Neighborhood Context and Risk of Violence Exposure**

Research on risks for community violence exposure has consistently found males to be at higher risk than females (Cooley-Quille, Boyd, Frantz, & Walsh, 2001; Stein et al., 2003). Risk of exposure may also vary as a function of age, with older youth more vulnerable than those who are younger (Buka, Stichick, Birdthistle, & Earls, 2001). Class and race also appear to have a positive correlation with violence exposure. For example, exposure to community violence is disproportionately higher among the poor, people of color, and those who live in densely populated urban areas (Foy & Goguen, 1998; Garbarino, Hammond, Mercy, & Yung, 2004; Hill & Madhere, 1996). In addition, economic opportunities, proportion of single-parent families, housing conditions, and number and kinds of youth services and opportunities for youth have profound effects on the nature and context of violence (Greene, 1998).

Recent studies of neighborhood influences have linked deficits in institutional resources, collective efficacy, social cohesion, and informal social control to violence at the individual and community levels (Sampson, Morenoff, & Gannon-Rowley, 2002; Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). In addition to these neighborhood structural characteristics, the prevalence of substance abuse, availability of firearms, and ethnic heterogeneity all appear correlated with increased rates of violence (Duncan & Aber, 1997; Sampson et al., 1997; Sheidow, Gorman-Smith, Tolan, & Henry, 2001).

Studies by Sampson and colleagues (1997), among others, have advanced understanding of the association between violence exposure and neighborhood social processes, although further research is needed (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, & Aber, 1997; Sastry, Ghosh-Dastidar, Adams, & Pebley, 2003). According to structural strain theory, broad societal imbalances and inequalities contribute to the isolation of certain groups within highly disadvantaged communities. Relative deprivation and barriers to success limit upward social mobility and contribute directly and indirectly to violence within those communities (Agnew, 1999). Thus, the likelihood of youth being exposed to violence within areas characterized by both structural and social processes that are correlated with violence appears to be quite high.

Youth living within disadvantaged neighborhoods not only encounter a higher risk of violence exposure but also experience fewer opportunities for positive relationships and prosocial models than do other youth (Lynch & Cicchetti, 2002b). The scarcity of neighborhood adults who can serve as role models for children and monitor the behavior of neighborhood children translates to less human capital available to promote positive development and to serve as a resource and a support to other parents and families (Burton & Jarrett, 2000; Ceballo, McLoyd, & Toyokawa, 2004; Jeneks & Mayer, 1990; Wilson, 1987). In addition, residents who share the deleterious impact of concentrated poverty and multiple risks and stressors witness media portrayals of their neighborhoods as crime ridden, threatening, and unsafe. These messages can fuel an internalized sense of marginalization, powerlessness, and sense of despair among the most vulnerable.

Although there has been progress in identifying and understanding the role and influence of neighborhood context for community violence exposure, several limitations remain. Few empirical studies examine outcomes in interrelated social contexts, and even fewer use data sets that are appropriate for multilevel analysis of the effects of neighborhoods (Rankin & Quane, 2002; Sampson et al., 1997). Research on the mental health consequences of exposure to community violence often fails to assess and measure sources of risk, such as the concentration of female-headed households and residential stability (Duncan & Aber, 1997; Gephart, 1997). Research on the interpersonal context of children and parents coping with community violence is particularly sparse, which inhibits a refined understanding of the role of parents as potential mediators of the effects of neighborhood violence on children's emotional and behavioral health (Aisenberg & Mennen, 2000). Little is known about how psychosocial risk factors interact with biological risk factors in relation to violent behavior of youth (Raine, 2002). Also, the lack of consensus in defining and operationalizing

community violence may contribute to widely varying estimates of violence exposure, making it very difficult to generalize results across studies (Aisenberg & Ell, 2005; Guterman, Cameron, & Staller, 2000; Overstreet, 2000).

## **Adverse Outcomes Associated With Exposure to Community Violence**

Evidence of the detrimental effects of community violence exposure for children has emerged in the past two decade. For example, research has shown that children who consistently witness violence in their communities are at increased risk of substance abuse, internalizing behaviors, and psychological problems including anxiety, depression, and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Aisenberg, 2001; Buka et al., 2001; Gorman-Smith, Henry, & Tolan, 2004; Hammack, Richards, Luo, Edlynn, & Roy, 2004; Saltzman, Pynoos, Layne, Steinberg, & Aisenberg, 2001). Gorman-Smith and Tolan (1998) examined the relation between exposure to community violence and anxiety and depression in their sample of fifth and seventh grade boys from economically disadvantaged neighborhoods of Chicago. Their analyses showed that violence exposure had a modest, but significant, effect on anxiety and depression in adolescence above and beyond the effects of the same variables of internalizing behaviors measured 1 year earlier. In another study, conducted by Cooley-Quille and colleagues (2001), which involved a sample of predominantly African American adolescents, a high level of community violence exposure (above the median on the Children's Report of Exposure to Violence [CREV]; Cooley, Turner, & Beidel, 1995) was associated with greater fear, more anxiety, more internalizing behaviors, and more negative life experiences compared to youth with low exposure (below the median on the CREV). In their study of urban Latino middle school students, Aisenberg, Trickett, Mennen, Saltzman, and Zayas (2007) found that increased exposure to community violence was significantly related to higher depression scores for adolescents overall.

There is some evidence that children exposed to community violence on a repetitive, ongoing basis can suffer cognitive impairments that lead to poor academic achievement and school failure (Saltzman et al., 2001). An increased risk of externalizing behaviors (e.g., aggression) among children exposed to repetitive violence also has been documented (Gorman-Smith et al., 2004; Margolin & Gordis, 2004). In Gorman-Smith and Tolan's (1998) Chicago study, violence exposure in boys predicted current aggression after accounting for earlier aggression. Buka and colleagues' (2001) review found a link between children's use of violence and aggression

(including defensive fighting and weapon carrying) and their earlier exposure to high levels of violence in the community. Margolin and Gordis's (2000) review provides similar findings.

Research has not consistently found significant differences in outcomes among children who were victims of violence compared to those who were only witnesses of violence. However, it is possible that different types of violence exposure have varying effects (Trickett, Durán, & Horn, 2003). Indeed, some research suggests that not all forms of community violence exposure are the same, at least when considering their detrimental effects on families and children (Horn & Trickett, 1998; Trickett et al., 2003). Yet, the rudimentary method of data scaling used in many survey studies (e.g., tallying the number of distinct kinds of events and summing them up to derive a total exposure score) assigns the same value or weight to different violence exposures, which makes it difficult to assess with precision the impact of particular events. Being robbed at knifepoint, witnessing a fistfight in the school yard, and hearing from someone of a drive-by shooting are discrete, heterogeneous events that likely differ in their severity and impact on children (Horn & Trickett, 1998; Trickett et al., 2003). It is likely that other factors too, such as a child's relationship to the victim, his or her physical proximity to the event, the recency and severity of exposure, his or her previous traumatic experiences and losses, and developmental status, all may affect the effect of exposure and later youth outcomes (Pynoos & Nader, 1993; Zeanah & Scheeringa, 1996). However, these factors are rarely assessed, and findings remain inconclusive (Aisenberg, Ayon, Orozco-Figueroa, & Saltzman, in press).

Although research has documented that the consequences of exposure to community violence may vary, it also may be that outcomes differ according to the perspective of the reporter. In their study of the exposure of 137 middle school students to community violence, Aisenberg, Ayon, and colleagues (in press) found a general lack of concordance between what the students reported as their most bothersome violent exposure and the most violent occurrence they had experienced defined by an objective source. For example, although 50% of the youngsters had witnessed a violent death (homicide or suicide), only 14% of these students indicated that it was their most bothersome exposure.

An important, emerging area of research focuses on mediators of violence exposure on later outcomes for youth. One hypothesis is that children are indirectly affected by violence in the community through its impact on parenting, that is, parents' capacity to "parent" well. When parents are themselves traumatized by violence and danger in the surrounding environment—or stressed by social and economic deprivation—they may be less able to safeguard their children from harm because they

are overwhelmed by multiple stressors or become depressed or dissociative by the trauma. Low family management (including parental monitoring and supervision) is one factor that has been key to investigations of family processes and violence (Aisenberg, Trickett, et al., in press; Furstenberg, 1993; Linares et al., 2001; Pynoos, Steinberg, & Wraith, 1995). Furstenberg's (1993) qualitative study of families who were part of the McArthur-funded study, *Successful Adolescent Development Among Youth in High-Risk Settings*, examined the connections of neighborhood and family. The study, conducted in the Philadelphia area, involved open-ended interviews with parents and adolescent children from five inner-city neighborhoods. Respondents reported on their views of the community, including perceived resources, risks, and opportunities. Data from field notes of the project staff were used to establish linkages between various aspects of the neighborhood and functioning of families. Findings attest to the power of parenting as both a risk factor for developmental problems in children and a potential buffer against the consequences of environmental risks (see more below under "Resilience, Protective Factors, and Developmental Assets").

Although compelling, findings from existing research provide little insight into the long-term (i.e., multiyear), enduring impact of community violence exposure. For example, whether violence exposure in childhood leads to adulthood anxiety, PTSD, and depression is unclear. To generate evidence of these long-term effects, considerable investments must be made in ongoing and newly developed longitudinal studies. Also lacking is a clear idea of how or whether the effects of children's exposure to community violence in children differ by gender of the child. This is an important consideration for further research (Buka et al., 2001).

Finally, community violence is often thought of as distinct from other forms of violence, although it often co-occurs with violence within families (e.g., domestic violence and physical child abuse; Gorman-Smith & Tolan, 1998; Herrenkohl, Sousa, Tajima, Herrenkohl, & Moylan, in press). Many times, individuals are exposed to multiple forms of interpersonal violence in their lifetime. However, few studies have investigated multiple exposures in comparison. According to Buka and colleagues (2001), there is some evidence that family conflict and domestic violence moderate (and exacerbate) the relationship between community violence and poor outcomes in children. This overlap in exposure to multiple forms of violence raises a particularly challenging aspect of studying the effects of community violence on children because the effect of one form of violence exposure may be difficult to discern from another. The fact that community violence is often overlooked in studies of domestic violence and physical child abuse raises the



possibility that effects attributable to community violence exposure may be misattributed to these other forms of violence (Aisenberg & Mennen, 2000). Similarly, studies of community violence that do not account for intrafamilial violence may overestimate the effects of violence in the community. One implication of the co-occurrence of violence exposure is that studies of community violence should take into account the multiple contexts and forms of violence exposure and the multiple levels of its consequences.

## **Resilience, Protective Factors, and Developmental Assets**

When community violence characterizes the day-to-day environment of children, they are forced to develop coping styles and strategies to respond to constant intimidation, threats to safety and well-being, and loss of personal control. However, most children exposed to violence and other stressors are “resilient” in some form; that is, they function in one or more life domains better than one would expect given their vulnerability and exposure to one or multiple risk factors (Fraser & Richman, 2001; Masten, 1994, 2001; Rutter, 2001; Wolfe, 1999). Resilience, as applied to children in a stressful environment, is the dynamic process of transactions within and among multiple levels of children’s environment over time that influences their capacity to successfully adapt and function despite experiencing chronic stress and adversity (Garmezy, 1981; Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Walsh, 1998).

Researchers often use the term *protective factor* to describe those experiences, relationships, opportunities, and individual qualities that are thought to promote resilience in vulnerable children. Others have used the term *developmental asset* to capture a related set of variables generalizable to youths as a whole, not just to those exposed to a particular risk factor such as community violence (Benson, Roehlkepartain, & Sesma, 2004). Much of the earliest research on protection and assets focused mainly, if not exclusively, on individual qualities or traits, such as positive temperament and high IQ (Luthar et al., 2000; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). For children exposed to community violence, resilience research that focuses on single risk factors or single protective factors is limiting (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). Although it cannot be disputed that individual differences in children can have an impact on their response to violence and recovery from trauma (Masten, 2001), an exclusive focus on individual factors and personal characteristics can lead to blaming the victims if resilience is not achieved; that

is, those who do not succeed in overcoming the risk of community violence could be considered personally responsible for their problems (Luthar & Zelazo, 2003; Small & Memmo, 2004). A more balanced assessment and articulation of individual and contextual factors (micro to macro) related to resilience would provide a stronger foundation on which to understand and prevent the effects of violence exposure.

### **Research on Social Contextual Factors Related to Positive Coping**

Although studies in this area are limited, there is evidence that a child's adaptation and positive development following violence exposure depends on the social surroundings and environmental influences on the child and his or her family (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Yates et al., 2003). Research supports the hypothesis that risk and protective factors interact with demographic variables such as gender, age, socioeconomic status, social class, immigration history, culture, and race/ethnicity in predicting outcomes of community violence, whether framed as developmental challenges or as indicators of resilience (Resnick et al., 1997; Turner, Norman, & Zunz, 1995). Studies show that aspects of the environment in which a child lives have a pronounced effect on the child's capacity to overcome the deleterious effects of having been exposed to violence. For example, important protective influences emerge from parental support, adult mentoring, and positive community organizations (e.g., health, educational, religious, cultural, recreational, and social service organizations; Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Luthar & Zelazo, 2003).

Studies that have specifically focused on the resilience of children exposed to community violence have identified social support from a child's family (parent), school, and peer group to be important in resilience from repeated violence exposure (Hill & Madhere, 1996; O'Donnell, Schwab-Stone, & Muyeed, 2002). Family cohesion and positive coping on the part of parents also appear to lessen the negative impact of community violence (Buka et al., 2001; Plybon & Kliever, 2001). For example, many parents, despite living in high-crime neighborhoods, effectively promote the resilience of their children. In contrast to those who are overwhelmed by stressors in the environment, parents who perceive themselves as being able to successfully cope with danger are likely to be better at modeling effective coping and conveying a sense of security and confidence to their children, leading to their children enjoying higher self-esteem and greater confidence in their own ability to cope (Garbarino, Dubrow, Kostelny, & Pardo, 1992).

Studies of people living in war zones highlight the significance of interdependent coping, confirming that the level of emotional upset and anxiety displayed by parents, not the war itself, is the most important factor in predicting a child's response (Bat-Zion & Levy-Shiff, 1992; Garbarino et al., 1992). This dynamic could hold as well for community violence. Some research has found a reduction in externalizing problems among children in violent neighborhoods when they live in highly cohesive homes (Plybon & Kliwer, 2001). Gorman-Smith and Tolan (1998) found the level of organization and support within the family to moderate the association between exposure to community violence and later aggression and depression in youth.

In their recent study of sixth, eighth, and tenth grade students exposed to community violence, O'Donnell and her colleagues (2002) found that parent support and coping strongly promoted resilience but became less influential over time. In contrast, support from school appeared to become more influential over time, promoting resilience for children in several domains. Furthermore, O'Donnell and colleagues found that support from peers had a positive but weaker impact on children's resilience and in some cases had a negative impact. Ozer and Weinstein (2004) found that specific aspects of social support within the children's family (e.g., perceived parental helpfulness) and school (e.g., teacher helpfulness) provided some level of protection against the deleterious influence of community violence exposure. Perceived school safety also proved beneficial for some children.

Evidence from other studies shows the potential buffering influences of family bonding variables. Maternal closeness, time spent with family, and social support were shown in one study to provide protection for children who had witnessed community violence (Hammack et al., 2004). In addition, having a secure attachment to at least one parent or a significant adult figure appears to buffer the effect of violence exposure for some children (Engle, Castle, & Menon, 1996; Katz & Gottman, 1997; Werner, 1995). In her review of the literature, Luthar (2006) highlighted the role of secure attachment in early family relationships as an important moderator of community violence exposure.

The extent to which bonds of attachment and cohesion within families buffer the effects of violence exposure on children's development may depend in part on the degree of strain and level of disadvantage in the broader community. According to Agnew (1999), community characteristics have a direct effect on individual crime after individual-level variables are controlled. Communities also have an indirect effect on strain by influencing individual traits and the individual's immediate social environment. Research by Sampson and colleagues (2002) suggests that the effects of neighborhood and community characteristics may occur through their influence on the collective efficacy of residents and on the neighborhood

supervision of children. These relations may be particularly relevant to understanding protective and risk elements in the functioning of youth in high-risk, poor communities. Hammack and colleagues (2004) found that although social support emerged as a protective factor for vulnerable children, its positive (buffering) effect appeared to fade under conditions of particularly high risk. Gerard and Buehler (2004) found that adolescents who had multiple protective factors such as academic achievement, problem-solving ability, and self-esteem, when experiencing risk factors, including family detachment, school detachment, and neighborhood safety in two or more social settings, had higher levels of depressed mood and more conduct problems than did adolescents with risk factors in fewer social contexts. This finding underscores that adolescents are unlikely to thrive when they face difficult experiences across multiple settings of their lives, even if they possess the personal resources, or resilience, to deal with a challenging environment. Thus, this research points to the fact that under the weight of multiple and chronic stressors, including poverty, racism, maternal depression, and low social cohesion within neighborhoods, healthy parenting norms and positive parent-child bonds may become less protective when considering both the immediate (proximal) and long-term (distal) outcomes of community violence exposure.

As with individuals and families, communities fluctuate in their ability to support the well-being of residents under conditions of high stress (Leadbeater, Schellenbach, Maton, & Dodgen, 2004). In an important study by Furstenberg (1993), parents communicated the benefits of a cohesive social network as a counterbalance to neighborhood disadvantage. When neighborhood children are under the watch of other adult residents in the neighborhood, parenting and supervision of children is a less isolating experience. Collective vigilance and shared responsibility for children promotes a common set of norms and sanctions that leads to better protection and more uniform monitoring of children. Where collective strategies of parenting prevail, the burden of caregiving for any one parent is spread among many, increasing the likelihood that in times of high stress within families, children will encounter fewer challenges, greater stability, and more consistent messages of strength and reassurance. In addition, collective enforcement of norms provides an opportunity for positive guidance and role modeling on the part of multiple, able, and influential adults (Coleman, 1988).

According to Mowbray and colleagues (2007), community resilience emerges from community-level resources that enhance residents' abilities to adapt in positive ways to risk. Social capital resources, institutional resources, and economic resources are three types of resources that contribute to community resilience.

## **Further Research on Protection and Resilience in Children Exposed to Community Violence**

The fact that researchers have begun to examine the role of protection in the lives of young people represents a positive shift away from deficit-centered models that exclusively focus on risks. Because children exposed to community violence often face multiple stressors and risks at multiple levels on a consistent, often daily, basis, it is necessary to further investigate the cumulative impact of risks alongside, or in competition with, developmental gains. Also, research is needed to pinpoint the timing and duration of exposure to a particular protective factor (e.g., parental monitoring matters in the effects on children's development and potential for avoiding and/or overcoming the risk of community violence exposure). In addition, more needs to be learned of the ways in which individual strengths (e.g., positive coping) and assets (e.g., social networks) materialize and are maintained over time. There have been very few prospective studies that have followed child victims of community violence into adulthood to understand the potentially enduring effects of community violence or processes of resilience at the individual and community levels. Further research is also needed to identify the cross-level, dynamic, and transactional protective processes derived from family and neighborhood factors and other cultural and resource or economic factors that influence an individual's and a community's experiences of violence and that can enhance well-being. Factors requiring additional attention from researchers include cultural identity, resources for child care, community cohesiveness, and meaningful employment opportunities within a community (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Kemp, Whittaker, & Tracy, 1997).

Qualitative research approaches, focused on the strengths and resources of parents and communities, may offer an opportunity to better understand the most salient protective factors in the family and community and the processes of adaptive coping and survival in the face of high stress and traumatic exposure to repetitive community violence and loss (Grant et al., 2000; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). Perceptions of resilience, the meaning of residents' neighborhood and their experiences within the locale, their perceptions and attributions of threat and violent events, and their use of neighborhood institutions are all crucial aspects warranting further assessment and investigation to inform intervention and policy efforts. Qualitative research can also be instrumental in understanding neighborhoods in a more refined manner than is possible via survey research or research based on census data. Although important, census data fail to capture the context of the day-to-day interactions of residents and the dynamic processes that promote and/or mitigate violence in a community. For example, although

the prevalence and concentration of small corner markets selling alcohol in a community may be noted by drive-through observations of neighborhoods, and although surveys can reveal residents' common knowledge of the sale of alcohol to minors by the merchants of these stores, qualitative data gathered from focus groups can reveal that residents choose not to report this illegal sale of alcohol. Their decision is based on hardships in obtaining food, household items, and cultural services that the closure of these accessible stores would create because the nearest large chain grocery store is several miles away and because many residents are dependent on public transportation.

Qualitative methods can also contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the history of the community. For example, immigration patterns shift, and neighborhoods may dramatically change within the short span of 2 years from a predominantly African American community to a largely immigrant community of Mexican Americans. This process has profound effects on services and levels of trust within the residents of the community and among merchants, service providers, and law enforcement officials. Large-scale observational studies also are useful, although these are both costly and difficult to carry out.

Although not exclusive to community violence, some research has begun to show that to achieve positive outcomes, some of the most vulnerable children require exposure to not just one but multiple protective influences in the family and surrounding contexts (Benson et al., 2004; Herrenkohl et al., 2003). Further research can help elucidate this pattern and provide greater clarity and specificity important for policy development and implementation and intervention.

Another important area that warrants further research is culture and its interplay with violence exposure and resilience. Debate exists as to defining good adaptation in different cultural contexts and determining who should define these criteria (Small & Memmo, 2004). The construct of resilience, as currently defined, involves a subjective judgment of what constitutes an individual's "success" or ability to overcome the odds. This judgment is largely made by persons who are outsiders to the high-risk context in which purported resilient individuals reside. Resilience is most often determined by the dominant culture, particularly when speaking of children of color. The term *resilience* thus is not an expression that children and families living in high-crime neighborhoods typically use to describe or apply to themselves. Although the dominant culture often portrays resilience as the success of the individual as being the exception (e.g., in leaving the perils of an inner-city environment), ethnic communities tend to focus on the collective. In prioritizing the well-being of the collective over independence and

individual advancement, ethnic communities may view resilience in terms of standing on the shoulders of others, with the understanding that inherent in one's success is the responsibility to do good for the community. The collectivist nature of many communities of color is a major strength that can promote and sustain positive growth and prosocial development. Future research on resilience should include the perspective of the constituents and their cultural context in defining and understanding resilience.

Findings indicate the need to identify protective factors that are ecologically valid and culturally relevant for the population of interest (Grant et al., 2000). Although social forces, such as racism and economic inequality, may interact with the influences of early childhood to foster the expression of violence, a child's ethnic culture and its values and norms may serve as a buffer against adverse social circumstances (National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention, 2004). Clauss-Ehlers and Lopez Levi (2002) posit that cultural values such as *familismo* in the Latino community act as buffers against violence. Among African Americans, a positive ethnic identity has been found to be associated with the development of increased self-esteem (Spencer, Fegley, & Harpalani, 2003).

Additional research is needed to understand and specify the nature of the cultural and contextual factors that shape the varied experiences, perceptions, and interpretation of community violence and outcomes across racial/ethnic populations (Bartelt, 1994; Brodsky, 1997; Guterman et al., 2000). To date, community violence research has largely focused on African American children and families. Latinos, Asians and Pacific Islanders, and American Indians and Alaskan Natives have received only limited attention in the literature on outcomes of community violence and protection for children (Aisenberg et al., in press; Compas, Connor-Smith, Saltzman, Thomsen, & Wadsworth, 2001). Serious commitment to the disproportionate number of youth of color affected by violence (as victims, witnesses, and perpetrators) is needed.

Future studies "should be guided by models sensitive to the effects of culture on developmental processes and to culture's unique contributions to how successful adaptation is achieved in the face of adversity" (Flores, Cicchetti, & Rogosch, 2005, p. 348). Such research is crucial to understanding the relationship of racial, cultural, and community infrastructure and "protective" factors that reduce risk and increase resilience of specific groups with respect to mental health and to incorporating knowledge about such protective factors into the development and implementation of appropriate mental health treatments and services (National Implementation Research Network, the Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute, 2003). Also, research that examines and compares the experiences and outcomes of immigrant children and children of immigrant and refugee parents

is particularly needed given the pattern of trauma and violence often experienced by families who have fled war and violence in their native country.

## Conclusion

This article focuses “beyond the individual” as a foundation for the study of community violence and calls for a fundamental shift toward understanding and promoting resilience at the family and community levels. Consideration and integration of neighborhood-level factors and outcomes are important for theory building, practice, and policy development to decrease the prevalence and risk of community violence and strengthen intervention programs for children and their families. We suggest that researchers engage residents of the communities they study as active participants in the efforts of knowledge building and transformation of communities and society. Inclusion of residents’ perceptions and insights regarding community violence and its effects and inclusion of their understanding of resilience are crucial to moving the field toward a more nuanced understanding of protective factors and risk factors and social processes. Such knowledge is needed to inform intervention programs capable of promoting positive development and outcomes for children adversely affected by violence in their communities, to promote resilience, and to prevent the perpetration of violence.

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**Eugene Aisenberg**, PhD, is an assistant professor in the School of Social Work at the University of Washington. His research focuses on exposure to community violence among Latino and African American children and their families and associated mental health and behavioral outcomes.

**Todd Herrenkohl**, PhD, is an associate professor in the School of Social Work, University of Washington and a research scientist with the UW Social Development Research Group. His work has focused on the development and prevention of youth violence, consequences of family violence for children, and resilience in vulnerable youth and families.