

Trauma inside and Out: A Descriptive Cross-Sectional Study of Family, Community and Psychological Wellbeing amongst Pediatric Victims of Interpersonal Violence

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Abstract : Background: Exposure to violence not only has negative psychological impact on children but is a risk factor for children becoming recurrent victims of violence. However, little is known regarding the degree to which child victims of violence are exposed to trauma at home and in their community, or its association with specific psychological diagnoses. Objective: The aims of this study were to perform in-depth characterizations of family, community and psychological wellness amongst pediatric victims of interpersonal violence. Methods: As standard of care at the Saint Louis Children's Hospital pediatric emergency department (ED), social workers perform in-depth interviews with all children presenting due to violent interpersonal encounters. In this retrospective cross-sectional study, we collected data from social work interviews on family structure, exposure to violence in the community and the home, as well as history of psychological diagnoses amongst children ages 8-19 years who presented to the ED for injuries related to interpersonal violence from 2014-2017. Results: A total of 407 patients presenting to the ED for an interpersonal violent encounter were analyzed. The average age of studied youths was 14.7 years (SD 2.5). Youths were 97.5% African American ethnicity and 66.6% male. 67.8% described their home having a nonnuclear family structure, 50% of which reported living with a single mother. Of the 21% who reported having incarcerated family members, 56.3% reported their father being incarcerated, 15% reported their mother being incarcerated, and 12.5% reported multiple family members being incarcerated. 11.3% reported witnessing domestic violence in their home. 12.8% of youths reported some form of child abuse. The type of child abuse was not specified in 29.3% of cases, but physical abuse (32.8%) followed by sexual abuse (22.4%) were the most commonly reported. 14.5% had history of placement in foster care and/or adoption. 64% reported having witnessed violence in their community. 30.2% reported having lost friends or family due to violence, and of those, 26.4% reported the loss of a cousin, 18.9% the loss of a friend, 16% the loss of their father, and 12.3% the loss of their brother due to violence. Of the 22.4% youths with psychiatric diagnose(s), 48.4% had multiple diagnoses, the most common of which were ADD/ADHD (62.6%), followed by depression (31.9%), bipolar disorder (27.5%) and anxiety (15.4%). Conclusions: A remarkable proportion of children presenting to EDs due to interpersonal violence have a history of exposure to instability and violence in their homes and communities. Additionally, psychological diagnoses are frequent among pediatric victims of violence. More research is needed to better understand the association between trauma exposure, psychological health and violent victimization amongst children.

Keywords : community violence, emergency department, pediatric interpersonal violence, pediatric trauma, psychological effects of trauma

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