

Understanding the Perception of Place and Its Impact on Community Violence

Dorothy Dillard, PhD;¹ Howard Henderson, PhD;² Johnny Rice II, DrPH;³ Amy D. Goldstein, BA;⁴ Maruice Mangum, PhD⁵

1. Director, Center for Neighborhood Revitalization and Research, Delaware State University

2. Professor of Justice Administration and Director of Center for Justice Research, Texas Southern University

3. Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Criminal Justice, College of Behavioral and Social Sciences, Coppin State University.

4. Vice President, Strategy, Thurgood Marshall College Fund

5. Professor of Political Science and Chair of the Department of Political Science, Jackson State University

Abstract

In this article, we explore the responses of 357 African American men between 15- and 24-years old living in four high crime high violence cities to better understand their perception of their environment and its impact on community violence. We focus on study participants' perceptions of their cities, explanations of violence, and their perceived contribution to the level of violence. Respondents describe their cities in grim terms with few opportunities. And, from their perspective, the dangerous environment in which they live necessitates gun possession, potentially perpetuating community violence. Our findings affirm that as with any other public health issue, the perception of place matters in understanding community violence. Further, our findings underscore the importance of seeking and responding to the lived experience of those most likely to be victims and perpetrators of community violence in crafting and implementing interventions.

Introduction

Decades of research has continuously and consistently documented the inextricable relationship between crime and environment. As the public health field developed, the impact of environment on health took a more prominent place. In fact, the socioecological model embraced by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to address gun violence has its roots in the social sciences. Bronfenbrenner's¹ socioecological theory of human development posits that our development is influenced by a combination of interrelated and varying factors at the personal, community and societal levels. Place or community in the socioecological model (SEM) has become a central component of understanding and addressing public health issues. The Delaware Journal of Public Health issue, Place Matters, demonstrates the many ways in which environment, frequently noted as community or neighborhood, impacts health. In that issue, Phillips² describes the Vital Conditions Framework, which is a place-based framework and includes safety as a vital condition. Shannon³ introduces a public health intervention designed to reduce school shootings, demonstrating the importance of crafting place specific interventions.

Similarly, the Prevention Institute has compiled a series of fact sheets summarizing findings from the extensive literature on the relationship between health and violence and the impact of environment on both. As captured in the fact sheets, research shows higher rates of chronic diseases, such as asthma, obesity, and diabetes, among children and adults exposed to violence.⁴ The fact sheets also emphasize worse health outcomes for those living in unsafe neighborhoods compared to those living in neighborhoods described as safe.⁵

Despite this sound scientific foundation, we continue to focus on individual factors to explain both criminal activity and health outcomes. In turn, we tend to prioritize individual level interventions and fail to address the community level factors embedded in the socioecological public health model. Findings from a recent study⁶ examining gun possession in four cities characterized by high levels of crime and violence highlights the need to understand how those most likely to be victims and perpetrators of violence view and adapt to their environment. In this article, we further examine the perception of place and its impact on community violence among African American males between 15 and 24 years who possess guns and live in cities marked by high crime and high violence. We discuss how the negative perception of their cities influences their decisions to possess guns. We also examine how they consider their contribution to violence. We then discuss the public health implications.

Methods

In 2020, Thurgood Marshall College received a grant from the National Collaborative of Gun Violence Researchers to conduct a two phased study on gun possession among African American males between 15 and 24 years old. The study was conducted in four cities experiencing high crime and high violence: Baltimore, Maryland; Jackson, Mississippi; Houston, Texas; and, Wilmington, Delaware. In the first phase of the study, we examined the city characteristics for descriptive and comparative purposes as well as to assess how their characteristics aligned with previous research findings. We found that environmental factors, such as population density, were statistically significant in explaining violent crime rates but not in explaining property crime rates.⁷

Recognizing that statistical analyses only tell us so much and that they are exponentially more powerful when coupled with qualitative information, we complemented Phase I with a qualitative study exploring the factors associated with gun possession among African American young men. Our qualitative component, Phase II, was based in grounded theory⁸ and employed community engaged research principles.⁹ Based on the factors associated with crime and violence identified through previous research, we developed an interview guide comprised of seven broad themes: background (race, ethnicity, age, family, housing); personality, influences and life goals; school, employment and income; arrest and justice system experience; gun exposure and possession, and views on guns, violence, and the city. We vetted the interview guide and research protocol with our community partners.

We aimed to interview 400 study participants, 100 from each city. Eligible participants included African American males between the ages of 15 and 24 years old who possessed or recently possessed a gun. Recruitment varied slightly across sites with the Wilmington site relying exclusively on a grassroots community partner to recruit participants and the other three sites sharing recruitment with community partners. The study sample includes 95 respondents from Baltimore, 86 from Jackson, 100 from Houston, and 93 from Wilmington for a total of 374 respondents or 94% of our target sample size. The sample size for the analysis was 357,

excluding 10 of the interviews that could not be used due to audio issues with the taping and seven respondents who did not identify as Black or African American. The respondents were between 15 and 24 years of age, with an average age of 20. About one fifth of the respondents dropped out of high school. Most respondents either graduated from high school or were still in school.

We collected information across a broad range of topics which produced an abundance of valuable information to inform policy and practice. In brief, we found that the young men in our study possessed guns because it was necessary to survive in the environment.⁶ In this article, we explore our respondents' perception of their city and the violence that characterizes it. We also examine their explanation of the violence and their perception of how they contribute to the violence.

Findings

The findings across all study sites are presented for the interview sections related to perception of place: city description, reasons for high levels of city violence, contribution to city violence, and available positive opportunities. More detailed findings from our respondents living in Wilmington are highlighted.

City Description

Most respondents across the four study sites describe their cities in negative terms. Two-thirds used only negative terms, such as dangerous and violent, to describe their city. In Wilmington, 86% of the respondents described the city negatively and 74% used only negative terms. Wilmington was described as "murder town," "treacherous," "crazy," "chaotic," and "a war zone" by multiple respondents.

Only 7 (2%) of the respondents described their city in positive terms. None of the Wilmington respondents described the city in positive terms. Only 22 (6%) respondents used qualified positive terms, noting that their city was a mix of good and bad. Among the 87 Wilmington respondents included in the analysis, only three (3%) described Wilmington in qualified positive terms, such as "beautiful but has an ugly side." Nine (3%) respondents, including one Wilmington respondent, noted that their city had potential.

Reasons for High Levels of Violence

When asked why the level of violence was high, most respondents noted multiple factors. When responses were grouped based on similarity, two categories, negative influences and lack of socialization, emerged as the most common. Negative influences, including music, social media, and peers, was the most common category. About 17% of all respondents but 34% of Wilmington respondents explained the high levels of violence as the result of negative influences. Among the Wilmington group, over half specifically noted "beefing" on social media as a key element fueling violence. As one respondent put it, "There's so much violence in the city because people be hating. They be beefing over dumb stuff. Over money. They shoot you over females. All sorts of dumb stuff."

The second most common explanation for the high levels of violence was lack of socialization, such as absent parents and no role models. About 12% of all respondents and one quarter of Wilmington respondents contributed the high levels of violence to the lack of positive

socialization. One Wilmington respondent summed it up by saying, “Mothers aren't raising kids; fathers aren't around. Not enough money for food. Children aren't being taken care of.” Another commented, “Violence is all some people know.”

Not surprisingly, easy access to and prevalence of guns was also a common factor in explaining violence. Interestingly, however, less than 10% of the entire sample, including the Wilmington group, mentioned guns as the primary reason for the high levels of violence. More typically, guns were one of many factors, such as crime, poverty, absent parents, and social media, that contributed to violence. Given that all the study participants possessed a gun, we asked them if they thought they contributed to the violence. Only 22 (6%) respondents said they currently contributed to the violence and only 13 (4%) participants noted that they contributed to the violence in the past. In total, only 10% of the young men identified with contributing to the high levels of violence in their city. In Wilmington, 12 (14%) respondents acknowledge they currently contributed to the violence and another 12 (14%) reported that in the past they contributed to the violence. In Wilmington, the proportion of study participants (28%) recognizing their contribution to the violence was almost three times that of the entire study group.

Opportunities

When asked about the opportunities in their cities, less than one fifth (17%) of the young men we interviewed reported that their city had good opportunities. In Wilmington, only 10 (12%) noted that there are positive opportunities and only five respondents named specific types of opportunities. The types of opportunities identified included sports, school, or jobs. None of them named specific programs or services. For the entire study group, 11% responded that their city offered no opportunities, including about 8% of the Wilmington group. Several of the Wilmington respondents explained that there were no opportunities for them because they were Black, had criminal records, and/or were too young to participate in programs. One Wilmington participant explained the lack of opportunities are the result of a lack of leadership: “Because we have no community leaders. We have no ... backbone for the city. We have no one standing up for what's right and coming here and letting everyone know enough is enough.”

Discussion

The young men we interviewed shared similar perceptions of living in cities characterized by crime and violence. Over two-thirds of our study participants described their cities as a negative social environment with few opportunities. When asked to describe their city, single word responses, such as violent, dangerous, crazy, an in flames, were typical. Wilmington was frequently referred to as “murder town,” referencing the 2014 Newsweek article¹⁰ on violence in Wilmington. Similarly, Baltimore was called “a bushel of crabs” by many. The young men told us that the people in the city were “angry and miserable” and comments, such as “if you say the wrong thing, you're dead and that's the end of that” underscored the sense of danger that permeates their everyday lives.

In their opinion, surviving this environment required a gun. As we previously described elsewhere,⁶ all knew where they could easily obtain a gun and two-thirds acknowledged currently possessing a gun. Our study respondents explained that they possessed a gun for safety, and some noted that they needed a gun to protect themselves from enemies and others that they were “beefing with.” The young men were introduced to guns at an early age, typically by friends or family members. Most had handled a gun before they were 15 years old with a few

reporting that they were younger than ten years old when they first had access to a gun. Few had been trained to use a gun.

The young men we interviewed painted similar stories about the negative impact of the environment in which they were raised. Socialized in a violent environment and frequently traumatized by that environment, the young men in our study felt that their survival is dependent on possibly perpetuating that violence by carrying a gun. More than once we heard, “Violence is all some people know.” However, few acknowledged their contribution to the violence. When asked why they did not think they contributed to the violence, most respondents did not have a clear reasoning. A few, however, noted that they did not contribute to the violence because they had not killed anyone. Several others explained their response by saying that they possessed a gun for protection and not to hurt others.

Many felt that things could not be changed. Others had a more hopeful outlook as highlighted by responses such as, “I mean, if there was more city events, things like that, the mayor was getting along and participating and things like this and giving back to the communities. I don't think there would be too much violence...” and “It can be fixed if people came together to stop the bloodshed.”

Practice and experience show us that we can change the environmental factors that fuel violence, crime, and poor health. We can make our schools more inclusive and nurturing environments. We can provide more opportunities in our communities for positive social interaction and growth, recreation, and work force development. We can address the trauma resulting from exposure to the community level violence. We can improve our police community relations. However, we cannot expect sustained violence reduction if we do not solicit and respond to the realities faced by those living in communities marked by violence.

Public Health Implications

The responses from our study participants remind us that not only does place matter, but perception of place also matters. The public health implication is that we must couple our individual level interventions with community level interventions. In other words, we must address all levels of the socioecological model. If the environmental factors, such as poverty, poor education, limited job opportunities, and inadequate resources, are not addressed the individual level interventions will have limited impact.

Our findings also emphasize that effective public health interventions, including community level interventions, must be informed by the lived experience. The young men in our study knew what they and their communities need to combat gun violence: jobs, better schools, positive social and recreational activities, and inclusion in community planning and events. These match the findings from research.⁵

Simply increasing opportunities and resources without input from and collaboration with those in need rarely result in the desired effect. Almost 25 years ago, Penchansky and Thomas,¹¹ established that access to resources is a complex issue with interrelated elements related to affordability, availability, accessibility, accommodation, and acceptability. Greater attention to acceptability or the degree to which those in need of the interventions are comfortable with it, requires us to involve not only the victims of violence but also the perpetrators as we design and implement the community level response to violence.

Dr. Dillard may be contacted at ddillard@desu.edu.

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