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## Urban Youth Violence: Do Definitions and Reasons for Violence Vary by Gender?

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**ABSTRACT** *This study explored how young boys and girls living in low income urban neighborhoods defined and described reasons associated with youth violence. Five focus groups were conducted with 29 youth between the ages of 8 and 12 recruited from four selected study neighborhoods. Participants were asked to describe youth violence. Appropriate probes were used to explore similarities and differences by gender with regard to the reasons for violence. Definitions of youth violence were consistent across participants and included verbal threats, physical contact, and often the use of a weapon. Several common reasons for violence were found among both boys and girls; romantic relationships, respect, idle time, gangs/cliques, and witnessing violence. Reasons for violence unique to boys include fighting about issues related to money and illicit drugs. Gossip was identified as a reason specific to why girls engage in violence. Youth violence was perceived as a common problem impacting the lives of the boys and girls in this study. Although many of the reasons identified for violence are similar among boys and girls, select gender differences do exist. Future research and prevention efforts to address youth violence should engage young people in efforts to understand and address this important public health topic.*

**KEYWORDS** *Gender, Urban, Violence, Youth.*

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### INTRODUCTION

Youth violence is one of the most significant public health problems facing our society and low income urban communities today<sup>1,2</sup> and is the single factor that American youth fear the most.<sup>3</sup> Despite widespread prevention and intervention efforts, the homicide rate for young men in the United States is without question the highest in the world.<sup>4,5</sup> Homicide still remains the leading cause of death among 15–24 year-old African Americans in the United States,<sup>6</sup> and in 2001, an average of 15 young people between the ages of 10 and 24 were murdered everyday.<sup>7</sup> Focusing on homicide alone only just begins to shed light on the magnitude of this true public health epidemic.

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Recent research indicated that the ratio of nonfatal injuries to homicides was 94:1, highlighting that concentrating on homicide as the sole outcome measure of violence greatly under represents the true burden and implication of youth violence in America today.<sup>8</sup> Although being male is commonly viewed as a risk factor for experiencing violence, girls appear to be engaging in substantially more violent crime than a decade ago, with aggravated assaults up 137% and murder up 64%.<sup>9</sup>

Most definitions of youth violence traditionally focus on the outcome of violent acts such as psychological, emotional, or physical action causing pain, injury, or death among but not exclusive to young people.<sup>10,11</sup> Although these definitions are functional for labeling and categorizing incidents, they fail to capture the local perceptions and experiences regarding youth violence. Understanding these local dynamics is critical to designing and implementing effective local intervention and prevention strategies.<sup>12,13</sup>

Previous studies have reported that being male is a primary risk factor for experiencing violence, particularly for young people living in low socioeconomic urban settings.<sup>14-17</sup> Although young men are still more likely to be involved in violence, the gender gap in experiencing violence as perpetrators and victims appears to be narrowing.<sup>2,14,16,18,19</sup> In 2000, girls accounted for 23% of all juvenile arrests for aggravated assaults in the United States, 31% of all simple assaults.<sup>20</sup> Since 1987, the incidence of female juvenile violence has also increased annually as a portion of the total violent crime index.<sup>20,21</sup> From 1992 to 2001, the percent change of arrests for boys under age 18 for aggravated assaults (decrease of 21%) and simple assaults (increase of 18%) was substantially less than that of girls under age 18, (increases of 24 and 66%, respectively).<sup>21</sup>

Increasing attention is being paid to the growing rates of violence involving young women, and recent research has found that girls in urban neighborhoods have come to adopt many of the same behaviors as their male counterparts. This research asserts that young women in urban neighborhoods are increasingly interested in issues of respect, peer recognition, and status and that they are more likely than ever in the past to use abusive language, posturing, and violence using weapons such as knives, box cutters, and guns to resolve conflicts.<sup>16,17,19</sup> While the primary causes for violence among young men are often considered to be issues associated with illicit drugs and neighborhood turf, the reasons for violence among young women is often gossip and issues related to romantic relationships.<sup>16</sup>

There were two primary research questions addressed during this investigation. First, how do young people in low socioeconomic urban neighborhoods define and describe "youth violence"? Second, what are the perceived similarities or differences that exist regarding the reasons that young boys and girls engage in violence?

## METHODS

### Subject Recruitment

Young boys and girls were recruited for participation in focus group discussions, and eligibility criteria included residing with the selected study neighborhoods and being between 8 and 12 years of age. Five coed focus group discussion sessions were conducted to explore definitions of and reasons for youth violence. Twenty nine youth participated in the study with the average age of the participants being 11 years of age; one third were boys and the rest girls. All of the participants were African American. Detailed discussion of the study neighborhood selection process and investigation methods can be found elsewhere (Yonas MA, O'Campo P, Burke JG, Gielen AC, Thomas AL. unpublished data, 2005). In brief, all study neighborhoods

were low income with most of the households (70%) reporting a median household income under \$25,000 per year.<sup>22</sup> Very few of the households in the study neighborhoods were owner occupied (13%) and close to a third were vacant.<sup>22</sup>

### **Qualitative Data Collection**

Participants were instructed to think of “young people or youth” in the neighborhood as those “their age or older, up to around age 17” and were encouraged to think and talk about “violence that involves youth in their neighborhood.” For example, participants were asked to first share what they think of when they hear the term “youth violence.” Open-ended questions and appropriate probes were used to explore their definitions of youth violence and the associated reasons for such violence presented during the sessions.

A number of steps were taken to facilitate participant comfort. For example, priority was given to identifying familiar locations such as a community center room or home of a local resident within the participants’ neighborhoods for conducting the focus group sessions. Second, ground rules for group participation were provided and collectively agreed upon; rules highlighted the importance of taking turns, respecting each participant’s view, and allowing equal opportunity for participation. Third, interactive activities were utilized to facilitate discussion with participants in a format that was entertaining and particularly sensitive to mediating the dynamics of power between researchers and participants. The focus group facilitators (MY and JB), who were not from the study neighborhoods, openly recognized the young participants as local “expert” in the lives and experiences of neighborhood youth.

The focus groups discussions lasted an average of 60 minutes and were audio-taped. During the groups, participant responses were recorded on a flip chart and made visible to all. This format allowed for interactive discussion about the items listed and appropriate clarification. In addition to the tapes and chart notes, a second member of the research team (JB) took hand written field notes.

For safety, security, and anonymity purposes, the young participants adopted “nick names” and were encouraged to not share personal experiences or specific details regarding events in their neighborhood. Informed consent was obtained from each participant’s parent or guardian. At the beginning of each focus group discussion, the consent forms were collected and the assent form was reviewed to obtain assent from each participant. Refreshments were provided and the participants were reimbursed with a \$10.00 gift card to a local toy store for their time and thoughts. All procedures were approved by the institutional review board, The Committee on Human Subjects Research for the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

### **Data Analysis**

Audiotape recordings of focus group sessions were transcribed verbatim and reviewed for accuracy. The transcripts were reviewed by two members of the research team (MY, JB) who developed an initial set of thematic codes consistent with the study objectives and field guide. Consistent with qualitative analytic procedures, the transcripts were then coded and summarized.<sup>23</sup> QSR NVivo, a qualitative software package, was used during the data analysis process to manage, index, and consolidate individual text segments.<sup>24</sup> Results were organized into four theme categories: definitions of youth violence; similarities between boys’ and girls’ reasons of violence; boy-specific reasons for violence; and girl-specific reasons for violence. The original code categories were examined for additional emergent new subcategories throughout the transcription and data analysis process.

## Findings

*Definition of “youth violence”* There was a great deal of consistency in the definitions and descriptions of “youth violence,” and the causes and incidents of violence almost exclusively illustrated incidents of girls fighting with girls and boys fighting with boys.

Definitions of youth violence included the use of verbal threats including “threatening someone” or using “violent speech like profanity.” Many participants spoke of physical actions such as “fist fighting,” “kicking,” “stomping,” and “shootings.” Participants often described youth violence as involving “guns,” “knives,” “baseball bats,” “bottles in the alley,” “broom handles,” and “utensils” because they were particularly easy to acquire and conceal. A common sentiment presented was that girls were more likely to use weapons than boys. For example, one participant stated “. . . like bottles, bottles and knives. I know girls use bottles and knives more than boys.” And when directly asked about the role of weapons in violence, another participant said, “boys use their hands and feet . . . use their hands and stuff . . .”

Many comments indicated that incidents of violence involving young people would start small but often escalate into larger altercations involving weapons and other people such as friends and family members. One such scenario was provided by a young man when he stated “well . . . like when people start fighting and, like, they might start losing, they like go in the house and say I be back and bring out a gun and start shooting and stuff like that.”

A term used to describe youth violence, not previously found in the literature, was “banking.” Referred to by both boys and girls, banking was described as “banking people . . . like if one person is getting banked, 14 other people trying to bank ‘em, that’s getting banked . . . like more than one people on another person!” Banking was described as an episode often lasting just a few minutes that involved first hitting the victim until they fell to the ground and then stomping on and kicking the victim in the face, head, and body, quickly and collectively. When asked to further describe “banking,” participants in all of the focus group sessions expressed feelings that these were “serious” and brutal events. One young woman commented that “bankings” often escalate into larger altercations or cycles of altercations between individuals or groups of individuals, male or female, when she described a scenario from her neighborhood “yeah . . . because when, umm . . . this boy was fighting and then he got banked . . . and . . . he went in the house and got a gun, like a machine gun, and start shootin’ and six people died!”

## Common Reasons for Youth Violence

Several common reasons for violence were found among both boys and girls; romantic relationships, respect, idle time, gangs/cliques, and witnessing violence.

*Romantic Relationships* When asked what the most common reasons that boys fight in the neighborhood, the young participants did not hesitate in their responses, often yelling that fights were frequently about romantic issues with girls. Common responses included, “boys fight cause they like girls . . . yeah . . . you go with somebody else’s girlfriend that they like, and they kinda, they get REAL mad!” or that “they fight because other boys be talking to their girlfriend . . . or they tease them” about the girlfriend.

Responses also described scenarios involving large groups involved in the fighting, “also boys ‘bank’ . . . boys fight cause they think they (another boy) is takin’ their

girlfriend.” This appeared to be a fairly common scenario that involved a boy hearing about it, either through gossip or observation that another boy was talking with and trying to “take” his girlfriend. This would often result in the first boy responding with violence on his own or getting a large group of other boys, his peers, together to “bank” the other one.

Similarly, the primary reason that girls fight with other girls was about boys and romantic situations involving a boy (i.e., boys they might like). When asked what the most common reasons that girls fight, the responses were immediate and energetic. One participant shared that most fights with girls start, “cause that’s her boyfriend . . . cause one might, they might fight over a boy cause a girl might like a boy and another girl might like the same boy . . .” Participants described girls fighting over boys that were much older than themselves. For example, one participant stated, “girls fight over boys . . . they want ‘em and they too young to have ‘em.” Many times it was mentioned that “. . . [girls] get jealous . . . REAL jealous!” and that these feelings led to feelings of competition, anger, and physical altercations which often resulted in “banking” another girl.”

*Respect* Issues related to respect were felt to be a common reason for youth violence among both boys and girls. Examples of disrespect included bumping into someone, intentionally or unintentionally on the street or in school, “stepping on their shoes,” talking about someone close to them who had died or was killed, staring at or “muggin’” someone, or talking about “someone’s mother” or another family member.

An additional type of disrespect for girls was identified as touching or “messing with” with another girl’s hair or clothes. For example, one participant spoke of the relationship in the following way; “. . . your clothes and your hair . . . like if you pull their hair, they get real mad. And, then the other girls . . . then the girl would turn around and then they would start fighting, or if somebody mess up your hair, they ready to fight.”

Similarly, statements described a culture of violence in the study neighborhoods which was driven by being perceived as strong, tough, and worthy of respect. Examples summarizing this general sentiment include, “I think boys might fight cause they think they tough, the same thing with the girls, they think they tough too,” “just picking fights . . . because some boys think that the other boys are tougher than him” or that “some people . . . they just know . . . they know they can beat you and they be wantin’ to be fightin’ cause they know they can beat you!”

*Idle Time* A third common reason for violence was idle time. One female participant highlighted the role of idle time when she said, “I know why . . . the reason why girls AND boys fight . . . because they don’t have nothin’ better to do!” A general scenario presented was of a few young people, either boys or girls, hanging out on the street or in the recreation center deciding to “bank ‘em (another young person) just because,” indicating that the violence may often be the result of opportunity and not necessarily for any specific reason.

*Gangs and Cliques* The importance of gangs/cliques was discussed often by the participants. An important distinction to raise was that girls groups were defined differently than boys; “boys [are] in the gang and girls are [in] what’s called . . . a little clique.” Violence associated with gangs for the boys or cliques for the girls often related to neighborhood turf, gang, or clique colors and identity. For example,

one participant stated that “you know, how boys got their little gangs and nobody that ain’t in their gang can’t do nothing in the gang cause they’ll want to bank whoever says what in the gang. And, if you in the gang . . . it’s not (just) the color, it’s the jersey (NBA jersey uniform). It’s them jerseys . . . like the Lakers . . . the 76ers.” The importance of the gang colors was often discussed and is highlighted by one participants’ comment about how boys are always “talking about whose colors are the baddest!” The important of such issues for girls was also quite apparent. For example, one participant stated, “yeah . . . they all got to dress alike . . . they all wear the same colors. Whoever don’t got . . . whoever got their colors, then they (better be) ready to fight. Like if all of us had like pink and blue, if the other person have pink or blue . . . we . . . we fight them cause we had their colors . . . and they try to think they cute with our colors on!”

*Witnessing Violence* The final common reason for youth violence was the issue of witnessing fighting in the home between parents or other neighborhood adults which was perceived as an important influence on why boys and girls experience violence. For example, one participant stated, “like . . . children, they see their mother and their father fightin! So they think it’s good to fight, so they also want to fight.” The participants expressed a feeling that witnessing such violence supported the attitude and modeling of such behavior was acceptable.

#### **Reasons for Violence Specific to Boys**

Reasons for violence unique to boys include fighting about issues related to money and illicit drugs and often these two reasons were interrelated. Participants said that there were fights “if somebody owes somebody money and they won’t give it to ‘em” or there were fights about, “drugs . . . like, umm, (who is) making more, or who made the most money.” A number of comments were also made on the use of illicit drugs and alcohol in relation to boys and their involvement in violence. For example, one respondent stated, “because they (boys) get high and then they go and they fighting and they gonna be picking with people and stuff . . . they get so high that they do some crazy things!”

#### **Reasons for Violence Specific to Girls**

Gossip, or “he said she said” issues as described by the participants, was identified as a specific reason for violence among girls. For example, one participant stated, “it’s like they run their mouth . . . they run their mouth to the wrong person that’s gonna go back and tell somebody what you say, he say, she say . . . and . . . gossip!” These circumstances are related to issues of respect and results in violence because of a feeling that they need “defend they reputation” and prove themselves in front of their peers to gain status and acceptance.

### **DISCUSSION**

These findings present detailed information regarding the definition of and perceived reasons for urban youth violence and identify the commonalities and differences by gender. While the definitions and descriptions for violence involving young people were consistent with those found in the literature,<sup>10,11</sup> the findings from this investigation provide an in-depth understanding of this significant public health issue which is valuable for informing future prevention and intervention efforts.<sup>12,13</sup>

Several of the reasons associated with violence are similar for boys and girls: romantic relationships, respect, idle time, gangs/cliques, and witnessing violence. By and large, young people perceived issues related to romantic relationships as being a primary reason for violence for both genders. While this finding adds further support to the literature with regard to violence among girls,<sup>2,14</sup> romantic relationships and matters related to relationships have rarely been perceived or presented as a main factor influencing young men and contributing to their experiences with violence. Issues of “respect” and “toughness” have been commonly identified as important factors related to violence among boys.<sup>2,14,16,25–27</sup>

Our findings further illustrate ways in which girls in urban neighborhoods are adopting similar problem-solving behaviors commonly attributed to their male counterparts. Specifically, it is apparent that girls are equally concerned with issues of respect, peer recognition, and social status as their male counterparts, and that they are likely to respond to perceived threats with violence. Although some scholars believe that the increase in violence involving girls is inflated due to biased policies which increase the seriousness or charge, response, and penalty for violence involving girls,<sup>9,28</sup> the data presented here provide further support and strengthen the growing body of literature recognizing the significance and magnitude of violence among and involving girls from low-income urban environments.<sup>16,18</sup>

A number of gender-specific reasons for violence were also observed in this investigation, which were consistent with the existing body of literature.<sup>16,18,19,25–27</sup> For example, reasons for violence unique to boys include fighting about issues related to money and involvement in illicit drug markets. For girls, gossip was identified as a motivation more specific to why girls engage in violence.

Participants in this study confirmed the perception that witnessing violence in the home or in the neighborhood between adults contributed to the belief that violence is an acceptable method for negotiating problems they might experience in the street, at school or in recreation centers.<sup>1,15,16</sup> In addition, although issues related to romantic relationships were identified as a primary reason for same sex violence, it is worthy of mention that issues related to dating violence were not discussed, especially because women ages 16–24 experience the highest rates of nonfatal dating violence in the United States.<sup>29</sup> Although participants were asked specifically to share their thoughts on violence involving neighborhood youth, participants were not discouraged from discussing dating violence. The absence of any such discussion regarding dating violence may be a result of conducting coed focus groups or because participants considered such violence as normative within relationships. Further research with regard to definitions and causes for dating violence is recommended and necessary.

Implications of these findings might suggest that prevention efforts use gender neutral methodologies and approaches to prevent youth violence. On the contrary, although many promising programs have been developed for preventing youth violence, these are often directed towards boys,<sup>30</sup> and it is important to consider the uniqueness of girls by incorporating issues of health and wellness into violence prevention and intervention efforts specifically designed for girls.<sup>16,28</sup> Findings which illustrate how and why girls engage in violence are essential for informing such targeted youth violence prevention efforts. Programs for boys might also benefit from taking a similar more holistic approach.

The qualitative nature and purposive sampling technique of the study are potential study limitations. Findings represent the opinions of youth from selected low-income neighborhoods and should therefore be considered accordingly. However,

this data provides an opportunity to understand unique and insightful aspects of the problem of youth violence from those individuals—youth experts—most in-touch and impacted, and these findings can and should be considered when addressing this issue in other comparable urban settings. Building upon the knowledge base, additional research, perhaps involving more quantitative approaches, should be used to explore the shared and distinct reasons for youth violence among boys and girls residing in low income urban neighborhoods.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research was supported by funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CCR 318627).

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