



## VIOLENCE IN THE CONTEXT OF NEIGHBORHOOD

### VIOLENȚA ÎN CONTEXTUL COMUNITĂȚILOR LOCALE

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**Rezumat:** *Violența este una dintre cele mai stringente probleme ce afectează comunitățile locale. Cauzele acesteia sunt multiple, în fond, determinate de numeroși factori sociali: sărăcia, școala, mediul înconjurător, familia, apartenența etnică. Articolul ce urmează expune o privire de ansamblu asupra acestei probleme și sugerează unele direcții de eradicare a ei.*

**Cuvinte-cheie:** *violență, climat local, comunități locale, școală, dizain de mediu.*

A neighborhood is a subsection of a larger community, a collection of both people and institutions occupying a spatially defined area influenced by ecological, cultural, and sometimes political forces. Suttles later defined this view by recognizing that local communities do not form their identities only as the result of free-market competition. Instead, some communities have their identity and boundaries imposed on them by outsiders. Suttles also argued that the local community is best thought of not as a single entity, but rather as a hierarchy of progressively more inclusive residential groupings [15]. In this sense, we can think of neighborhoods as ecological units nested within successively larger communities. Most social scientists and virtually all studies of neighbourhoods we assess rely on geographic boundaries defined by the Census Bureau or other administrative agencies (e.g., school districts, police districts). Although administratively defined units such as census tracts and block groups are reasonably consistent with the notion of overlapping and nested ecological structures, they offer imperfect operational definitions of

neighborhoods for research and policy [1].

Most researches on neighbourhood interactional and institutional processes have focused on crime outcomes, especially police records of homicide, robbery, stranger assault, survey reports of violent and property victimization. Crime rates are related to neighborhood ties and patterns of interaction, social cohesion and informal social control, institutional resources, routine activity patterns, especially mixed land use and proximity to schools and malls.

Economically poor neighborhoods differ from affluent neighborhoods in a number of ways. These neighbourhoods have diminished private economic activity. The types of public and social services that are available to residents are limited as are recreation and developmental programs for youths. Poor neighborhoods also tend to be characterized by disorganization or a lack of neighborhood cohesion. Disorganized neighborhoods lack effective social controls. Factors such as high levels of transiency make it difficult for individuals to establish common values and norms and to

develop informal support networks [3]. As a result, people living in such neighborhoods often experience a sense of social isolation and exhibit lower levels of attachment to the community [8], [19]. Chronic unemployment further isolates people by distancing them from legitimate labor markets and increases the likelihood of illegitimate enterprises [3]. When neighborhood social and economic systems break down, the poorest of neighborhoods, in effect, become unable to resist crime and violence.

School is part of a neighborhood. It has two components: the school social environment and the school physical environment. The school social environment captures the nature of interactions that happen in the school. There are two primary mechanisms through which the school social environment impacts students' behaviors. The first mechanism operates at the collective level using the constructs of social cohesion and social capital. Cohesive schools, where members know each other and have similar goals, have more social capital. This social capital, or organizational resources, allows for a stronger transmission of social norms and the ability to collectively act. The second mechanism through which the school social environment impacts behavior is at the individual level [9].

The physical environment consists of the space where violence occurs. Some research has shown that by redesigning school space, using principles of Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED), incidences of school violence can be lowered [2]. CPTED categorizes the possible impact of the environment into four mechanisms: space design,

space use and circulation patterns, territorial features, and physical deterioration [8]. Improvements in space design and use and circulation patterns decrease the amount of violence in an area by decreasing interactions and the shield of anonymity. Territorial features or signs of ownership, and physical deterioration contribute to the perception of investment in an area and confer social norms of appropriate behavior.

Several studies have been made in order to examine the relationship between school environment and violence of children. Recent studies found that teacher support was significantly related to less perpetration and victimization of multiple types of violence. McNeely and Falci found that teacher support can be protective against the initiation of violence and encourage the cessation of violence for middle and high school students [11]. In their study, violence was the only health-related outcome for which teacher support was protective of both the initiation and cessation of the behavior (other behaviors included smoking, drinking, marijuana use, and suicidal initiation). Nevertheless, in Khoury-Kassabri et al. study of weapon-related violence, teacher support was not related to weapon carrying for middle and high school students. The Teacher-Student Relationships construct had the most consistent measurement of all the school social environment measures [10].

School norms about violence were researched to a greater extent than the other school social environment measures. All studies found that school norms against violence were associated with a decrease in student-reported perpetration and

victimization. Felson et al. found that this was true for 10th grade males even after controlling for students' attitudes toward violence [6]. Studies measured three different components of this construct: awareness of school norms, perception of the fairness of school norms, and belief in the school norms. Welsh included all 3 components in his study of middle school students and found that the measures were not statistically significantly correlated and that only belief was associated with a decrease in misconduct and offending.

While the above constructs certainly contribute to the classroom culture, some studies specifically attempted to measure the culture of the classroom or the school. Mooji and Sprott found that a positive classroom environment with an academic focus was correlated with fewer instances of violence [12], [14]. When this atmosphere was created in an elementary school classroom, the Classroom Centered intervention and its predecessor the Good Behavior Game found a reduction in all levels of student-reported baseline aggressive behavior. This was also seen for teacher-reported problem behavior, but not for parent-reported problem behavior.

Certain school practices have been carried out to foster negative peer group interactions and the problems most likely to result from these interactions. Ability tracking, for example, tends to place academically poor students and those with disruptive behavioral patterns together in classes. Ability grouping has not been shown to improve learning among low-achieving students, and indeed, has been associated with many negative social consequences [13]. Place-

ment of youths in ability groups reinforces feelings of anger, rejection, and alienation, and can lead to academic failure. Although direct empirical links between ability grouping and violence have not been demonstrated, research does show that youths who experience academic failure and exhibit a low commitment to school are at increased risk of engaging in violent behavior [5].

School settings in general, however, may contribute to disruptive behavior and violence. The National Research Council has cited a number of characteristics of the school environment that engender more aggression and violence, including undisciplined classrooms, lax enforcement of school rules and policies, tight physical space, and conformity to behavioral routines that seem to produce feelings of anger, resentment, and rejection in some students [ibidem].

Research conducted in the United States has revealed that the exposure to community violence among children and adolescents is widespread, including exposure to violence outside the home, either directly experienced or witnessed, but not media violence. In the U.S. National Survey of Adolescents, 23% of the participants reported that they had been victims of and witnessed community violence during their life time. The risk of victimization in an act of severe violent crime outside of the home, such as robbery and aggravated assault, is twice as great for children and youth as it is for adults, and the risk of victimization in simple assault outside of the home is three times as high for children and youth as it is for adults. A recent comprehensive survey conducted by Finkelhor, Ormrod, Turner, and Hamby,

which dealt with the exposure of children and youth aged 2-17 years to violence, crime, and victimization, revealed that more than one out of every four of the children and adolescents (273 per 1,000) had experienced a property offense, and more than one of every three (375 per 1,000) had witnessed violence or experienced another form of indirect victimization during the study year [7].

Other studies on the prevalence rates of community violence have revealed that most of the children and youth residing in inner cities in the United States have been exposed to at least one act of community violence. One study of urban adolescents revealed that 67% of them had witnessed shooting, 50% had witnessed stabbing, and 25% had been victims of severe violence. In addition, research has revealed that those who reported witnessing murder also indicated that they had witnessed other incidents of severe violence (e.g., robbery, shooting, and stabbing), which reflect a “violent milieu” in the lives of those youth. The rates of community violence in other nations have been reported as substantial as well. A study of youth in Antwerp, Belgium revealed that 54% had witnessed mild violence and about 38% had experienced such violence. With regard to witnessing and directly experiencing severe violence, the annual rates were about 28% and about 9%, respectively [17]. In a study conducted among women in South Africa, 75% reported that numerous incidents of rape occur in their neighborhoods. Over half of them reported that they had witnessed or heard about numerous cases of violence using weapons or firearms. All of the women participating in that

study reported that at least one incident of murder, rape, or stabbing had occurred in their neighborhood.

Studies have documented the broad range of negative sequela of community violence exposure for children and adolescents, including problems such as posttraumatic stress disorder; other anxiety disorders; depression; dissociation; impairment in school functioning; decreased IQ and reading ability; decreased rates of high school graduation and aggression [4]. Alarmed by this upswing in community violence and the broad range of negative consequences it has for children and adolescents, public health officials have identified violence as one of the most significant health issues facing America.

Community violence is determined by different risk factors. The more a child is exposed to multiple risk factors, the more he or she is likely to engage in violent behavior.

Studies on community violence have found that although all ethnic groups in the United States are exposed to community violence, the rates of exposure among ethnic minorities are disproportionate. Comparative data on Caucasians, African Americans, and people from other ethnic and racial groups have revealed that African Americans experience the highest levels of exposure to community violence [1].

It is more likely that the environments in which community violence occurs are mainly urban areas that have high concentrations of families with impoverished economic and other types of resources. Those environments are characterized by poor housing conditions, low-income populations, and high rates of drug

abuse. However, there is also evidence of substantial rates of community violence in suburban areas, as well as in rural areas, regardless of their housing conditions or other socioeconomic conditions [4].

Several studies have shown that male children and youth are more likely than females to experience and witness violent incidents in the community. It was found that among upper middle socio-economic groups as well as among groups in the inner city, males were at higher risk than females for witnessing community violence, experiencing physical assault, and experiencing other direct patterns of community violence. However, females were found to be at greater risk for exposure to violence related to sexual assault [1].

Data on exposure among Israeli children and youth to community violence have been collected in two studies sponsored by the World Health Organization, which focused specifically on exposure to school-linked violence [7].

Approximately half of the Israeli students participating in those studies had been victims of bullying, harassment, and intimidation at least once during the year, whereas 20% had been victims three or more times.

Although Jewish and Arab populations in Israel are two different ethnic groups who live in the same country and participate in the same educational system, Arabs in Israel have suffered discrimination. Com-

pared with Jewish groups, Arabs have higher rates of unemployment and poverty. Most Arab localities lack basic infrastructure and welfare services. Furthermore, Arabs do not participate much in the industrial and high-tech development in Israel and are therefore more vulnerable to the more recent economic recession. Public schools in Israel are organized distinctly by the ethnic-cultural affiliation of the student's family. Arab students almost never attend Jewish schools and are educated by Arab educators, and vice versa. Jewish schools are also divided into religious and secular schools.

Arab-Jewish inequality also can be found in the educational system. Arab students attend larger classes than Jewish students, and their schools tend to be less equipped than their Jewish counterparts. For instance, Arab schools tend to have fewer facilities such as libraries, computers, and science laboratories. Also, Arab teachers receive less in-service training than Jewish teachers. Over the years, achievement levels among Arab students have improved, including rates of entrance to higher education. Nevertheless, the gaps between Arab and Jewish students are significant.

No matter what were the factors generating violence, it is imperative that community organizations could cooperate and mobilize efficiently, so that violence would not mark and destroy those qualities and good habits that still describe us as humans.

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