



Psychiatry & Behavioral Sciences Section – 2007

I19 Risk Factors For Adolescent Violence: A Retrospective Study

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After attending this presentation, attendees will enhance their understanding of static and dynamic risk factors associated with adolescent violence; learn of approaches to assessment of violence risk in adolescents; and understand potential risk factors to target as foci for primary intervention strategies.

This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by highlighting risk factors for adolescent violence, which are foci for intervention and emphasize the potential benefit of primary prevention strategies.

Violence among youths is an important public health problem. Between 1985 and 1991, homicide rates among youths 15-19 years of age increased 154% and remain, today, at high levels. Previous research points to a number of factors that increase the probability of violence during adolescence and young adulthood. Some of these factors include the early onset of aggressive behavior in childhood, social problem-solving skill deficits, exposure to violence, poor parenting practices and family functioning, negative peer influences, access to firearms, and neighborhoods characterized by high rates of poverty, family disruption, and social isolation.

Variations in social cognition serve as one possible mechanism by which these environmental experiences influence aggressive behavior during adolescence. Children who have been maltreated tend to display negatively biased social-cognitive processing styles, which may in turn increase their likelihood of reacting aggressively in ambiguous social situations. Similarly, witnessing community violence is associated with aspects of social cognition, including beliefs that support aggressive responses to threat.

Major risk factors for violence include gender and deviant behaviors, such as using and selling drugs, committing nonviolent felonies, and engaging in other forms of nonviolent delinquency. Low academic orientation, lack of parental affection and support, and perceptions of parents' substance use also show strong links with violent behavior. As the number of risk factors increases, so does the likelihood of engaging in violent behavior. Boys and girls show somewhat different paths to violence, with girls being comparatively more susceptible to the effects of family problems or disruption and impaired relationships with parents. For boys, engaging in other deviant behaviors provides the most information about their propensity to commit violent acts. Weak bonds with school and family also have an impact on serious violence for boys.

Boys who have repeated one or more grades are more likely than those who have not to be at high risk for violence perpetration. For both girls and boys with a history of grade repetition, predictive risk factors include violence perpetration, violence victimization, weapon carrying, school problems, and alcohol and marijuana use. School connectedness, parent-family connectedness, high grade point average, and emotional well-being have been identified as significant universal protectors against violence perpetration. For both girls and boys there were substantial reductions in the percentage of youth involved in violence in the presence of protective factors, even with significant risk factors present. Violent events involving preadolescent and early adolescent girls are more likely to be in response to a previous event and to involve the home environment and family member intervention.

In relationships characterized by both sexual intercourse and violence, sexual intercourse is significantly more likely to precede violence rather than the reverse, regardless of type of violent act. Adolescent sibling violence is a predictor for college dating violence. Males have reported experiencing more sibling violence than females, but females have reported experiencing more dating violence, both as perpetrators and victims.

Currently, there is an emphasis on providing violence prevention programs in the school environment, typically with little parental or caregiver involvement. The most influential risk factors (i.e., the family, community, and peers) have their principle impact on youth aggression outside the school.

The presentation will describe a non-experimental retrospective study involving a population of adolescents referred by the New York County Court system to the Forensic Psychiatry Clinic for forensic evaluation (excluding fitness to stand trial evaluations). This study will demonstrate the relationship between the presence of psychiatric illness or substance use with violent crimes by adolescents.

Adolescence, Violence, Risk Assessment