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Urban Violence among African American Males: Integrating Family, Neighborhood, and Peer Perspectives

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Even though rates have declined in recent years, violence is a serious problem in many American cities. This paper reviews recent perspectives on violence among young, urban African American males. Special attention is afforded the "father absent" hypothesis, the effect of poverty, the character of neighborhoods, the roots of self-efficacy, and peer influence, particularly the influence of street codes. The latter are argued both to regulate some situational behavior and to promote the use of violence in disputes over social status, drugs, and money. The authors discuss implications for policy and community development.

High rates of urban violence have made identifying factors contributing to both victimization and participation in violent acts a matter of great public concern (Reiss & Roth, 1993). African American young adults—particularly males—are over-represented both as victims and as perpetrators of violent crime (Fingerhut & Kleinman, 1990; Fingerhut, Ingram, Feldman 1992; Paschall, Ennett, & Flewelling, 1996; Snyder, Sickmund, & Poe-Yamagata, 1996). A growing body of research suggests that the roots of violence may be embedded, at least in part, in the structural disadvantages that many youths and young adults—particularly African American youths and young adults—experience in their neighborhoods and that influence the character of family life and the nature of peer relationships (see Sampson, 1987; Shihadeh & Steffensmeir, 1994; Cao, Adams, & Jensen, 1997). It is

important to note that the causes violence do not originate at the neighborhood level. The effects of racism, residential segregation, and poverty are important considerations. However a thorough examination of these factors is beyond the scope of this paper. Further, the violence described and discussed here differs from school violence (e.g. Columbine High School shooting) as well as domestic or family violence in that it typically takes place in an urban context and—we will argue—is related to social and economic conditions that influence social dynamics.

The purpose of this paper is to review recent perspectives on the nature of violence among African American male adolescents and young adults. Specifically, we will discuss findings from studies of family, neighborhood, and peer or street behavior. If solutions are to be found for high rates of violence, they likely reside in social policies that alter the chain of risk factors affecting young men in high-risk neighborhoods.[1]

Extent of the Problem

Though it has declined somewhat in recent years, the rate of homicide among males ages 15–24 in the United States is approximately 10 times higher than in Canada, 15 times higher than in Australia, and 28 times higher than in France or Germany (World Health Organization, 1995). The arrest rate for homicide, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault continues to be considerably higher for persons 15–24 years of age than for all other age groups (Uniform Crime Reports, 1997). Approximately 20% of all violent crime arrests involve an individual under 18 years of age (Snyder et al., 1996). Homicide is the second leading cause of death among persons 15–24 years of age and is the leading cause of death for African American and Hispanic youths in this age group (Fingerhut & Kleinman, 1990; DuRant, Cadenhead, Pendergrast, Slavens, & Linder, 1994; Van Soest & Bryant, 1995;Centers for Disease Control, 1996; Singh, Kochanek, & McDorman, 1996; Snyder et al., 1996).

African American males face a disproportionate lifetime risk of death by homicide. According to the Centers for Disease Control (1990), the risk of homicide among African American men is 1 in 27, as compared to 1 in 117 for African American females, 1 in 205 for white males, and 1 in 496 for white females. African American males are victims of homicide at an annual rate of 56.3 per

100,000 with the greatest incidence of homicide occurring among African American males ages 15–24. Within that age group, the rate of homicide is 132 per 100,000 (Anderson, Kochanek, & Murphy, 1997). Importantly, homicide rates reflect only the actual number of deaths and do not include violence that does not end in death but may result in serious or permanent injury (Fingerhut & Kleinman, 1990). It is estimated that for every violent death, there are at least 100 nonfatal injuries caused by violence (U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1990). Hence, the impact of violence on African American men is large, extending well beyond the actual number of homicides.

The black market availability and sheer lethality of firearms is a major contributor to high rates of homicide (Snyder et al., 1996). In a study of juvenile victims and offenders, Snyder et al. (1996) concluded that the increase in juvenile homicide from the mid-1980s through 1994 was completely firearm-related and that African Americans were more likely than whites to be victims of firearms-related homicide. In the first half of the 1980s, firearms were involved in 46% of African American juvenile homicides versus 39% of white juvenile homicides (Snyder et al., 1996). However, between 1990 and 1994 firearms were involved in 71% of African American juvenile homicides compared to 54% of white juvenile homicides. While these figures demonstrate the magnitude of the problem of youth violence among African American youths, they do not illuminate the structural forces that are thought to be linked to the availability of guns and the growth in violence (Seidman & Rappaport, 1986). DuRant et al. (1994) argue that the disproportion of violence by race is almost entirely accounted for by social factors associated with poverty and unemployment (see also Deater-Deckard et al., 1998; Van Soest & Bryant, 1995). In the next sections, we explore this argument first from a family perspective and then from a neighborhood perspective.

Family Disruption and Family Support: The "Father Absence" Hypothesis

Poverty, unemployment, and other indicators of social disadvantage exert both direct and indirect effects on children, youths, and young adults (Patterson, Forgatch, Yoerger, & Stoolmiller, 1998). Physical illnesses, family stress, inadequate social support,

and chaotic home environments are manifestations of the lack of resources typically associated with poverty (Kirby & Fraser, 1997). Persons affected by poverty may judge their financial positions as insecure and their futures as uncertain. Hence, they may be unwilling or unable to take on the financial responsibilities of marriage and family. Many scholars now think that the economic marginality of many African American males has had a disruptive impact on family stability, contributing to out of wedlock births and the growth of single parent households (Sampson, 1987; Wilson, 1984).

Single parents who are poor often have less contact with neighbors and are less likely to monitor the activities and associations of their children (Bloom, 1966; Sampson, 1986; McLanahan & Booth, 1989; Sampson, 1997; Hawkins, 1999). Because single parents bear the dual burden of employment and child care, they have less time to develop social ties that might reduce the family burden (Shihadeh & Steffensmeir, 1994; Strand, 1995). Thus, the combination of single-parenthood and poverty reduces the resources available to children and holds the potential to disrupt effective parenting.

Some scholars believe that single-parenthood is a major contributor to the high incidence of violent behavior among African American youths and young adults (Paschall et al., 1996). Parallel trends of increasing rates of single parenthood and violent behavior by African American youths seem to support this assumption. The percentage of African American youths under the age of 18 who lived only with their mothers increased from 44% in 1980 to 54% in 1992, an aggregate increase of 23% (Paschall et al., 1996). During the same time period, the arrest rate for aggravated assault and murder among African American youths ages 10–17 increased by 89% and 145% respectively (Paschall et al., 1996).

Although the increases in aggravated assault and murder are unlikely to be due to any single factor, burgeoning rates of single parenthood and "father absence" are oft heard as explanations for interpersonal violence among young African Americans. In a study of 171 U.S. cities, Sampson (1987) found that rates of offending by African American juveniles were strongly influenced by variations in family structure. The disruption of African American families was found to have the largest effect on robbery

and homicide. High rates of joblessness among African American adult males seemed to be directly related to the prevalence of families headed by African American females. Sampson (1987) also found that household structure was highly correlated with the rates of violence among African American youths. These effects were independent of income, region, density, city size, and welfare benefits. Moreover, they were similar in pattern to the effects of family disruption on violence among white children (Sampson, 1987; see also Hawkins, Laub, & Lauritsen, 1998). Such findings seem to suggest that father absence is related causally to violent behavior among youths, particularly African American youths. In light of this "absent father" hypothesis, many violence prevention programs have incorporated mentoring by African American adult males as a means to offset the effects of father absence (see, e.g., Wilson-Brewer & Jacklin, 1990; Harvey & Rauch, 1997).

Recent research, however, suggests that "family disruption" may be inadequately conceptualized when merely described as the absence of a father or single parenthood. Father absence can be offset by the presence of other male family members and friends (e.g., uncles, grandfathers, and neighbors). In a study of 254 urban African American male adolescents across five family constellations (single mother, stepparent, biological parents, mother with extended family, and extended family only), Zimmerman, Salem, and Maton (1995) concluded that father absence was not a significant predictor of delinquent behavior. In fact, youths living in single parent families reported *more* parental support than did youths in the remaining four family constellations. Zimmerman et al. (1995) observed that the single parents (mothers) appeared to compensate for father absence by cultivating auxiliary parental support. In addition, they observed that many African American youths actually continued to receive support from their fathers, even though their fathers were outside the home (see also Jackson, 1999).

Other research also seems to support the view that the strength of family and non-kin relationships may counter-balance family structure for some African American youths. In a six-year longitudinal study of 132 families, Klein, Forehand, Armistead, and Long (1997) found that compared to family structure, poor

maternal communication and problem solving skills were more predictive of antisocial behavior and arrest-convictions in late adolescence and early adulthood. Similarly, Jarrett (1995) in a review of qualitative literature on the social mobility of low-income African American youths found that "supportive adult network structure, restricted family and community relations (i.e. parental review of social activities), stringent parental monitoring, strategic alliances with mobility enhancing institutions and organizations, and adult sponsored development" were salient factors in buffering adolescents from the risks associated with growing up in poverty. Thus, as suggested by Loeber and Stouthamer-Loeber (1986), kin *plus* non-kin support may be a better predictor of adolescent behavior than family structure per se (see also Zimmerman et al., 1995; Werner & Smith, 1982; Rhodes & Jason, 1990). The research suggests that parent-child communication, consistent discipline, and supervision are more highly correlated with behavioral outcomes. While father absence and poverty may affect childrearing practices, research suggests that some single parents manage (despite unfavorable odds (to develop adequate alternative means to support and monitor children. It is the quality of this support and supervision that buffers many poor children from risk.

Social Disorganization:
The Collective Efficacy of Families and Neighborhoods

    The effectiveness of families in raising children is directly related to the effectiveness of neighborhoods in supporting families (Small & Supple, 1998). Neighborhoods provide settings that differentially promote critical developmental processes, which, in turn, shape a child's sense of wellbeing and self efficacy. Social developmental processes that occur through involvement with parents, teachers, and peers are contextually dependent. That is, they are based on webs of strong and weak social ties that provide role models and rewards for prosocial behavior (Fraser, 1996). These processes are disrupted when fear of victimization, anger, and pessimism break down social cohesion.

    From this perspective, the character of the social environment—particularly the neighborhood—affects family functioning. Moreover, it helps to explain collective destructive acts that

occur in riots, gang confrontations, and other seemingly sponta-
neous violent events. In declining neighborhoods, residents be-
come reluctant to monitor the behavior of others who they do not
know. By default, a wider range of oppositional and destructive
behavior—such as harassment of shopkeepers and intimidation
of passersby—is tolerated. This exacerbates fear and withdrawal,
and as isolation grows, it further breaks down cohesion. Drug
addiction, drug trafficking, exploitive and hostile relationships
with women, confrontational relationships with law enforcement
and other authorities, and other types of antisocial behaviors
are collectively symptomatic of growing social disorganization.
In socially disorganized communities, residents often view the
larger society as uncaring, intolerant, and hostile (Allen-Meares &
Burman, 1995). In the course of just a few years, the consequences
of social disorganization can be distrust, alienation, hopelessness,
and anger.

Social disorganization theory. At the neighborhood level, vio-
lence can be conceptualized as the result of structural disadvan-
tages that collectively deny African Americans in general—and
African American males in particular—access to economic oppor-
tunities and social mobility (Taylor-Gibbs, 1988). Structural dis-
advantage contributes to the social and psychological conditions,
which impede family functioning and increase the likelihood that
violence will occur. Implied above, this view is often referred to
as social disorganization theory (Sampson et al., 1997).

In contrast to social disorganization, social organization refers
to the extent to which residents of a neighborhood are able to
achieve and maintain effective social control and realize com-
mon goals (Wilson, 1996). In recent research, three dimensions
of social organization are often identified: (1) the strength or
density of social networks, (2) collective supervision and personal
responsibility in addressing neighborhood problems, and (3) resi-
dent participation in formal and informal organizations (Skogan,
1992). High social organization depends on high social cohesion,
resident participation in social networks, and the strength and
stability of those networks (Liska, 1992). In contrast, social disor-
ganization is the absence of these factors.

Socially disorganized neighborhoods can be characterized by
disrupted and dysfunctional households; ethnic, racial, and class

segregation; hostility and predatory behavior; and the development of crime tolerating norms (DeFronzo, 1996). Social disorganization is thought to most likely emerge in neighborhoods with high rates of joblessness, poverty and residential mobility (Sampson et al., 1997). Whether cause or effect, these factors exacerbate other neighborhood problems that contribute to low social cohesion and weak, poorly formed networks, which undermine social organization.

Social control and social disorganization. Recent studies have attempted to examine the relationship between social disorganization and the effectiveness of formal social controls, such as law enforcement efforts to break up gangs and "weed" communities of serious offenders. Rose and Clear (1998) argue that high rates of incarceration in low-income urban neighborhoods may actually contribute to social disorganization by creating a heavy reliance on law enforcement. The expansion of reliance on formal control is thought to inhibit the development and maintenance of informal controls, principally the willingness of residents to intervene on behalf of other residents and to correct the behavior of youths who may be engaged in potentially harmful behaviors. From this perspective, high levels of incarceration undermine informal social, political, and economic controls that may already be weakened by poverty, joblessness, and crime. Ironically, then the result of reinforced law enforcement can be reduced social cohesion and self-regulation (Rose & Clear, 1998; see also Miller, 1996). This applies only to law enforcement strategies that focus on widespread arrest and incarceration. Although more research is needed, peacekeeping law enforcement such as community policing does not appear to reduce informal social control On balance, this seems to suggest that promoting social cohesion and informal social control through the development and maintenance of strong bonds of attachment among community residents may be a critical strategy in reducing violence.

From a neighborhood perspective, high levels of youth crime and violence are thought to signal a decline in the ability of parents, neighborhood elders, and others to channel younger community members into conventional lines of action. This "neighborhood perspective" builds on the idea that communities

are complex systems of formal and informal networks rooted in family life, school activities, work commitments, and on-going socialization processes (Shihadeh & Steffensmeir, 1994). Formal networks typically consist of ties among groups, schools, faith based organizations, sports and youth agencies. Informal networks consist of kinship, peer, and other associational ties that may grow out of but are not necessarily maintained through the formal networks. Early community workers like Jane Addams and Edith Abbott knew that the social organization of a neighborhood is dependent on the maintenance of both formal and informal networks (see, e.g., Abbott, 1936). Recent research supports this view. Williams, Stiffman, and O'Neal (1998), for example, conducted a study of 684 African American youths ages 14 to 17. They found that exposure to neighborhood violence, deteriorated schools, negative peer environments, traumatic neighborhood and family experiences, as well as alcohol and substance use were significant predictors of violence. When the web of resources in a community becomes weakened, neighborhoods appear to lose efficacy, fear of victimization rises, and residents lose confidence in social institutions (i.e., schools, religious leaders, and law enforcement).

Data suggest that these factors conspire to create conditions in which violence occurs. Skogan (1992) conducted a study of social disorder and neighborhood decline across forty neighborhoods in six U.S. cities. Social disorder was measured by the degree to which community residents felt that loitering, drug traffic, vandalism, gangs, public drinking, and street harassment were problems in their communities. Findings from this study revealed a substantial negative correlation (–.59) between social disorder and neighborhood solidarity (Skogan, 1992). Thus, as neighborhood solidarity decreased, social disorder increased. This study further found that poverty, instability, and the racial composition of neighborhoods were strongly linked to area crime, but that this linkage was mediated through social disorder (Skogan, 1992). Similarly, in a study of 8,782 residents across 343 Chicago neighborhoods, Sampson (1997) found that the collective efficacy of neighborhoods—defined as social cohesion and informal social control among residents—was negatively related to rates of

violence. These data strongly suggest that the collective capacity of neighborhoods to control behavior and support families is a key determinant of crime.

Resilience: Self-Efficacy and Peer Relationships

Thus far we have focused on the interelatedness of family and neighborhood conditions as risk factors in the growth of violence in African American as well as other communities; but how is it that factors such as low neighborhood social control translate into oppositional and violent behaviors? As we have suggested, not every child from a disrupted family or socially disorganized neighborhood engages in violence or exhibits antisocial behavior. The concept of resilience provides a basis for understanding this phenomenon.

Resilience is defined as high functioning in face of great risk or adversity (Rutter, in press). Although the research on resilience is nascent at best (for a review, see Fraser, Richman, & Galin-sky, 1999), individual and environmental factors are thought to protect children from risk and promote positive developmental outcomes. In the absence of environmental protective factors such as a supportive family or a cohesive neighborhood, personal attributes such as self efficacy, a cultural identity, and social competence (skill in solving social problems and relating to people) are conceptualized as "buffering" individuals from risk (Fraser, Randolph, & Bennett, in press; see also Miller, in press; Schiele, 1998). In a sense, resilience is the product of a counter-point balancing of risk and protective factors. Violence and other negative outcomes emerge when accumulated risk significantly outweighs protection (see, e.g., Hill, Howell, Hawkins, & Battin-Pearson, 1999).

Across many potential protective factors, self-efficacy, cultural identity, and—more broadly—social competence loom large in influence. Individual attributes are rooted in the ways youths and young adults form meaning from social information in their environments. Influences such as prior experiences, personal goals, and feelings affect the interpretation of information in the environment and form the basis for social interaction, including family, school, and peer relationships (Nurius & Berlin, 1995). The meanings given to events and even social conditions are

dependent on the linguistic categories, rules, values, and goals of the cultures and groups in which children are embedded. These meanings are further impacted by virtue of the fact that we live in a society where the accumulation of material wealth is often held as a measure of importance and self worth. Hence, broad societal influences also help to shape meaning. From this perspective, the families and communities in which we are born and in which we grow up provide a reservoir of memories that are used to interpret on-going flows of experience (Crick & Dodge, 1994; Nurius & Berlin, 1995). They are the resources a youth uses to assign meaning to life. They are the basis for hope, for aspirations, and for expectations.

This provides an important context for understanding the way individual behavior and developmental outcomes unfold in and are related to the environment. Self-efficacy, for example, refers to beliefs in one's ability to achieve goals associated with a given situation. These beliefs affect the level of challenge over which a child feels competent, the amount of effort expended in a given venture, and the degree of perseverance that is applied when encountering difficulties (Bandura, 1982; Wilson, 1996). In this regard, two special problems potentially affect many African American children in some economically distressed urban neighborhoods. First, because of prior disadvantage, victimization, and failure, these youths may doubt their ability to accomplish what is expected. Derived in part from negative life experiences and dangerous neighborhoods, many may be skeptical of new opportunities. They may inaccurately interpret the intentions of others as negative, too often attributing hostility to those whose intent may be positive (Courtney & Cohen, 1996). This is called "hostile attribution bias" and it is correlated with aggressive behavior in children (for reviews, see Crick & Dodge, 1994; Fraser, Nash, Galinsky, & Darwin, in press). Second, they may feel confident of their abilities but give up trying, because they believe that their efforts will ultimately be futile—that is, they expect the environment to be unresponsive, discriminatory, or punitive. For some children, attributions are shaped by hostile, dangerous neighborhoods. Though these attributions may be functional in the context of the street, they interfere with important social developmental processes in school and other settings (Courtney & Cohen, 1996).

This "social cognitive" perspective helps to explain differential violence by linking family and neighborhood conditions to the way children process social information (Fraser, 1996). The ways children give meaning to events, the ways they interpret the actions of others, and the skills that they bring to bear in solving social problems may be conceptualized as learned through interaction with other people, whose own behaviors are—influenced by joblessness, neighborhood violence, and other indicators of social disorganization—contextually dependent (DuRant et al., 1994). Social cognitive theory begins to provide an explanation for how street violence, poverty, drug abuse, and drug traffic impact beliefs and behavior. Neighborhood conditions affect children's relationships with their parents and their relationships with others. They deeply affect children's opinions about themselves, their interpretations of the intent of others, and their ability to sustain efforts to prevail over adversity. While some resilient children beat the odds, many do not (Fraser, 1997; Pollard, Hawkins, & Arthur, 1991).

Race and Continuities in Violence:
The Effect of Neighborhood Joblessness

Recent data provide further information on the interconnections among individual, family, and neighborhood risk factors associated with urban violence among African American youths and young adults. During late adolescence and young adulthood, a rarely discussed but key trend emerges. The vast majority of violent youths stop their violent activities. For African American youths, however, twice as many young adults persist in violent offending (Elliot, 1994). *The one significant exception to this pattern occurs among those African American males who become employed.* Within this group, there are no discernible differences in rates of violence by race (Elliot, 1994). Studies by Anderson (1990) and Padilla (1992) suggest that adolescents without legitimate opportunities in local labor markets are easily drawn into illegal enterprise (see also Blumstein, Cohen & Farrington, 1988; Taylor-Gibbs, 1988; Sullivan, 1989). Involvement in illicit activities including drug and handgun sales is too often seen as a viable alternative to continued schooling and prospective employment in the legal labor market. In this context, it is not past experience with

unemployment that initiates criminality. Rather, it is that con-
ventional employment holds increasingly marginal potential for
youths in neighborhoods where there is high joblessness—a sense
of despair and alienation—and where few adults are committed
to conventional lines of action. Thus for many youths in high-risk
neighborhoods, criminal behavior becomes an attractive alterna-
tive to limited opportunities for legitimate employment.

The Code of the Street: An Oppositional Culture?

In some communities, this despair spawns what some schol-
ars have called an *"oppositional culture,"* where street norms and
values conflict with those of mainstream society and provide situ-
ational inducements for violence (see Anderson, 1990; 1994). The
concept of oppositional culture should not be confused with the
concept of subculture. Historically, a subculture or more specif-
ically a "subculture of violence" was thought to emerge from
wide-spread reaction formation, a psychological defense wherein
youths were believed to embrace certain values in reaction to
barriers to legitimate opportunities (see Cohen, 1955; Cloward &
Ohlin, 1960; Phillips, 1997). Subculture theory argued that local-
ized oppositional norms permeate, define, and guide interactions
in entire neighborhoods (see Wolfgang & Ferracutti, 1967). Oppo-
sitional culture or behavior, on the other hand, can be thought of
as a combination of attitudes, values, and behaviors that inform
situational public behavior for some, but not all, youths and young
adults of a given neighborhood. Further, these attitudes, values,
and behaviors are "normative" for only a small street-wise seg-
ment of a given community (Anderson, 1997; 1999). While there
is a vast amount of research on the etiology of violence, much of
it fails to examine the various social dynamics that contribute to
oppositional behavior and the ways oppositional behaviors and
attitudes affect the social identities of community members, espe-
cially young urban African American males (Fagan & Wilkinson,
1998; Miller, in press).

In many socially disorganized communities, alienation and
hopelessness contribute to a climate where oppositional behavior
receives tacit support. To be sure, the support is situationally
dependent and does not regulate all social exchange. That is, even
in high-risk neighborhoods, most residents subscribe to legal,

conventional norms and values (Wilson, 1996). However, fearing violence and lacking widespread community (including police) support, residents may acquiesce to gangs, drug dealers, and thugs. This gives rise to a "street code" that embraces the concrete utility of violent and aggressive behavior. This code of the street is defined by a set of informal rules governing interpersonal public behavior. For (too) many urban youths, street codes promote the use violence as a building block of social status (Massey, 1995).

Respect is an integral part of street codes and is often subject to strict social regulation (Anderson, 1994). Simply maintaining eye contact with an individual for "too long" may be viewed as lack of respect, an affront that can escalate into a confrontation. In a similar vein, a snide remark that might otherwise be viewed as trivial may lead to an "honor" contest where no party backs down until someone is injured (Anderson, 1990; Markowitz & Felson, 1998; Polk, 1999). To be sure, honor contests are not unique to African American youths or urban youths and young adults. They do, however, seem to be predominantly a male phenomenon, and they are reported to occur across many different cultures and countries (for more information, see Polk, 1999).

In the absence of mainstream goals and means for achievement, a fragile sense of personal capital, respect, and honor become the medium for social exchange. Resorting to violence at the first sign of conflict, portrayal of oneself as fearless and dangerous, the reputation for numerous sexual encounters with members of the opposite sex, and the display of material wealth through illegal/illicit activity produce social capital, respect, and status (see Taylor-Gibbs, 1988; Fagan & Wilkinson, 1998).

In some socially disorganized neighborhoods, the existence of street codes is socially, politically, and economically reinforced. Street codes are socially reinforced by the fear-induced tolerance of violence by community members (Taylor-Gibbs, 1988). As suggested earlier, social disorganization breaks down informal social control and social cohesion, making it difficult for residents to support conventional values and beliefs without fear of victimization. In many urban areas, parents who are committed to conventional lines of action are reported to limit their focus of concern to include only their own homes and children (Skogan, 1992). From a political perspective, street codes may even be

reinforced when federal, state, and local governments develop comprehensive formal control strategies without concomitantly developing other programs that strengthen informal social controls (Taylor-Gibbs, 1988; Majors & Mancini-Billson, 1992).

Based on fear and violence, street codes are economically reinforced by educational and business institutions that do not or cannot provide adequate job training or employment opportunities. Thus, the transition from school to work is attenuated. Recent so-called "get tough" educational policies may exacerbate the problem by making the transition from school to adult roles more difficult. Across the country, these policies appear related to a rise in dropout rates and a decrease in college enrollments of African American youths, particularly African American males (Johnson, 1998). Further, job programs intended to address the problem too often have negative outcomes. A case in point, the Job Training and Partnership Act (JTPA) was found to be of limited effectiveness for those who need it most. White males were more likely to be channeled into "on the job" training programs, which provide the highest likelihood of re-employment. On the other hand, women, minorities, the long-term unemployed, and public assistance recipients were more likely to be channeled into classroom training or simply receive placement assistance (Fitzgerald & McGregor, 1993; see also Johnson et al, 1998). Making the transition to adult roles still more difficult, many African American males who complete job training programs find that there is no local labor market demand for their newly acquired skills (Kirschenman & Neckerman, 1991;Fitzgerald & McGregor, 1993). The disjuncture between public concern about violence and systematic actions to address the roots of violence contributes significantly to the proliferation of violent, oppositional attitudes and behaviors (Rose & McLain, 1998). This creates a brutal reality. Some neighborhoods are simply tough and dangerous places to live. Thus, a certain familiarity with and adherence to street codes is a necessary survival mechanism (Anderson, 1990; Massey, 1995).

Policy Implications: Extending Recent Successes

Violence among young urban African American males arises from social conditions that disrupt effective parenting, reduce the effectiveness of neighborhoods, deprive communities of jobs,

and encode (for some youths (hostility and coercion as a means of social interaction and dispute resolution. We do not mean to imply that the social conditions giving rise to and characterizing violence among African American males are unique to African Americans. They may similarly affect Asian American, Latino, Native American, and other youths. Further attention—both in terms of historical forces and social conditions that affect behavior—must be given to these and other groups who have been subject to discrimination. The proliferation of guns, the abuse of psychoactive substances, and membership in gangs often exacerbate these conditions (Hill et al., 1999; Howell, 1998). At this intersection of the effects of racism, poverty, and violence, African American youth in some neighborhoods have become deeply alienated and have adopted—in varying degrees—a set of oppositional attitudes and behaviors (Anderson, 1994; Rose & McClain, 1990).

   Community policing and neighborhood mobilization. In spite of the depth and seeming intractability of the problems giving rise to violence, recent innovations in community practice have caused some scholars to suggest that not all the root causes of antisocial aggressive behavior have to be addressed in order to make communities safer (Kelling, 1997). Community based efforts in several major U.S. cities have improved public safety by developing and implementing intervention strategies that acknowledge multiple determinants of violence among young urban principally African American males.

   The city of Boston recently implemented a multi-faceted prevention/intervention effort that targets neighborhoods with high rates of crime and violence. It is comprised of four components: the Youth Violence Strike Force, Operation Nightlife, Operation Cease-Fire, and the Boston Gun Project. These four components represent collaborative efforts between local and state law enforcement entities, the Massachusetts Department of Probation, gang mediation specialists, and members of the local faith community. Law enforcement officials use various criminal statutes and civil forfeiture laws as a means to remove violent offenders from the streets. Probation officers make nightly visits to the homes of youths, who are under court supervision in an effort to ensure compliance with the terms of probation, reduce truancy,

increase academic performance, increase parental involvement and improve communication with schools. Mediation specialists also known as "street-workers" are sent to "hot spots" in an effort to resolve conflict and link youths with community services (Howell & Hawkins, 1998). Finally, the *Boston Gun Project* seeks reduce gun violence by coerced use-reduction strategies, including limiting access to firearms (Kennedy, Piehl, & Braga, 1996). The *Boston Gun Project* is a public policy initiative that relies heavily on federal firearm laws to make the illicit gun market much less viable and to remove the most violent gang and drug offenders from the streets (Howell & Hawkins, 1998). Overall, Boston's community prevention intervention is believed to be a significant contributor to the near 80% reduction in juvenile homicide from 1990 to 1995 (U.S. Department of Justice, 1996). The reported successes of this community policing program and a similar one in Chicago strongly suggest that public policies promoting partnerships with social service agencies, the faith community, and law enforcement organizations can alter some of the neighborhood conditions that have made murder the leading cause of death among young African American men (Kennedy, Piehl, & Braga, 1996; Loeber et al., 1998; Rose & Clear, 1998).

While not as comprehensive as the Boston initiative, midnight basketball leagues have also been described as a viable intervention strategy in the effort to reduce the levels of crime and violence among urban African American males. The first league was founded in 1986 in Glenarden, Maryland. It was designed to keep "high risk" youth, principally unemployed high school dropouts off the streets (Farrell et al., 1996). The games were scheduled between the hours of 12 a.m. and 3 a.m.; peak hours for gang and drug related offenses. This league and subsequent ones are reported to provide more than just late night recreation. Many midnight basketball leagues provide opportunities for participants to obtain high school diplomas, learn family development skills, and secure employment. Hence, this intervention focuses on the transition from school to work and responsible adult roles. Since 1986, midnight basketball leagues have been established in hundreds of cities across the country and it has been oft reported—without rigorous evaluation—that crime and

violence have decreased as a result of such leagues (see Farrell et al., 1996).

Informal social control and social cohesion. In the context of these successes, innovative programs and while we await evaluations describing their apparent success, it is not too early to develop public policies that further strengthen the efficacy of communities. If changes emerging from innovative community policing and neighborhood mobilization programs are to be sustained and extended, our review suggests that increases in informal social control and social cohesion must emerge from the efforts of law enforcement, social services, public health, faith, and other community organizations. In the context of improved public safety, improved collective efficacy will require capitalizing on the strengths of community members, while addressing risk factors that corrupt neighborhood socialization processes.

Strong ties and weak ties. From a neighborhood perspective, it is not sufficient to suppress crime and reduce fear of victimization. These are critical beginnings. However, to build informal social control and social cohesion, one must create greater interconnectedness among neighborhood residents and, in so doing, generate a sense of attachment, involvement, and commitment to collective enterprise. This involves strengthening both strong and weak ties in the social networks of residents. Strong ties consist of family and friends with whom one feels close. Weak ties consist of more distal colleagues and acquaintances who can be called upon to solve problems (Macy, 1991). Weak ties often serve as bridging mechanisms between different neighborhood groups. In that sense, they promote social cohesion by linking residents who might not routinely have contact. The social fabric of effective neighborhoods is made up of both kinds of ties.

From a neighborhood perspective, social cohesion and informal social control are founded on the strong and weak ties among neighborhood residents (Macy & Skvoretz, 1998). To use the concept of "ties" to address differential rates of success in the transition from adolescence to conventional adult roles (and, concomitantly, in racial disparities in rates of de-escalation from illegal behavior), one would strengthen the relationship between school involvement and labor market participation. Partnerships between schools and businesses might be (and, in some commu-

nities, are being) constructed both for making public education more relevant and for insuring that success in school leads to economic opportunity in legitimate labor markets. Mechanisms such as this must be found to strengthen the ties across the home, school, and work settings where young adults develop skills, attitudes, and beliefs. This is a tall order that exceeds the individual mandates of community policing, public housing, social service, and other organizations.

A multi-component approach that affects the risk factors which disrupt effective parenting, alienate children from school, reduce opportunities in legitimate marketplaces, and promote oppositional codes is most likely—in our view—to fortify gains now emerging through community policing, public housing, and neighborhood initiatives in Boston, Chicago, San Francisco, and other cities. The sense of promise that is beginning to spread through communities in some areas of the United States can be fulfilled only if we become successful in building connections between people and in eroding the hopelessness that energizes violence at the street level. This will require viewing violence not only as a neighborhood problem with public safety, family, education, and local labor market dimensions, but also as a problem related to the social and economic vitality of America's urban areas. Herein lies both hope and challenge in extending recent successes in crime prevention.

NOTE

1. The terms neighborhood and community are used interchangeably. They refer to a physical space characterized by boundaries in which people share norms, values, goals, and feelings of belonging and trust. Although "community" is sometimes used to describe social relationships that transcend physical boundaries (as in a church community), we will use both terms to connote a bounded space wherein people share by consensus a bond of attachment.

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