

Thinking About Emerging Adults and Violent Crime



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Individuals who commit acts of violence constitute an enduring concern for the criminal justice system as well as the public at large.

In response to fears of an unrelenting crime wave, dramatic changes to sentencing policy, particularly for violent offenders, occurred in the 1980s and 1990s. Today, more than half of state prisoners are serving time for a violent offense.¹ Increases in the severity of criminal justice sanctions (e.g., decision to prosecute, reclassification of charges, use of incarceration, and lengthening prison sentences) for those convicted of violent offenses has fueled mass incarceration.² Despite major reductions of crime, including violence, over the past two decades, an intense focus on violent offenders as distinct and different endures.

This brief summarizes research on violent criminal behavior over the life course. We focus special attention on emerging adults because they have the highest rates of both violent offending and violent victimization.³ First, drawing on a large body of longitudinal research on crime, we present the known 'facts' about violence. Note that this research literature uses criminal justice records of those officially sanctioned as well as self-reports of offending and victimization. Second, we discuss the experiences and consequences of living with violence. Third, we conclude with policy recommendations for responding to violent crime.

Known Facts About Violence

VIOLENT OFFENSES ARE RARE EVENTS

For those who engage in crime, the overwhelming majority are involved in property crime (e.g., larceny theft) or public order offenses (e.g., drug use). Offenders who persistently engage in violent acts are rare. Among those who engage in violent behavior, histories of violence are typically short in duration and usually limited to only one officially recorded violent offense.⁴ The term “violent offender” is inconsistent with a long body of research that finds little evidence of violent crime specialists. Instead, research finds that virtually all individuals involved in crime are generalists who commit a wide variety of criminal acts, some of which may be violent in nature.⁵ In other words, today’s violent offender may commit a non-violent offense tomorrow and vice versa. Moreover, violent acts constitute a small subset of behaviors that characterize an individual’s involvement in crime.

VIOLENT BEHAVIOR DECLINES WITH AGE

Involvement in violence is typically a young man’s game. The well-known inverted-U-shaped pattern of involvement in crime — characterized by the rapid escalation of delinquent and criminal behavior in early adolescence, reaching its peak in late adolescence, and followed by a swift decline in emerging adulthood — is similar when examining involvement in crime-specific categories like violence, with two slight variations.⁶ First, the peak age of involvement in violent crime occurring in emerging adulthood is slightly older than the peak age for property crime. Second, the magnitude or rate of involvement in violent crime is much less pronounced than that of property crime at all ages across the life course. Nonetheless, all criminal involvement, including involvement in violence, declines with age.

DESISTANCE FROM VIOLENT CRIME IS THE NORM

Desistance from crime reflects the process of reducing one's involvement in crime moving toward non-offending. Desistance from violent crime is pervasive and occurs irrespective of gender, race and ethnicity, and across historical and geographic contexts.⁷ The analysis of criminal offenses for 500 serious delinquent boys followed from ages 7 to 70, who comprise a select sample of individuals most likely to engage in serious, violent crime throughout their lifetime, revealed that arrests for violence were rare and declined rapidly in early adulthood.⁸ Analyses of contemporary, demographically and culturally diverse samples also reveal the pervasive and normative nature of desistance from violence with age.⁹

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THE CORRELATES OF VIOLENT CRIME ARE NOT DISTINCTIVE

Research has long demonstrated that the correlates of serious, violent crime are similar to those for non-serious, non-violent crimes.¹⁰ Subjected to a host of different analytic strategies, and the inclusion of a wide range of risk factors (e.g., early and chronic onset of offending and risky behavior, low cognitive ability, psychological instability, and personality traits such as impulsivity), the prediction of high-risk, chronic, persistent, or violent offenders remains highly inaccurate and subject to a high “false positive” rate.¹¹ For example, in one study, the accuracy rate was less than 7% when predicting violent criminal convictions.¹² Looking across the life course “violent offenders and nonviolent frequent offenders are virtually identical in childhood, adolescent, and adult features.”¹³

MOST PERPETRATORS OF VIOLENCE HAVE A HISTORY OF VIOLENT VICTIMIZATION

There is a distinct overlap between victims of violence and perpetrators of violent crime.¹⁴ In fact, the overlap between violent victimization and violent offending is so great that it suggests these individuals are frequently one and the same. The victim-offender overlap is reciprocal in nature, where violent offending increases the risk of violent victimization and violent victimization increases the risk for violent offending. As a result, efforts to understand one cannot be separated from the other.¹⁵

The similarity between victims and offenders extends beyond a behavioral association. Victims of violence and the perpetrators of violent offenses share a similar demographic profile in that they both tend to young, black men living in urban areas.¹⁶ Similar to the age-distribution of violent offending, the risk of serious violent victimization is concentrated among those 18 to 24 years of age. Men are nearly four times more likely to be a victim of homicide compared to women, and the homicide rate for African Americans is more than six times greater than for whites and more than four times greater than for Hispanics.¹⁷

VIOLENT BEHAVIOR IS SPATIALLY CONCENTRATED

The distribution of violence is not random. Instead, violent crime systematically concentrates in places characterized by structural disadvantage, social disorganization, and racial inequality.¹⁸ Micro-places, as small as street segments, are vulnerable to persistent violence over many decades, despite changes in the resident population.¹⁹ Though violent offenders are rare, situations conducive to violence are more common. Consequently, individuals exposed to violent places will encounter more opportunities for violent interaction and will have a higher risk of engaging in violent acts either as perpetrator, victim, or witness. This spatial concentration of violence extends beyond the perpetration of violent crime to include violent victimization, exposure to violence, and disproportionate and differential justice system responses that can reproduce the violence it is meant to stop.²⁰

VIOLENCE IS A BROAD HETEROGENEOUS CATEGORY

There are a wide range of violent acts that vary greatly in terms of their seriousness. Violent crimes include murder, aggravated assault, sexual assault, and robbery as well as non-physical contact including simple assault, and attempts and threats. The classification of violent crimes is not uniform, varying from state to state and across federal and state criminal justice systems. The fact is, saying that someone has engaged in an act of violence tells us little about the underlying nature of the offense under investigation. Yet, the classification of 'violent offender' permanently brands an individual with consequential effects including disqualification from many treatment and rehabilitation programs, intensification of mandatory minimum sentences, and barring employment in certain labor sectors.

Living with Violence

Matthew Desmond and Bruce Western²¹ present a new conceptual framework for studying poverty in America. They argue that “poverty is multidimensional, compounding material hardship with human frailty, generational trauma, family and neighborhood violence and broken institutions.” Thus it is no surprise that research routinely demonstrates that violence manifests itself in conditions of extreme poverty and disadvantage. These contexts are characterized as disorganized, chaotic, and lacking informal social controls leading to the creation of situations ripe for violence to arise. The pervasiveness of violence in conditions of extreme poverty and disadvantage has forced a reorganization of daily life to accommodate violence in these contexts.²² For men, women, and children living in these environments, violence is not an isolated event, but a burden borne for a lifetime. Violence is not normal in these settings, but emerging in these contexts are situations that are conducive to, and in many ways acknowledge the utility of, violent behavior.²³

For individuals living in impoverished contexts, the omnipresent nature of violence presents itself in a variety of ways across the life course. A recent longitudinal survey of men and women released from state prison in Massachusetts, returning to the Boston area, reveals that violence and exposure to trauma begins early in the life course. This research depicts a context where individual roles in violence are not neatly divided, but instead “at different times and in different venues, people come to play the roles of victim, offender, participant, or witness.”²⁴ The ways in which exposure to violence imprints on an individual’s life course vary and include witnessing or experiencing violence directly through personal interactions to living in violent environments and encountering violent situations, and shouldering the intergenerational legacy of trauma.

The consequences of exposure to violence, in any form, are wide-ranging and linked to poor performance in school and work, cognitive delays, health and mental health problems, and future victimization and offending.

Particularly consequential, living with violence in childhood leaves an indelible mark on the life course as children carry the burden of violence well into adulthood.²⁵ Research measuring the direct impact of exposure to violent events (i.e., local homicide) on academic performance estimates that the effect on cognition is pronounced with reading and language skills regressed roughly two years, lessening impulse control and the ability to maintain attention.²⁶ These detriments are greatest in the immediate aftermath of violence and among those with the closest proximity to violent acts. In short, the impact of violence extends well beyond physical injury and patterns of behavior as it

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comes to occupy the minds of those living in violence-ridden contexts where thought processes are often governed by a focus on survival and constant vigilance.

Violence in childhood is experienced predominantly as a victim or witness to violence; alongside the rising incidence of victimization, direct participation as

a perpetrator of violence escalates in adolescence, reaching a distinctive peak in emerging adulthood. In tandem, justice system involvement also increases from adolescence to emerging adulthood. Research reveals that justice system involvement does not remove individuals from violent situations, but instead perpetuates and concentrates exposure to violence. Research consistently documents the frequency of violent encounters within and by the justice system – estimates likely vastly underrepresenting the prevalence of prison violence due to underreporting.²⁷ The violent conditions within and by the justice system further stress thought processes consumed by extreme vigilance.

Taken together, the spatial concentration of violence, correspondence between victims of violence and perpetrators of violence, and the age-graded presentation of violence across the life course compel a reorientation in thinking about violence. First, consistent patterns observed in scientific research challenge arguments that violence is chiefly an individual disposition, forcing the recognition that most violence is situational in nature. Violence is a characteristic of places, not people. Second, the perpetration of violence cannot be understood in isolation, but instead must contend with the intimate connection to violent victimization. Victims of violence and violent offenders are often one-in-the-same. Finally, experiences of violence manifest differently across the life course ranging from daily exposure to violent contexts, to violent victimization, and the perpetration of violence. Lifetime legacies of violence cast a dark shadow across the full life course and shape everyday behavior.

Policy Implications

We recognize that violent crime can have devastating effects on individuals, families, and communities. We also recognize that there are large racial disparities in violent offending and victimization.²⁸ Finally, we do not dismiss that the criminal justice system may have a deterrent and incapacitation effect in responding to violent crime.²⁹ Nevertheless, one modest policy implication of our review is to challenge the idea that people who commit violent crime are fundamentally different and are not worthy of consideration when contemplating criminal justice reforms. We thus call for a major reframing of the policy response to violent crime.

An abundance of research points to the broad and reverberating reach of violence. Individuals are neither solely perpetrators of violence or victims of violence, and instead experience violence directly as a participant in violent encounters, indirectly having friends and family with histories of violent encounters, and experientially through exposure to violent contexts.

Viewed through this lens, punishment-oriented approaches to violent acts are inadequate. Instead, punitive criminal justice policy often perpetuates violence by adding to the socio-economic disadvantage in which violence can flourish.

Responses to violent acts need to recognize the diversity of harms that violence does to individuals, families, and communities. Promising pathways include building and strengthening the bonds to community, addressing histories of harm through trauma-informed approaches, and building the capacity for communities to thrive. These approaches do not ignore the role of the justice system, but instead challenge the system to rethink approaches to “justice” and “accountability.” Bruce Western succinctly states, “Where violence is contextual and offenders are also likely to be victims and witnesses, justice is not achieved through punishment of the offender but through the abatement of violent contexts.”³⁰ So what can we do?



STRENGTHEN SOCIAL BONDS

It is well known that factors that keep individuals from offending, and specifically from involvement in violent crime, include strengthening bonds to community, particularly attachment to family and school. This suggests that violence reduction strategies should include a focus on creating and strengthening those social connections.³¹ Community-based sanctions offer alternatives to imprisonment that allow for the preservation of connections to social supports such as the family and school. In addition, attachments to the family among those entangled in the justice system could include community furloughs, the easing of communication while incarcerated through flexible visitation hours, adequate and free phone availability, and maintaining a close physical distance between incarcerated individuals and their family. Access to education, skills training, and connections to employment networks (e.g., work release programs) following incarceration allow for the continuity in education and employment critical to a successful transition into mainstream society. As eloquently stated by Miriam Gohara, we must “counter unwarranted or overly simplistic reliance on incarceration as a universal salve for the very real fissures that crime visits on too many communities.”³²



ADOPT A VICTIM- AND TRAUMA-INFORMED RESPONSE

The overlapping roles of victim and offender suggests that responses or programs should be trauma-informed. By taking a trauma-informed approach, strategies recognize the diverse manifestations of violence and also introduce trauma awareness and reorient policies and programs across the justice system to avoid (re)traumatization. In part this means expanding assistance to crime victims to attend to economic losses and the costs to physical and mental health associated with violent victimization. For perpetrators of violence, the potential of trauma-informed approaches is particularly profound given that upwards of 90% of justice involved youth report experiencing a traumatic event.³³ The similarity in patterns and predictors of violent and non-violent offending, and violent victimization and violent offending, suggests that interventions aimed at reducing violence, whether building social bonds or addressing histories of trauma, may hold widespread benefits. Though rarely incorporated into correctional practices, particularly those involving individuals with violent felonies, one potentially promising approach is restorative justice.³⁴



INVEST IN COMMUNITIES

As Bruce Western has written, “The social facts of violence sit uneasily with the individual culpabilities decided by the criminal justice system. The violence addressed by the courts and prisons is largely stripped of social context and biography.”³⁵ Addressing violence should start from the position that criminal behavior and social context are inextricably linked.

Policies and practices that focus solely on punishing individuals who commit violent acts, ignoring social context, are unlikely to produce lasting change. Opportunities to move to safer neighborhoods are not equally distributed and those forced to live in violent places are more likely to use violence as a strategic response to avert victimization. Among justice-involved individuals, programs that build in conditions for residential change outside of former criminogenic places can reduce offending.³⁶ Absent direct involvement in violence, either as a perpetrator or victim, exposure to violent environments and situations holds detrimental consequences for individuals both in the short- and long-term.³⁷ Most vulnerable are those whose exposure to violence occurs early, and often, in the life course. Criminal justice efforts should be directed to creating safe environments to disrupt the cycle of common and chronic exposure to violence. The public safety mission can be met by supporting community organizations and grassroots efforts to reclaim violence prone areas, promoting treatment programs and trauma centers to recognize the diversity of ways violence presents itself across the life course, and fostering social ties to family and community that play a central role in tempering offending and supporting desistance.³⁸ Community organizations along with criminal justice agents can play a critical role in reducing violence; a role characterized by the investment and support of local level efforts.³⁹

Conclusion

Individuals who commit acts of violence should be part of the discussion regarding criminal justice reform and the alteration of post-conviction laws.

Regardless of their offense, all offenders deserve to be treated with human dignity and offered rehabilitation. James Forman, among others, have pointed out that criminal justice reform efforts are too narrowly focused on non-violent drug offenders. Those who committed acts of violence are deemed “permanently out-of-bounds.” Forman goes on to write “Such talk draws no distinction and admits no exceptions. It allows for no individual consideration of the violent offense. The context, the story, the mitigating factors – none of it matters. Any act of violence in your past casts you as undeserving forever.”⁴⁰

Policy decisions in the 1980s and 90s—the so-called War on Crime and the War on Drugs—created the conditions for what is widely viewed as mass incarceration. These policies exacerbated race and class disparities in the justice system with poor, young, minority men disproportionately shouldering the brunt of these repressive penal policy changes.⁴¹ The disproportionate burden plays out not only in all aspects of the justice system response, but also in exposure to violent contexts, violent interactions, residence in areas characterized by concentrated poverty and under-resourced schools, that imprint on an individual’s life well before any interaction with the justice system. Policies aimed at severing the connection between socioeconomic disadvantage and criminal punishment are needed, as are policies to address the structural inequalities that create violent contexts that eventually feed into the justice system itself.⁴²

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Bruce is the co-founder and co-director of the Justice Lab and the Bryce Professor of sociology and social justice at Columbia University. Before joining Columbia in the fall of 2018, Bruce was the faculty chair of the Program in Criminal Justice Policy at Harvard University. He is the author of *Homeward: Life in the Year After Prison* (2018) and *Punishment and Inequality in America* (2006). In 2014, Bruce was the Vice-Chair on the National Academy of Science panel on high rates of incarceration in the United States, led by Jeremy Travis. From 2014 to 2017, Bruce chaired the Harvard Executive Session on Community Corrections. Bruce is a Guggenheim Fellow, a member of the National Academy of Sciences, and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

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Emerging Adult Justice Learning Community

The Emerging Adult Justice Learning Community (EAJLC) is a carefully organized collaborative learning environment that brings together researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and advocates twice a year over a three-year period in order to create more developmentally appropriate, effective and fairer criminal justice responses for youths ages 18 – 25. Participants of the Learning Community are all engaged in some aspect of this work in their professional pursuits.

Despite the fact that emerging adults experience some of the worst criminal justice outcomes in our justice system, little attention has been paid to the research that would support new and improved justice system responses. The Learning Community's goals are to provide researchers and policymakers access to one another in order to increase learning, practice and policy innovations by translating academic research into effective policies and developing opportunities to research burgeoning practices that contribute to a more equitable treatment of this population.

