

UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS



NATIONAL CENTER FOR PTSD

Community Violence: The Effects on Children and Teens

Community violence includes many events. It might be a stranger using physical threat or direct violence to take something or hurt someone. It can also be violence between family members, close partners, or peers. These events may include cruel acts such as being shot, raped, stabbed, or beaten.

Most of the attention from media and research is on community violence that involves adults. However, many children and teens face violence in their neighborhoods and schools. Such violence can have effects on children.

How much community violence do children face?

Many people think that community violence only happens in gangs and inner cities. It is true that people who are poor, non-White, and living in crowded inner-city areas deal with a lot of violence. Community violence also occurs, though, in White, middle-class areas, both suburban and rural. All kinds of youth are at risk for community violence.

Over one-third of girls and boys across the country ages 10 to 16 years are victims of direct violence. Direct violence includes attempted kidnapping, physical and sexual assault. Even more children have faced indirect community violence. That is, they have seen violence or they know a victim of community violence.

In one study, over three-quarters of children in a high-violence urban area reported coming into contact with community violence. Of note, more than half of the parents said that their children had not been exposed to violence in the community.

Who is at risk?

Sadly, there is no way to make sure your child does not face community violence. However, we do know some of the factors that add to a child's risk for coming into contact with community violence:

- Living in poor, inner-city areas.
- Being non-White.
- Being in a gang or using alcohol or drugs.
- Living in a home with domestic (family) violence.
- Males see more community violence than do females and are at more risk for physical attacks.
- Females are at more risk for sexual assault.

What are the effects of community violence?

If hurt by violence, a child may have to cope with physical or medical problems. A child may also

have mental health problems, including PTSD. Some people think that young children are not harmed by community violence because they are too young to understand or remember. However, studies have found signs of PTSD in babies and young children.

For more information on PTSD in children, please see our fact sheet [PTSD in Children and Teens](#).

A child's exposure to community violence affects the whole family. Parents are often very worried about their child's health and well-being. If resources and help are limited, parents can become angry. As a parent, you might blame yourself for not being able to keep your child safe. You may even become too protective. Parents sometimes use harsh discipline when the child acts out, even though the child's behavior is related to a trauma. Relations among family members can become strained. Parents are trying to comfort their child while at the same time trying to handle their own fears. This is hard, even more so if they live in an area where violence is common.

What can we do?

Children can be helped. The best thing for a child is a caring adult. If a child is touched by violence, spend time with the child. Be sure the child understands that you are there to listen. Help the child talk about the trauma, but do not make him or her talk. Answer questions honestly using words that your child understands.

Try to understand that children may have new problem behaviors as a result of the trauma. These behaviors need your patience and understanding. Ask for help from friends, family, and medical and mental health experts for you and your child.

For more information on treatment for children with PTSD, see our fact sheet [PTSD in Children and Teens](#).

Prevention programs are also important to keep community violence from happening. This involves gang prevention. Also, programs can help children and teens at risk for violence learn how to peacefully solve problems. These programs work better if they happen before age 6 years. They are also better if they are taught in the children's homes and schools. Programs should also try to prevent high-risk behaviors such as alcohol and drug use and carrying weapons.

Sources

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