

# Action Partnership on Interventions for Black Children Exposed to Violence and Victimization

## Black Children Exposed to Violence and Victimization

Children and youth in the United States experience an alarming rate of exposure to violence and victimization from all the crimes that affect adults—from property crimes to homicide—plus child abuse and neglect. The National [Survey](#) of Children's Exposure to Violence indicates that more than 60 percent of children from birth to 17 years experience victimization and 38 percent witness violence sometime during childhood.<sup>1</sup>

Victimization levels increase as youth reach adolescence; in fact, youth ages 12 to 24 suffer more violent crime than any other age group in the United States.<sup>2</sup> Over the course of their lifetime, 71 percent of 14- to 17-year olds suffer assault; 28 percent sexual victimization; 32 percent abuse or neglect; and 53 percent property victimization (including robbery).<sup>3</sup>

Compared with other segments of the population, victimization rates for African American children and youth are even higher. Evidence suggests that Black youth ages 12 to 19 are victims of violent crime at significantly higher rates than their white peers.<sup>4</sup> Black youth are three times more likely to be victims of reported child abuse or neglect, three times more likely to be victims of robbery,<sup>5</sup> and five times more likely to be victims of homicide.<sup>6</sup> In fact, homicide is the leading cause of death among African American youth ages 15 to 24.<sup>7</sup>

Living in urban environments also increases the risk of exposure to violence and one-quarter of low-income, urban youth have witnessed a murder.<sup>8</sup> In one study of inner-city 7-year-olds, 75 percent had heard gunshots, 60 percent had seen drug deals, 18 percent had seen a dead body outside, and 10 percent had seen a shooting or stabbing at home.<sup>9</sup> In a Chicago study, approximately 25 percent of Black children reported witnessing a person shot and 29 percent indicated that they had seen a stabbing.<sup>10</sup> After one of the children participating in this study described the violent deaths of seven close family members, an eight-year-old remarked that "just" three people in her family had died violently.<sup>11</sup> Such family and community violence is most often perpetrated by persons known to the youth, and is likely to be reoccurring—creating potentially greater harm to a developing child than would a one-time incident of victimization.<sup>12</sup>

Youth exposure to victimization is directly linked to negative outcomes for young people, including increased depression, substance abuse, risky sexual behavior, homelessness, and poor school performance.<sup>13</sup> Youth victimization increases the odds of becoming a perpetrator of violent crimes, including felony assault and intimate partner violence,<sup>14</sup> doubles the likelihood of problematic drug use, and increases the odds of committing property crimes.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the far-reaching impact of crime and violence exposure on children and teens, our nation's youth do not receive the support and guidance needed to cope with these traumatic experiences. One estimate finds that only between two and fifteen percent of victims of all ages ever receive any victim assistance,<sup>16</sup> and another indicates that among African American victims, only about nine percent of people sought help from non-police agencies that provided services.<sup>17</sup>

Since publishing its 2002 landmark report, *Our Vulnerable Teenagers: Their Victimization, Its Consequences, and Directions for Prevention and Intervention*,<sup>18</sup> the National Center for Victims of Crime has written and spoken extensively on issues of youth victimization—raising awareness about crimes against youth, building a body of knowledge about this diverse victim population, and fostering the development of programs to fill the gaps in responding to youth victims.<sup>19</sup> This experience has confirmed that, while youth crime victims have many of the same needs as adults after a crime (e.g., support, safety, justice, and options), the criminal justice and victim response systems often fail to meet teen victims' needs or provide justice on a broad scale. The many reasons behind these failures include low teen crime reporting rates, lack of culturally and developmentally appropriate outreach and interventions, and a lack of community knowledge about victims' rights and services. All these factors increase the risk of revictimization and a host of other problems for victimized youth.<sup>20</sup>

Youth who are victimized during the complicated transitional period of adolescence may experience serious disruption of their developmental processes. These effects are worsened when youth perceive institutions as unwilling or unable to help or protect them, and adults' failure to intercede confirms youth victims' sense that they must cope with an unsafe environment by themselves and leads to delayed reporting and recovery for youth.<sup>21</sup> After victimization, child and teen victims—just as with victims of any age group—often need counseling, advocacy, shelter, safety planning, emotional support, criminal and civil remedies, and other interventions that may mitigate the harm caused by violence. Experts agree that early identification of children exposed to victimization is key to successful intervention and resiliency. Even if children who experience violence do not display obvious signs of trauma or distress, they need to know that caregivers understand the importance and impact of what they experienced; they need reassurances about safety and adult efforts to protect them, and a return to normalcy.

Losing their sense of safety at this critical stage affects victimized teens' struggle to integrate into and become pro-social members of the community; they may respond by displaying aggression, withdrawal, school problems, and various high-risk behaviors, including offending.<sup>22</sup> Victimization in adolescence, for example, nearly doubles the likelihood of illegal drug use and increases the odds of committing property crimes.<sup>23</sup> In a study of urban middle school students, the greater their exposure to violence, the greater their likelihood of engaging in high-risk behaviors. Youth who had been exposed to seven to nine acts of violence were at least three times as likely as youth with no exposures to engage in risk behaviors. For certain risk behaviors, such as binge drinking and carrying a handgun, youth with high violence exposure were more than *ten times* as likely to engage in these behaviors as youth with no exposure.<sup>24</sup>

Communities of color face additional barriers when it comes to seeking help. Adult caregivers may hesitate to ask youth directly about suspected victimization, and many have qualms about making referrals to victim service agencies or reporting youth victimization, particularly if the agencies are perceived as not ethnically and/or culturally representative of their family.<sup>25</sup> If an agency has not instituted policies and practices to mitigate the impact of racism and discrimination against African American people in this country, or engaged staff in training to improve their cultural competence, then many African Americans may perceive providers as

perpetuating institutionalized racism.<sup>26</sup> African American parents may be even less likely to ask for professional help and more likely to rely on family and community members for help related to their children.<sup>27</sup> Consequently, many African American youth victims do not come to the attention of victim assistance providers and others who might help them.

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