

Study: Most young violent offenders in two NYC neighborhoods have seen someone killed

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More than three-quarters of young violent offenders interviewed in two poverty-stricken New York City neighborhoods had seen someone die in a violent incident, a new study reveals.

About half of them (51 percent) had been shot themselves and 78 percent said they had a close friend who died in a violent attack.

The results show how lifelong exposure to violence may lead some inner-city youth to accept violence as a normal way to deal with some problems, said Deanna Wilkinson, principal investigator of the federally-funded study and associate professor of human development and family science at Ohio State University.

"The study really uncovers how much trauma these young men have experienced in their past," Wilkinson said.

For comparison, a 1991 study of 4,200 U.S Army soldiers who fought on the front lines of the Gulf War found that 73 percent had seen someone killed or seriously wounded in combat.

"Many of these youth describe their neighborhoods as being like a war zone, and it is easy to see why," she said.

Homicide has been the leading cause of death for African American

males between the ages of 15 and 34 for the past thirty years, according to the Centers for Disease Control. Homicide is the second leading cause of death for Hispanic males between the ages of 15 and 34.

Patrick Carr, a sociologist at Rutgers University, is co-author of the study. Their results appear in the current issue of the *Journal of Community Psychology*, which focuses on youth violence.

The article was based on data from The New York City Youth Violence Study, which Wilkinson helped lead. The unique study involved interviews with 416 active violent offenders aged 16 to 24 from two disadvantaged and high-crime New York City neighborhoods over the course of nearly three years (1995-1998). The study focused on how youth made decisions in potentially violent situations.

Analysis of the interviews suggest that these youth and young men have developed internalized "scripts" that help them determine how to respond in dangerous situations.

Most of the participants have seen violence used as a way to work through problems all their lives, and as a result their scripts often include violence as a way of reacting when someone confronts them or shows them disrespect.

"The early exposure to violence teaches them a limited repertoire of what options they have in a particular dangerous setting," she said. "We found in the interviews that kids use violence when they think it is necessary to get through a situation and maintain their respect.

"These youth do not feel safe in their neighborhoods. They do not feel protected by the police or community adults."

The participants in the study were selected from three groups: one group

had been convicted and jailed for illegal handgun possession or a violent offense; another group had been in a hospital for injuries resulting from violence; and the third group had been identified as being actively involved in violence during the past six months.

All participants were interviewed for 1 to 2 hours by peer interviewers - young men from the same neighborhoods who were recruited and trained by the researchers.

The 416 participants discussed in detail 780 violent events in which they had been involved, and revealed how they psychologically processed these experiences.

For most of those interviewed, guns were a part of life, Wilkinson said.

Thirty percent of those surveyed said they carried a gun every day, and 92 percent reported they were carrying a gun at the time they were interviewed for this study.

Self-protection was one of the main reasons cited for carrying a gun.

"In the interviews, a lot of the kids defined themselves as non-violent, but at the same time they carry guns and they have used guns," Wilkinson said.

"They see violence as a necessity in their world. It's what they grew up with."

But contrary to the stereotype that these inner-city offenders are cold-blooded and heartless, interviews revealed that many felt sadness and grief at the violence they have seen and perpetrated.

When asked how witnessing a violent shooting affected them, the most

common response (expressed by 30 percent) was not wanting to talk about it because it was too upsetting. Another common response was that they felt "nervous," "on edge," "worried," or "panicky" after the shooting incident.

"In some ways, I feel like the interview was the first chance that many of these guys had to get this off their chest," Wilkinson said. "Despite repeated exposure to violence, almost none of the youth received counseling or other services that may have helped them heal."

Of the 780 violent events examined in the study, the largest number (317) involved issues of identity or respect. The second largest category involved disputes over a girl (157 incidents).

These situations led to more violent acts than did those related to crimes, such as robbery or drug business.

Observers can play a key role in whether a confrontation ends violently or not, according to the study. Findings showed that 96 percent of the violent incidents were observed by an audience.

Most of the violent acts recalled by participants never resulted in police action - only 28 percent of the incidents ended with an arrest.

Wilkinson said the results show that violence is more than just a police problem.

"If we only think about the violent acts committed by these youth, without thinking about the violence they've experienced themselves and how it affected them, we are going to continue to have new generations of kids with the same problems," she said.

"We need more social services to help these young people deal with the

violence they experience every day."

Wilkinson is putting what she learned in this and other studies into practice to help battle youth violence in Columbus. Since 2007, the OSU Youth Violence Prevention Advisory Board, which consists of more than 30 local justice, social service, community action, and prevention professionals has worked together to find new ways to turn violent youth and neighborhoods around.

Source: Ohio State University

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