

The lasting effects of violence on teen girls

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Associate professor of psychology Stephanie Milan, standing, and Ph.D. student Kate Zona are supplying clinicians with data to help shape effective interventions for young girls exposed to violence. Credit: Dan Buttrey/UConn Photo

(Medical Xpress) -- Throughout the world, although teenage boys are exposed to more violence than girls, girls tend to be more negatively affected by these experiences than boys. A new study shows the specific effects of this vulnerability: Girls exposed to violence are more prone to mentally remove themselves from their surroundings, a symptom that can lead to suicidal thoughts down the road.

“The finding that [girls](#) are especially vulnerable to violence has been found in studies conducted in various populations within the U.S. and around the world,” says Stephanie Milan, associate professor of psychology and an author on the study. “Most of these studies have focused on depression, however. Surprisingly, few studies of teenagers

have specifically focused on trauma symptoms.”

Ph.D. student Kate Zona, who led the study as part of her master’s degree research, says, “Violence exposure, including victimization and witnessing violence, is a traumatic event that can have lasting effects, but not a lot of studies have looked specifically at what the resulting symptoms might be among teenage girls.”

Zona and Milan’s research focuses on teens because during adolescence, people experience greater biological, cognitive, and social changes than at any other period in their life. It’s also a time when there is a steep rise in mental health problems, particularly among young girls. The authors say that this gender gap can remain throughout adulthood, which makes it critical to intervene during this time to prevent lifelong problems.

The authors studied a set of high-risk adolescents, ages 14 to 17, in inner-city Chicago as part of the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods. With data on more than 6,000 children, adolescents, and young adults, the project aims to discover how neighborhood factors such as crime, violence, and cleanliness can shape adolescent mental health and delinquency. The teens were surveyed three times over the course of four years.

Not surprisingly, says Zona, [young people](#) in these neighborhoods commonly experience violence – through hearing about it, seeing it happen, or being a victim themselves.

“The study asks these young people: Have you been hit, slapped, or punched? Have you seen that happen to someone else? Have you seen or heard gunshots?” says Zona. “Most of them have seen someone hit by someone else, and some have even seen people killed.”

Zona found that following exposure to violence, girls were more likely to

display symptoms of dissociation, which is characterized by mentally and emotionally withdrawing from difficult situations. The symptoms can include daydreaming, feeling disconnected from others, feeling outside of the individual's own body, getting confused about personal identity, and even amnesia.

“It’s a coping strategy associated with trauma,” says Milan. “When things are too overwhelming, girls will go somewhere else in their head to escape.”

Adds Zona, “Boys are more likely to have a hyper-arousal response to violence. They’re ready to fight. Girls, instead, can be more likely to become frozen or numb.”

Dissociative amnesia symptoms can be simple, like losing track of time or getting back a homework assignment you don’t remember doing, says Zona. When dissociation becomes chronic, though, it can contribute to psychological disorders like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), borderline personality disorder, and substance abuse.

Worse, Milan and Zona have found evidence that the dissociative symptoms displayed by the young women in Chicago were linked to [suicidal thoughts](#) down the road – although the same was not true for boys.

Despite these results, Milan wants her research to help inform treatment for these teens at an early age. Across Connecticut, she says, there’s a big push now for gender-responsive treatment for young people exposed to violence. This means that different interventions could be developed and used to help girls and boys overcome the stresses of their adolescence.

The researchers are now working on case studies of 200 girls and their mothers in the New Britain area. The girls come from a variety of

cultures and backgrounds and have experienced different levels of adolescent trauma, factors which Milan and Zona will try to link to ways of dealing with the stress of violence. Funded by the National Institutes of Health, the work is a collaboration with New Britain's Spanish Speaking Center, Young Women's Christian Association, and Community Health Center.

Zona hopes their work will help to create more effective interventions within New Britain and in other communities where violence affects adolescent development.

“Most importantly, we want to break these cycles of [violence](#),” she says. “The point is to work with people who can translate our research into specific interventions to help adolescents.”

More information: Zona and Milan published their results in the December 2011 issue of the [Journal of Youth and Adolescence](#).

Provided by University of Connecticut

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