

Improving children's access to care could mitigate the health consequences of exposure to neighborhood violence

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A new collaborative study between Boston Medical Center, Brigham and Women's Hospital, Boston Children's Hospital, Hennepin Healthcare Research Institute, University of Pennsylvania, and Children's Hospital of Philadelphia finds exposure to neighborhood violence among children

was associated with unmet health needs and increased acute care utilization.

Published in the [American Journal of Preventive Medicine](#) and based on nationally representative data on [violence exposure](#) and gold standard access to care measures from the National Health Interview Survey, this study shows that evidence-based interventions to improve access to care in communities impacted by violence are needed to mitigate long-term physical and mental health consequences for children.

Millions of children in the U.S. are exposed to violence in their homes or communities. Research has shown that children exposed to violence have worse school performance in childhood, increased rates of substance use disorder in adolescence, increased rates of anxiety, depression, and [post-traumatic stress disorder](#) in adulthood, and increased risk of developing chronic medical conditions throughout their lives.

Exposure to violence also deepens child health inequities, particularly in marginalized communities disproportionately exposed to violence due to systemic racism across generations.

This study helps examine violence exposure at the population level as both a direct driver of health inequities and as a consequence of fundamental causes like racism, poverty, and other structural risk conditions.

The researchers found that, even after controlling for the effects of other important factors like [family income](#) and insurance status, children exposed to neighborhood violence face unmet physical and [mental health care](#) needs, cost-related barriers, decreased access to prescription drugs, increased urgent care and emergency department utilization, and decreased access to preventive care, mental health care, and medications.

The study also identified an association between exposure to neighborhood violence and mental health symptoms, including increased rates of depression and anxiety, which was consistent with multiple previous studies. Researchers also found that children exposed to violence have higher rates of delayed and forgone mental health care despite experiencing more mental health symptoms.

Prior research shows how early access to care can mitigate the mental health consequences of violence exposure; improving access to high-quality, affordable mental health care services remains critical in communities impacted by neighborhood violence.

Researchers call attention to built-in environment reforms like neighborhood greening and cleanup, poverty alleviation interventions like the expanded Child Tax Credit, insurance coverage protections like continuous Medicaid enrollment, and hospital-based violence prevention programs as opportunities to take action.

"Our findings highlight the profound impacts of limited access to care in communities affected by violence," said lead author Rohan Khazanchi, MD, MPH, a resident in the Harvard Internal Medicine-Pediatrics Residency Program at Brigham & Women's Hospital, Boston Children's Hospital, and Boston Medical Center.

"We also identify specific opportunities for evidence-based clinician, health system, and policy actions that can reduce the incidence of neighborhood violence and mitigate its health consequences."

"To improve health outcomes for the millions of children in the United States affected by neighborhood violence, we have to invest in their families and communities," said senior author Aditi Vasan, MD, MSHP, a pediatrician at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and Assistant Professor of Pediatrics at the University of Pennsylvania Perelman

School of Medicine.

"Our findings underscore the need for both upstream policy interventions, like the expanded Child Tax Credit, which would provide essential economic support for families in low-income communities impacted by violence, and downstream health system interventions focused on improving access to high-quality, trauma-informed care for these [children](#) and their families."

More information: Rohan Khazanchi et al, Health Care Access and Use Among U.S. Children Exposed to Neighborhood Violence, *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* (2024). [DOI: 10.1016/j.amepre.2024.01.009](#)

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