

# Urban youth cope with neighborhood violence in diverse ways

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Experiences with violence cause teens growing up in dangerous neighborhoods to adopt a range of coping strategies, with notable impact whether the violence takes place at home, among friends or during police incidents, a University of Chicago study shows.

The responses to violence include seeking out non-violent friends, avoiding trouble, becoming resigned to the situation, striving to do well in school, or for some, retaliating physically, the authors said.

"Exposure to community violence is pervasive among youth in many urban neighborhoods. We found in one study that 76 percent of urban youth were exposed to some kind of community violence during the previous year," said Dexter Voisin, associate professor at the School of Social Service Administration and an expert on the impact of violence on youth people.

In a new study, Voisin explored how young people respond to the violence through a series of in-depth interviews with teens from a troubled area. The results were published in the article, "Everyday Victims: African American Adolescents Living and Coping with Exposure to Community Violence in an Inner-City Neighborhood," published in the current issue of the *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*.

He and his research team recruited 32 Chicago-area boys and girls, ranging in age from 14 to 17, for the study. Most were not from low-income homes, and nearly 40 percent reported their mothers had some

college education.

The youths were asked to describe their neighborhoods and their individual experiences with violence and their responses to it. The study found that boys were much more likely to witness and be victims of community violence than girls, who frequently heard about such violence. The girls were more likely than the boys to spend their non-school time at home, he said.

"The primary forms of violence exposures were physical attacks, fighting, incidents involving police, and gun violence involving murders," Voisin said.

The teens told the research team about the violence they had witnessed or heard about from others. One teen described seeing a friend die in front of him, while the dying boy's girlfriend stood nearby. The girlfriend was pregnant with his child, and as the boy lay dying, he said he regretted not being able to live to see his child.

The interviews also shed new light on understanding the relationship between police and teens, who often distrust the police.

"A noteworthy and unique finding, which has not been commonly discussed in prior research, is exposure to police incidents as a form of [community violence](#) exposure," Voisin writes. The boys reported being stopped and questioned by police, seeing police chasing and shooting community residents, and police coming into their homes to arrest family members.

Teens most often coped by associating with people in their neighborhood who are not part of the violence, Voisin said. "A second strategy was to avoid situations where violence might erupt, often by isolating themselves," he added.

Other approaches included either becoming resigned to their situation or in some cases learning to fight back or carry a gun.

For nearly a quarter of the students, however, achievement in school was their ticket to a better future. Those youth told the research team that doing well in school could mean they would be able to get a good job and move to a safer neighborhood.

In order to deal with the violence the students experience, Voisin recommends that schools provide more counseling opportunities to reduce youth's symptoms of distress associated with [violence](#) and work with the community to reduce gang activity and the availability of guns.

Provided by University of Chicago

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