

Gun Violence and Associated Trauma in Children and Youth

Firearm-related injuries have now become the leading cause of death for children in the United States. Each week we hear of another mass shooting; this one occurring at a bank, that one happening at a school, another one at a church. There are numerous studies out there related to firearm homicide statistics for children. Still, less research has been focused on how gun violence is connected with other childhood victimizations such as stealing, bullying, and witnessing domestic violence. A study published by the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies has recently investigated how exposure to multiple violent and traumatic contexts can be connected to gun violence.

The researchers in this study surveyed 630 youth ages 2 -17 from inner city areas of Boston and Philadelphia as well as in rural Tennessee. Boston and Philadelphia were chosen based on their relatively high homicide rate and Tennessee was chosen because of the state's high rates of gun ownership. Gun violence was divided into three categories: direct victimization, witnessing gun violence, and hearing gun violence. Direct victimization is described as being threatened with a gun in some aspect. Witnessing gun violence is described as seeing someone be threatened with a gun or witnessing a shooting. Lastly hearing gun violence is described as hearing but not seeing a gunshot while in public. Child victimization was broken into 3 broad categories: conventional crime (having had items stolen), peer victimization (having experienced bullying), and indirect victimization (being a witness to domestic violence in parents). Lastly, polyvictimization is defined as having experienced five or more different victimizations in your life. 11% of the 2-9-year-olds and 17% of 10-17-year-olds in this study reported polyvictimization.

This study found that their results were consistent with current firearm risk factors in United States youth including higher exposure risk “among males, black youth, urban dwelling youth, and youth in single adult households” (Turner 886). The researchers found a pattern that suggests “children and youth who are exposed to the most dangerous form of gun violence - gun violence directed at them personally - are also likely to have witnessed gun violence, and those who have witnessed gun violence are likely to have heard gunshots in public” (Turner 886). This pattern of gun violence is one of the heartbreaking truths of America. We are at a point where children are experiencing multiple traumatic shooting events mere years apart. The recent Michigan State shooting that occurred February 13th, 2023 had victims from the Oxford shooting present. Those students experienced their second school shooting only two years after their first.

This study came to some important conclusions regarding how children and youth respond to gun violence and who is most at risk for witnessing gun violence. Researchers argue one implication resulting from this study was that “both witnessing gun violence and hearing gunshots in public were significantly related to levels of posttraumatic symptoms... when polyvictimization entered the equation, it was significantly and strongly associated with the trauma symptom levels” (Turner 884). The pattern is there, already victimized children are more likely to be victimized again than non-victimized children. This makes sense when we look at the demographic of highly victimized children, most often they are racial minorities living in urban dwellings frequently with one parent. In one of the study cities, Boston, they found “the most fatal and nonfatal shooting incidents... occur in ‘hot spot’ locations in disadvantaged urban areas” (Turner, 883). These hot spots are neighborhoods where children live and play, and it's

these areas they grow up in that put them at a greater risk for both victimization and gun violence.

The socioeconomic and racial inequalities present in America have put certain children at higher risk than others to experience a shooting incident, however, more and more children are becoming fearful for their lives as they walk through their school hallways, grocery stores, the bank, go to concerts, etc. Mass shooting incidents have been on the rise and there is little promise of decline as legislators argue back and forth on the topic of gun control. As children experience victimizations such as conventional crime, they also face a greater risk of experiencing all three types of gun violence exposures. If we do not put an end to this now, every child in America will have a gun violence story to tell before their 18th birthday.

Works Cited

Turner, Heather A., et al. "Gun violence exposure and posttraumatic symptoms among children and youth." *Journal of traumatic stress* 32.6 (2019): 881-889.