The imperative of safety: How community safety supports optimal early childhood development

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Community safety provides conditions for families to take collective action in support of their young children’s development.

Early childhood is a sensitive and critical time that builds a foundation for future life and health outcomes. While research and practice has focused on the systems and supports that promote optimal development, less attention has been given to the deleterious impact of community violence on development, and the role of safe communities in supporting young children. Community violence is a unique form of violence that is cyclical in nature and often intergenerational, with impacts on the community’s ability to trust the police, other parts of government, and others for safety. It is different from random acts of violent crime, in that it refers to the deeply shared impact of experiencing violence in public spaces.1 Community violence interferes with young children’s attainment of key competencies — cognitive, sensory, muscular, emotional, social and behavioral — and compromises the capabilities of caregivers to provide supportive environments for their children.2,3 However, communities provide the conditions in which people can live free from fear of violence and harm from violence; they support opportunities for active learning and optimal growth in the early years.

This fact sheet highlights the research on the relationship between community safety and positive early childhood development. Further, it illustrates the powerful, detrimental influence of community violence on early child development. Taken together, these findings and supporting facts underscore the importance of taking action to promote community safety in support of optimal early child development.

How you can use this fact sheet
1. Incorporate the findings and supportive facts into talking points to make the case to focus on preventing community violence in support of positive early childhood development.
2. Use the findings and facts to strengthen your grant proposals.
3. Share with partners working in early childhood development and violence prevention as a starting point to discuss collaboration.
Using the THRIVE framework

The Cradle to Community project (see page 11 for project description) adopted THRIVE (Tool for Health and Resilience in Vulnerable Environments) as an organizing framework. THRIVE is an evidence-informed tool and framework. As Figure 1 depicts, THRIVE reflects how structural drivers such as racism and the inequitable distribution of resources, play out at the community level in the sociocultural (people), the physical/built (place) and equitable opportunity environments. In this fact sheet, we have used THRIVE to organize research on how community safety and violence impact early childhood outcomes.

Findings are organized in two categories: 1) Community safety supports optimal early childhood development and 2) Community violence directly impacts young children and families.

“Community violence and fear of violence change the quality of life for families and communities.”

– Kim Williams, Houston Health Department

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**Figure 1. THRIVE framework**

- **People**
  - Social networks & trust
  - Participation & willingness to act for the common good
  - Norms & culture

- **Place**
  - Look, feel & safety
  - Parks & open space
  - Getting around/transportation
  - Housing
  - What’s sold & how it’s promoted
  - Air, water, soil
  - Arts & cultural expression

- **Equitable Opportunity**
  - Living wages & local wealth
  - Education
Summary of Findings

Community safety supports optimal early childhood development.

PEOPLE: SOCIAL NETWORKS & TRUST AND PARTICIPATION & WILLINGNESS TO ACT FOR THE COMMUNITY GOOD
1. Safer communities promote informal relationships, social networks, and community action, all of which positively impact young children and families.

PEOPLE: NORMS & CULTURE
2. Safe communities strengthen pro-social norms among residents, and positive social-emotional development for young children.

PLACE: LOOK, FEEL & SAFETY AND PARKS & OPEN SPACE
3. Safe communities offer safe public places for children to play and develop.

EQUITABLE OPPORTUNITY: LIVING WAGES & LOCAL WEALTH
4. Safer communities can lay the foundation for more economic investments, which allow families to create a more supportive and stable environment for their children.

Community violence directly impacts young children and families.

OVERARCHING
1. Community violence can detrimentally impact the mental health and social-emotional development of even the youngest residents.

2. Parents facing violence in their communities can feel stress, frustration, and hopelessness, which undermine their resilience and their capability to create a positive environment for their children.

PEOPLE: SOCIAL NETWORKS & TRUST AND PARTICIPATION & WILLINGNESS TO ACT FOR THE COMMUNITY GOOD
3. Community violence can damage social networks and capability for collective action.

PEOPLE: NORMS & CULTURE
4. Community violence can contribute to a ‘cycle of violence’ that leads to further aggression and additional violence.

PLACE: LOOK, FEEL & SAFETY AND PARKS & OPEN SPACE
5. Community violence and fear of violence can discourage public investment in the community and restrict access to public spaces and resources.

PLACE: HOUSING
6. Communities with high levels of violence can lack sufficient stable and quality housing.

EQUITABLE OPPORTUNITY: LIVING WAGES & LOCAL WEALTH
7. Poverty and violence too often co-exist, reinforcing one another and reducing opportunities for development.

8. Community violence can limit local business investment, or deter businesses from operating in the community, reducing economic activity and opportunities for families.

The research supporting these findings is described in this fact sheet. Quotes from UNITY City Network and EC-LINC members – practitioners working on community safety and positive early childhood development – are also included.
Detailed Findings

Safe communities support optimal early childhood development

SOCIAL NETWORKS & TRUST AND PARTICIPATION & WILLINGNESS TO ACT FOR THE COMMUNITY GOOD

1. Safer communities promote informal relationships, social networks, and community action, all of which positively impact young children and their families.

Safer communities offer more opportunities for relationships to develop among residents, which are foundational in creating stable environments for young children and families, and encouraging collective action on behalf of the whole community.5

- Communities with less community violence have higher rates of social cohesion, trust, and collective action.6,7,8
- Emotional and instrumental support (such as emergency childcare and transportation) among community members positively impacts families and protects against depression.9
- Social relationships in the community offer young children opportunities to get along with others and resolve disputes peacefully.10
- Coordinated community resources contribute to a safe environment and rich setting for development.11,12

NORMS & CULTURE

2. Safe communities strengthen pro-social norms among residents, and positive social-emotional development for young children.

Norms are powerful cultural, societal, and community standards that shape attitudes, beliefs and behaviors. As violence decreases, communities strengthen norms that discourage violence and promote trust and mutual help among residents. This in turn models positive, healthy behaviors and perspectives for children.

- Communities with diminished violence reinforce positive norms, making it less acceptable to use violence in public spaces.13
- Positive socialization in communities allows for secure relationships for young children and parents, and normalizes prosocial behavior.14
- Safe, favorable neighborhood conditions are associated with reduced risk of behavioral problems in children.15
- Early social competence in young children is linked to future outcomes such as educational attainment and employment, while lowering the risk for criminal activity and substance use.16

LOOK, FEEL & SAFETY AND PARKS & OPEN SPACE

3. Safe communities offer safe public places for children to play and develop.

Safety in communities can help increase time outdoors for children, their families, and caregivers, allowing young children to engage in play and physical activity. This is important for developing social skills, as well as preventing eating- and activity-related chronic disease and other health problems. Conversely, families’ fears for their children’s safety can keep children from these opportunities.

- Parents’ perceptions of community safety influence their willingness to use parks, libraries and other community resources.17
- Communities that are safe and have green spaces promote physical health, wellbeing, and social competence, which are important for early childhood development.18
Safe public places to play in neighborhoods contribute to children’s physical health, development of gross motor skills, and socialization with peers. Children receive mental and physical health benefits from unstructured, outdoor activities, and need safe and easily accessible outdoor areas.

Community violence directly impacts young children and families

“Infants are taking in so much more than we know.”
– Linda McGlone, Monterey County Health Department

LIVING WAGES & LOCAL WEALTH

Safer communities can lay the foundation for more economic investments, which allows families to create a more supportive and stable environment for their children.

Community safety promotes economic opportunity through greater business investment, which allows families to create a more supportive and stable environment for their children.

- As violence decreases, a community’s economy and job prospects for residents improve.
- Improved neighborhood socioeconomic status is associated with better achievement, and behavioral and health outcomes for young children.
- For families, decreased financial stress can result in improved self-esteem and positive parenting.
- Higher wages increase families’ access to resources such as nutritious foods, quality healthcare, and adequate housing which contribute to healthy child development.

OVERARCHING

Community violence can detrimentally impact the mental health and social-emotional development of even the youngest residents.

Exposure to community violence is a recognized source of trauma and can be a source of extended, chronic stress for young children and their families, affecting a child’s development and mental health outcomes. Fear of bodily harm, witnessing or experiencing violence - including hearing gunshots or other forms of violence - can elicit excessive or prolonged activation of the stress response systems in the body and brain.

- Traumatic stress, which differs from normal, everyday stress, can reach toxic levels, and can have damaging effects on learning, behavior, and health across the lifespan.
- Young children are particularly affected by trauma because, while they have the perceptual understanding to be impacted, they lack the coping and communication skills to deal with the trauma without positive intervention from their caregivers.
- Neighborhood and domestic violence exposure is significantly associated with trauma-related symptoms in children, such as hyperarousal, withdrawing from activities, and nightmares.
- Early trauma from neighborhood violence can affect a child’s future internalizing and externalizing behaviors, later emotional health, and overall progression through age-appropriate developmental milestones.
- The experience of toxic stress in childhood may have long-term consequences that may not appear until adulthood, including unemployment, incarceration, mental health conditions, substance abuse, chronic diseases, and early loss of life.
Parents facing violence in their communities can feel stress, frustration, and hopelessness, undermining their resilience and their capability to create a positive environment for their children. Parents are more likely to feel disempowered when they feel they cannot protect their children from community violence and the trauma that comes from ongoing adversity.

- Stress from community conditions, including violence, can impair parenting and family life by reducing positive parent-child interactions, early attachment, learning experiences at home and in the neighborhood, and overall family stability.36,37,38,39,40
- Neighborhood poverty and community violence affect the ability of parents to marshal energy toward positive parenting.41
- Increased community violence is associated with maternal distress and depression, which are in turn linked to young children’s behavioral problems, decreased cognitive abilities, and lowered interpersonal skills.42,43

Community violence can damage social networks and capability for community action.

Parents and their young children are supported by positive and constructive social connections, but when communities are perceived as unsafe, retreatment into isolation can undermine those relationships, civic engagement, and the potential for collective action.

- Community violence is associated with decreased collective efficacy – the combination of social cohesion and community capability to make change 44,45 – which helps communities provide and advocate for safe places for children to play, nutritious food outlets, and other community assets required for healthy development.
- Social isolation reduces the support available to parents, whether it be emotional, informational (e.g., providing parenting guidance), instrumental (e.g., providing transportation), or spiritual.46
- Families facing social isolation may have higher rates of child neglect, a form of child maltreatment.47 Maltreatment negatively affects brain development, attachment, and academic achievement, with serious repercussions into adulthood.48
- Weak social ties between families and isolation confine children, restricting opportunities to interact with others outside their families and to gain pro-social skills linked to later success.49,50

As I planned vigils and funerals I was very aware of the low protective factors for the young people being exposed to this adult level of trauma. After staying in this career for 20 years I’ve watched those children turn into adolescents and become adults. I had a first row seat to see that what can look like a genetic predisposition is actually an intrinsic link to a traumatic event. If we do not keep children from being traumatized we cannot keep adolescents from behaving in ways that execute on that trauma and impact the rest of their lives.”

– Eleuthera Lisch, YMCA of Greater Seattle

Community violence can contribute to a ‘cycle of violence’ that leads to further aggression and additional violence.

In the United States, aggression and violence are normalized through venues like the media. As well, experiences of violence teach violence, and therefore may increase the risk of aggression later in the life course. This can reinforce the tolerance of aggressive norms and repeated cycles of multiple forms of violence over time in communities, schools, and homes.
• Community violence is a risk factor for multiple forms of violence, including domestic violence and child maltreatment.51,52,53,54,55,56
• Aggressive behavior learned through observation, and experience in early childhood is a strong predictor of aggression in later life.57
• Exposure to community violence is associated with an increased risk for intergenerational continuity of child maltreatment.58
• Witnessing community violence can alter brain function in early childhood, leading to the preferential development of survival skills and ‘adaptive’ tendencies towards violence at the expense of the development of other, vital competencies, unless there are intervening experiences to counter the impact.59,60
• Violence exposure in childhood may affect future relationships and eventually parenting capacities, thus repeating the cycle of violence.61

LOOK, FEEL & SAFETY / PARKS & OPEN SPACE

5 Community violence and fear of violence can discourage public investment in the community, and restrict access to public spaces and resources.

When a community experiences violence, public funds are prioritized towards enforcement rather than prevention, and the private sector may be reticent to invest. At the same time, fear of community violence can limit families and their young children from accessing stimulating community resources, which connect community members and help promote positive early childhood development.

• Community violence can contribute to public funds being shifted towards after-the-fact services such as criminal justice,62 over other positive investments that can contribute to the prevention of violence and the promotion of positive early childhood development, such as education.
• Concerns about neighborhood safety can isolate families and limit access to public spaces like local libraries and parks, and from children’s programs.63,64
• Community violence decreases opportunities for safe outdoor play, which restricts the building of motor skills and is associated with less physical activity and increased risk of obesity.65,66,67
• When parents perceive their neighborhoods as unsafe, their first grade children are significantly more likely to be overweight.68

HOUSING

6 Communities with high levels of violence can lack sufficient stable and quality housing.

Community violence affects shelter, one of the most basic human needs. When young children and families do not have access to safe and stable housing in their communities, they face negative development and health consequences.
• Neighborhood disadvantage, including community violence, is linked to lower quality housing.69,70 This is often due to historical and present day disinvestment, discriminatory lending and zoning.71
• Environmental housing hazards that are associated with poor quality housing can have long term consequences on children’s development. For example, exposure to lead in older housing has been associated with lower IQs, impulsivity, and increased incidence of antisocial behavior.72,73
• Community violence contributes to residential instability,74 which breaks down social networks in communities and negatively affects social and academic outcomes in early childhood.75
Poverty and violence too often co-exist, reinforcing one another and reducing opportunities for development.

Communities with high rates of violence often experience concentrated disadvantages. These conditions create greater inequities in the opportunities available to families and young children.

- Children in families with low average household incomes or from communities of color are more likely to live in neighborhoods that experience a high concentration of violence. Kindergarteners in families with incomes under the poverty line are more than twice as likely to reside in neighborhoods perceived as unsafe compared to their counterparts at or above the poverty threshold.

- Children in families with low average household income levels are disproportionately exposed to concentrated disadvantage, persistent hardship, and intense stressors that adversely affect children’s health, development and well-being, such as unsafe neighborhoods, environmental hazards, food insecurity, and inadequate access to grocery stores.

Community violence can limit local business investment, or deter businesses from operating in the community, reducing economic activity and opportunities for families.

Discriminatory policies and bias in business lending have historically discouraged investment in communities with a low average household income and communities of color. These practices continue today, and contribute to an environment of disincentives for business. A reluctance to locate businesses in communities that are disenfranchised ultimately reduces the availability of jobs and contributes to risk factors for higher levels of violence. This affects community members’ stress levels, household income, and ability to access much needed resources.

- Community violence and fear of violence can discourage business investment, decreasing the availability of jobs for residents and economic opportunities for the whole community.

- Neighborhoods with decreased safety are more likely to have businesses that are linked to risk factors for violence and to perceptions that a community is unsafe. For example, communities with high rates of violence have a higher density of alcohol outlets. As well, payday lenders are more common in areas with high levels of violence.

- Neighborhood socioeconomic status affects families’ stress levels and ability to access basic resources, such as nutritious foods, without which young children experience diminished physical health and academic achievement.
The Bottom Line – Safety is an Essential Condition for Young Children and Families

Community safety and positive early childhood development are intrinsically linked. There is a pathway from early childhood to safe communities where early childhood experiences influence the likelihood of future involvement in violence or participation and engagement in the community. In fact, early childhood is an effective and economical time to address inequities with consequences for child development and adult opportunity.\textsuperscript{88,89,90} There is also a pathway from safe communities to early childhood, where a safe community environment fosters optimal early childhood development and strong families by offering inviting public spaces, promoting community connectedness, and encouraging investments that provide families with better jobs and opportunities for economic mobility.

Partnering together, practitioners in violence prevention and early childhood development, including brain science, can develop policies and practices that support positive outcomes for the community, families, and young children. This includes making the case for action and collaborating with each other to push a broader shared agenda, including changing the systems that serve young children, families, and communities. In addition, practitioners in the two fields can engage new partners in actions to ensure that optimal early childhood development is supported by safe, thriving communities.

“We want to move away from a one-child, one-family approach, and move toward supporting organizations where children, families and community members feel that their environments are protective.”

– Catherine Fine, Boston Public Health Commission
Additional Resources

**Products from the Cradle to Community project:** This 2016-2017 project included the development of briefs and profiles to support practice on topics such as changing systems, norms and outcomes for fathers, collaborating with community development, and more.

**First Steps: Taking Action Early to Prevent Violence:** This 2002 report provides a background on the relationship between early childhood development and community violence prevention, including the impact of violence on early brain development and comprehensive solutions to reduce the risk of future perpetration of or victimization from violence.

**Working Toward Well-Being: Community Approaches to Toxic Stress:** This issue brief distills the experience and recommendations of leaders from six communities who were convened by CSSP in an Early Childhood-LINC Learning Lab on Community Approaches to Toxic Stress.

**Connecting the Dots: An Overview of the Links among Multiple Forms of Violence:** Prevention Institute developed this publication with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. It identifies shared risk and protective factors for multiple forms of violence and can inform joint efforts to prevent multiple forms of violence at once, thus protecting young children from exposure to violence.

**A Good Solution Solves Multiple Problems: Exploring Prevention Strategies that Address Multiple Forms of Violence:** This paper lays out the multiple connections among child abuse, intimate partner violence and community violence.

**Reducing Children’s Exposure to Violence: Maximizing Outcomes through Multi-Sector Engagement:** This paper explores the benefits of engaging multiple sectors in reducing traumatic exposures for children and youth.
Funding and Authorship

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**CRADLE TO COMMUNITY: A FOCUS ON COMMUNITY SAFETY AND HEALTHY CHILD DEVELOPMENT** was a national partnership project of Prevention Institute and the Center for the Study of Social Policy, supported by a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. With the UNITY City Network and Early Childhood LINC, the project identified strategic policy, practice, systems, and norms change levers to make communities safer so that all children have the opportunity to develop optimally. The project also identified policies and practices to strengthen early childhood development as a strategy to foster safer communities in the long-term. Activities included convenings, a learning lab, peer learning forums, technical assistance, and the development of briefs, fact sheets, and profiles to support practice. The 18 month planning grant laid the foundation for critical work at the intersection of healthy child development and community safety, all in service to a Culture of Health.

**PREVENTION INSTITUTE** is a focal point for primary prevention, dedicated to fostering health, safety, and equity by taking action to build resilience and to prevent problems in the first place. A national nonprofit with offices in Oakland, Los Angeles, and Washington D.C., we advance strategies, provide training and technical assistance, transform research into practice, and support collaboration across sectors to embed prevention and equity in all practices and policies. Since its founding in 1997, Prevention Institute has focused on transforming communities by advancing community prevention, health equity, injury and violence prevention, healthy eating and active living environments, health system transformation, and mental health and wellbeing.

**UNITY**, a Prevention Institute initiative, builds community safety in cities through comprehensive, multi-sector strategies that prevent violence and support community resilience. By supporting practice and innovation, UNITY has been collectively advancing the field and shifting the paradigm on community violence and what cities can do about it since 2005.

**THE CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF SOCIAL POLICY (CSSP)** is a national, nonprofit organization recognized for its leadership in shaping policy, reforming public systems and building the capacity of communities. CSSP’s mission is to secure equal opportunities and better futures for all children and families. The organization works to ensure that children and youth are born healthy; enter school ready to learn and succeed; and grow up in safe, supported, and economically successful families and communities. CSSP especially focuses on those who face the most significant barriers to opportunity, including racial and ethnic minorities, immigrants and refugees, families in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty, and families in contact with intervening public systems.

**EARLY CHILDHOOD LEARNING AND INNOVATION NETWORK FOR COMMUNITIES (EC-LINC)**, an initiative of the Center for the Study of Social Policy, was developed by and for local communities across the country, and works to support families and improve results for young children through accelerating the development of effective, integrated, local early childhood systems.
Endnotes


