Pathways to Violence

Ruth E. Dennis
Austin Peay State University

Introduction

Throughout the ages, interpersonal violence has been a characteristic of human beings. Trying to understand the causes and prevention of this behavior remains problematic because violence is a very complex social phenomenon. One definition is from the National Commission of the Causes and Prevention of Violence: "The overtly threatened or application of force which results in injury or destruction" (*Violence in America*, 1983). Another defines violence as an intense, turbulent or furious action, force of feeling or expression, often destructive. These definitions show the broad nature of this behavior. In order to discuss causes or prevention, it is necessary to narrow the scope since violence varies in degrees, and in forms from one group to another.

The complexity of this behavior makes it necessary to specify the particular category of violence being addressed. For example, geneticists look to heredity; psychologists examine the individual; psychiatrists look to pathology and mental illness; and sociologists focus on society's structure. Many conservatives believe more and stricter laws and capital punishment are the answer while many liberals think that the existing laws are unfair and too restrictive, thus increasing the violence rate.

To further complicate the matter, at least two distinctly different kinds of violence have been identified: (1) *Instrumental Violence*, is undertaken as a tool for achieving some other end (e.g. armed robbery and war); and (2) *Expressive Violence* is the acting out of anger, fear or frustration (e.g. jealous rage, hatred, other interpersonal conflicts). Both of these types of violence may manifest in the form of either aggressive of defensive violence. *Aggressive violence* is for the purpose of enjoying gains to which one is not entitled or for destroying or injuring others. *Defensive violence* is to repel an actual or expected attack (Jenkins and Gowdey, 1981).

The specific acts of violence that these definitions referred to include violent human acts such as homicide, forcible rape, aggravated assaults, robbery and suicide. All other types of violence such as political, state, and group violence have are not discussed in this paper.

The purpose of this discussion is to identify early conditions that generally lead to the above acts of violence. In other words, we are attempting to identify "Pathways to Violent Interpersonal Behavior," which will make it possible to retrace these paths backward in order to design intervention strategies for their reduction. These various acts of violence are seen to emerge from unique immediate causes. However, there are common underlying causes that may be examined, such that one intervention strategy may affect several types of violence. To develop this thought, we will follow the social interaction of the hypothetical individual child from childhood to young adulthood, and from his primary to his secondary and tertiary group relations.

This discussion will be from a social psychological viewpoint, where we will examine the environmental (social and physical) and personality factors in the development of the individual to act or react violently. A checklist of behaviors leading to violence is as difficult to specify as one leading to any deviant behavior, since any element listed can appear in different degrees in different children (delinquent or non-delinquent, violent or non-violent). However, researchers are beginning to focus on behaviors that may be underlying causes of violence or precursors to violence which reinforce the observations that violence is a patterned response to internal and external pressures.

At one time or another crime and violence have been explained on the basis of race, climate, political ideology, mental illness, relative deprivation, environment,etc. The problem with these explanations is that each has been promoted as the sole cause of these behaviors. Our view of how violence develops in the individual path to violence is not exhaustive nor will it be a single factor approach.

African-American males are disproportionately represented in violent crimes. Forty-seven (46.8) percent of the violent crimes in this country, and 53.5 percent of the murders were perpetrated by Blacks. The overwhelming majority of the perpetrators are male (Uniform Crime Reports, 1988). The population described herein refers generally to most aggressive persons, and specifically to African-American males because they are at highest risk.

In this discussion, we will examine the influence of two social institutions as well as the community and substance abuse. The two social institutions, where early behaviors (precursors) leading to violence may emanate, are the school and the home.

The Home

Studies on aggression suggest strongly that violence is a learned behavior (Bandura, 1973; Patterson, 1983). The home is one of the places where this behavior can be expected to have been learned. Some researchers see the home as the "cradle of violence" (Steinmetz and Straus, 1981).

The magnitude of violence in the home is suggested by many statistics appearing in the literature on this behavior. For example, in Detroit, 50 percent of all homicides are domestic. It is also of note that a significant number of police calls involve family disputes. Nationally, it is estimated that 1.4 to 1.9 million children are physically abused by family members and 2 million wives are beaten by their husbands. A person is more likely to be assaulted or killed in the home by a family member than anywhere else or anyone else (Gells and Straus, 1979; Uniform Crime Reports, 1988).

In growing up, the child acquires varied knowledge and skills, and feelings of what is right and what is wrong. The child learns the ways of his society from his family. It is generally accepted that the family plays a crucial role in exposing the child to violence or non-violence. If the child sees violence or has violence inflicted upon him, he is much more likely than others to absorb this behavior as being a method of conflict resolution. Therefore, children learn violence not only by observing it in their parent-parent interactions, but also by experiencing it through child abuse and practicing it through sibling aggression. Other conditions in the family associated specifically with the maladjustment of the African-American child include poverty, and racism and their manifestations.

Recently, the father's roles in the family have been shown to play a decisive part in conveying to the child a sense of social order. It is thought by some social scientists that the father's influence on the social climate within which his children's many experiences occur is perhaps the most important (Benson, 1984).

In the family, the father is often the most frequent abuser, especially in cases of physical abuse. This abuse usually involves not only the child, but also other family members. Further, research has shown that this abuse is more frequent when the abuser is a stepfather or a father surrogate (Lynn, 1974; Roberts, 1987). The home environment of the abused child then seems a fertile place for the beginning of the violence cycle, perhaps the first pathway to violence.

Families that are unstable, one-parent, and plagued with violence, inadequate parenting and role models, are at high risk for producing children with behaviors.

Many studies demonstrate the weak influence that families have in molding future goals of high-risk children and that, indeed, they are looking to influences outside the family and school for models of future goals and behaviors. Inadequate parenting, family violence, etc. may produce behavior that may manifest itself in poor self-concept, poor interpersonal skills, self-destructive values and actions, which, in turn, may result in running away, substance abuse, deviant behaviors, and violent behavior.

The School
More and more, the school has taken on the responsibility of socializing the child into the ways of his culture. Evidence has shown that the school has not dealt grappled adequately with the African-American child. This child has been taught values that do not enable him to achieve in school or in later life. For example, the schools, since integration, have not prepared the African-American child for survival in a racist society. The formal education that the African-American child receives in the nation's public school system is designed for the majority child's survival. Since 1954, this system has not admitted or recognized in its teaching that the African-American child is viewed differently not only by most of his teachers but also by most of the world that he will subsequently attempt to function in. The school's curriculum has failed to respond to differences among African-American the small middle class and the very large lower class families, although it is known that socioeconomic levels affect a child's degree of success in school. Further, research has shown that the degree to which a child succeeds or fails in school is a function of maturation.

Maturation as a determinant of intellectual achievement encompasses these factors: (1) the degree to which a child values competent performance in a given area; (2) the child's expectation of success or failure; (3) the minimal level of achievement with which the child can be satisfied; and (4) the extent to which the child sees himself or others as responsible for his success or failure This maturation and expectation is further affected by the child's observation of his parents' employment success, whether educated or not (McAdoo, 1988).

The school socialization for the African-American child may actually conflict with the parents' or family's socialization, i.e., where the family is socializing the child for survival, and the school is socializing for success in a culture that will systematically deny the child the access to that success.

Despite our knowledge about the harm done to children, the African-American child still learns mostly about white society in the school room. Also, he comes to perceive that he is not wanted in the school room or in the white world, and that he is considered inferior and bad. At most, the schools can instill values in the African-American child that inadequately prepare him for the world he must live in. But, most likely, it will create an ambivalence that will alienate him from the school, and he will turn to his peers for acceptance, drop out of school and begin the life-long trek through the various manifestations of this decision, one of the manifestations may be violence.

Remedies for this condition in the schools have been proposed by many authorities; however, to date, these remedies have been thwarted by political considerations, such as having a majority of white teachers in majority African-American schools, then blaming the child for the failures evidenced. Hiring of African-American teachers now may have some effect on Preventing these failures. However, many of the recently-graduated African-American teachers are those who have successfully adapted to the values of white America and could possibly inflict the same (or worse) effect as their white counterparts.

Since the socialization process of the high-risk African-American family may be impaired, the school is a powerful socializer of today's African-American child. The school is thought to be a reflection of the existing social order despite the fact that its function is to produce individuals who can function successfully in society. If this institution is also faulty, the damage to the child is enhanced.

Like the home, the school can be for many young people, a place where violence is an observed practice, learned, and hence, normative in conflict resolution. Other factors that promote behaviors that are early precursors to violence are school failures, poor interpersonal skills and poor self-image.

The Community
There is strong evidence to suggest that there is a vast amount of socialization taking place outside the formal institutions such as the home, school and church. The individual whose family ties are weak or non-existent finds peers, role models, significant others, etc. outside of those institutions to emulate. This seems to be especially significant among African-American males, where violence is escalating and often results in homicide. In a study conducted by this author of 500 black males in Nashville, Tennessee (Dennis, 1980), the majority of the victims and perpetrators of homicide reported that they did not have a father or father surrogate in their childhood.

51

Most victims and perpetrators of violence in this sample were men who were born to single parents, and/or teenage mothers. They reportedly participated minimally in family activities while spending much of their time "in the streets" with peers or in juvenile detention institutions. This obvious minimal participation with family suggests that much of their socialization took place outside the family, possibly by peers, role models and others.

Very little is being done to develop most high-risk communities where the African-American child can be in an environment where positive socialization can occur, where he can learn survival skills, observe successful role models, develop a positive self-concept, a sense of hope, and independence. All present attempts are woefully inadequate because they reach small numbers of children, have low impact on their overall behavior, and are either carried out by voluntary organizations or they are inadequately funded.

In studying such programs in Nashville, Tennessee, we found that individuals, groups, local and state agencies in these neighborhoods not only had no contact with each other, but sometimes were not aware of each other, even though they were working with the same population. Overlaps and gaps in program efforts were found; program effectiveness or evaluations were non-existent. This state of affairs is probably evident in other communities trying to improve the well-being of African-American children. It is agreed that efforts to develop communities where positive socialization is maximized is of utmost importance for African-American children whose present family life may be impaired and whose school experience may be damaging.

There is no doubt then that the community also serves as a place of socialization. If it is a good community in terms of child exposure, the positive outcomes for successful living are enhanced. However, children in communities or neighborhoods which expose them to negative experiences will be at high risk for learning violence as a normative way to reach desired goals and resolve conflicts. Minimizing violent role models while increasing positive role models is one way of socializing children for success and minimizing violence.

For African-Americans, discrimination has created despair and a lack of hope which have created, in turn, conditions where violence has been a natural outcome--probably initiated early on mostly by stressful social conditions, and, later, by a tradition of violence. This is to say, the frustration and stress of blocked goals may have initiated ghetto violence (the frustration aggression theory) (Dollard, 1939). This condition has existed long enough so that the child learns violence by observing and participating in violent quarrels and brawls in the unintegrated community of the ghetto (the social learning theory). Some researchers refer to this "place" as a subculture or microsystem (Bandura, 1979).

Further, the children in these communities view television, where violence is a constant dramatic theme and an integral part of cartoons, at a higher percent than most other children (Elkin and Handel, 1984). These television programs teach children a variety of violent techniques for coping with their frustrating and hostile environment. Violence, then, is seen as an adaptive mechanism.

The pressures and frustrations that the child is exposed to in ghettos, as well as alternatives for relief including the availability of guns, make the ghetto an ideal "place" to teach violence to a high percentage of each generation that passes through it. It is generally recognized that, as violence increases in a community, the tolerance for its occurrence also increases. Violence in these communities seems to be just one of the alternatives to conflict resolution. Substance abuse may be another.

Alcohol and other Substance Abuse

Researchers have linked alcohol abuse to violence for many years now. In some cases, alcohol abuse is seen as the cause of violence; in other cases, it seems to intensify violence. Alcohol abuse has manifested violence in the family as well as in interpersonal relationships outside the family (McBride, 1981). African-American males demonstrate this in the high rate of reported substance abuse and in homicide. The many types of alcohol abusers and the varied forms this abuse takes is also noted in the vast amount of literature on the subject.

The prevalence of this problem in the population of African-American males is unacceptably high. It is estimated that 20 percent of this group have a problem with alcohol. In a recent study, (Dennis, 1980), we found that more than half of our population of African-American males were frequent (more than once per week) users of alcohol, and over 90 percent were occasional users. It is also known that, in the majority (up to 80 percent) of violent incidents, the perpetrator and/or the victim were using alcohol (McBride, 1986), and that the moderate or heavy drinker is more likely to be the aggressor in violent encounters than the light drinkers or abstainers.

Alcohol abuse and violence are diseases that overlap in that some of the forces associated with alcohol abuse are also associated with violence. In fact, some researchers note that neither appears to be the cause of the other, but appears to be learned from the same sources. The *synergistic* relationship between alcoholism and violence is further noted through their many common characteristics. They fulfill many common needs and complement each other, especially in the case of family violence.

53

The tolerance levels for alcoholism and violence have increased to where they have become normative or expected behaviors. These behaviors are learned at home or in the broader community (Chavez, 1989). Alcoholism and violence are used to resolve conflicts or problems such as poverty, economic, depression, blocked goals, forced reactions, sexual mastery, control, jealously, possessiveness, etc. Indeed, society in general has tolerated both violence and alcoholism especially in their less extreme form.

The victims of alcohol and violence participate in their victimization in various normative ways, which seem to maintain or prolong and enhance these behaviors until they become so extreme that they terminate in institutionalization or in death (Dennis, 1985).

Abuse of other Substances and Violence

In the past ten to twelve years, and especially in the 1980s, we have seen a dramatic change in terms of "drug of choice" substance abuse. Since the late 1970s, crack cocaine has been highly utilized. Some of these abusers also used marijuana and alcohol simultaneously. There is a difference in the abuse and in the violence that was manifested by these "new" types of substance abusers.

While the research on specific violent behaviors is still underway, observations of these occurrences suggest that recent homicide and aggravated assaults are more related to drug conflicts than to interpersonal conflicts, as was observed in the early decades of this century when alcohol was the drug of choice in substance abuse.

Wolfgang noted in the 1960s and 1970s that the violence manifested by black males who were alcohol abusers was more interpersonal and victim precipitated, e.g. fights over money, women or non-respect; and even a form of self-destructive behavior (Wolfgang, 1982). Today, the violence, especially homicide, is overwhelmingly drug-related, e.g. drug users' non-payment of drug debt, violent attempts to obtain money for drugs that end in homicide. Also, the age of the victim of violence as well as that of the perpetrator has been lowered to the late teens and early twenties. This change in drug of choice with its resultant violent behavior as well as the lowering in age has its own set of ramifications, which need to be explained and addressed if intervention programs are to be designed for its reduction.

Discussion

Many reasons have been given to account for violence. We have examined the literature to identify some of the social characteristics of those who have been perpetrators of violent behaviors. We found that the violent perpetrators were characterized by the following:

1. low education (less than high school)
2. unemployed

3. substance abuser
4. trouble with the police
5. family and/or community violence
6. large family (5+ siblings)
7. no best friends
8. emotionally unstable
9. discontent
10. verbally inarticulate
11. experienced and/or perceived inequality
12. carried a weapon
13. low self-esteem

This list is not exhaustive nor did any violent person necessarily have all of the above characteristics. However, it is noted that most of the perpetrators had several of these characteristics. Our task then was to look at experiences in development that may have brought these men to this point.

In programs being conducted by the Nashville Urban League, Inc. and the Bethlehem Center of the United Methodist Church to prevent homicidal violence, it is the task of this writer to identify childhood behaviors that may indicate or predict violent behavior, either at present or later on in their lives. The male children in the programs are from nine to 16 years old.

Preliminary results show that programs such as those of the Bethlehem Center and Urban League, Inc. are beginning to affect the behaviors (precursors) under study, e.g. school attendance, grades, fighting goals and self-concept. So far, there is a marked difference between children in these programs and their controls. The programs demonstrate that it is possible to help children in high-risk communities to redirect or minimize behaviors that may evolve into violence by reducing frustrations and offering alternative solutions for problem-solving and interpersonal conflicts, providing positive role models and helping to establish future goals.

Summary and Conclusion
It is widely held that the violent home environment and the ghetto-like African-American communities are places where the pathways to violence, or cycles of violence, are created and maintained. Interrupting these cycles are as complex as their sources. For family violence, it is clear that the cycle of violence should be interrupted in the child's family of origin in order to achieve the highest level of success. Minimizing or reducing the child's experiences and observations of violence is another method of interrupting the violence cycle.

Various means have been established to treat and prevent child abuse. That is, experts all generally concluded that the long-term solution must involve changing the structure of the society which produces places where violence occurs. To do this, attention must be given to raising the educational level, increasing employment and changing the (norm) normative methods of responding to interpersonal conflicts.

Why is violence more prevalent among African-Americans? Violence in this group has existed in various forms since slavery. First, violence was inflicted on this group by others. Today, violence is inflicted upon this group by others as well as by themselves in a long-term tradition of using violence as one means of conflict resolution, violence as a reaction to frustration, and violence as modeling and rewards.

The main hope for reducing the level of violence in a society to a tolerable level, according to Frank (1971), lies in reducing its psychological and socioeconomic instigators and creating more effective institutions for its control. Heretofore, the institutions that have been the most concerned with this behavior have been those in the criminal justice system. We know now that other social institutions in the society must join the criminal justice system to assist in reducing this cycle of violence.

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