

Children Exposed to Violence & the Defending Childhood Initiative

A recent investigation funded by the Department of Justice³ found that 60% of a national sample of children reported being exposed to abuse or criminal victimization in the previous twelve months, with more than one-third reporting multiple incidents and over 10% reporting at least five distinct incidents. The situation is intensified in urban areas, where 50-96% of youth are exposed to violence in their neighborhoods.⁴ Children and adolescents who are chronically exposed to violence are at increased risk for psychological distress, with associated symptoms ranging from depression, anger, and anxiety,⁵ to poor physical health outcomes,⁶ dissociation,^{5,7} posttraumatic stress,^{4,8} and thoughts of suicide.⁹ Furthermore, there is a clear link between childhood violence exposure and perpetration of violence,^{9,10} with children displaying exposure-related aggression as early as the preschool years.¹¹

In the broadest sense, violence is defined as “all abuse experiences and violent acts such as child maltreatment, domestic violence, verbal, physical, and

sexual assaults, homicides, fighting, and bullying directly and through technology; and gratuitous depiction of these acts in music, movies, games, television, or any other media.”¹¹ Whether as victims or witnesses of violence, children are particularly vulnerable to the effects of exposure because they have limited control over their environments and are often unable to obtain help, especially if violence is occurring within the home. Moreover, early and prolonged exposure to violence appears to significantly affect children’s developing brains, particularly in young children who have fewer reasoning capacities and effective defenses.

Cuyahoga County is challenged with staggeringly high rates of childhood exposure to violence and associated risk factors. U.S. Census data from 2009¹² indicated that 30.9% of children under age 5 in Cuyahoga County lived below the poverty line, with rates nearly twice as high (57.9%) in Cleveland – the second poorest major city in the country. Furthermore, Cleveland was home to two of the 25 most dangerous neighborhoods in the country in 2010,

one of which ranked second to the top with a violent crime rate of 165.56 per 1000 and a 1 in 6 chance of becoming a victim over the course of a year. While crime rates are significantly higher in the City of Cleveland than in its rural and suburban counterparts, violence exposure is prevalent throughout Cuyahoga County, with records showing 3,817 suburban child abuse referrals in 2008 and 8,217 charges for suburban juvenile offenses in 2009.

Cuyahoga County is one of eight sites that received funding through the U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder’s Defending Childhood Initiative. The goals of the Defending Childhood Initiative are to prevent exposure to violence, mitigate the negative impacts of exposure when it does occur, and develop knowledge and spread awareness about the issue. Researchers at the Begun Center for Violence Prevention and Education at Case Western Reserve University are part of this collaborative effort, providing ongoing planning, data and evaluation support.

Evaluation and the Cuyahoga County Defending Childhood Initiative

Previously the founding Director of the Institute for the Study and Prevention of Violence at Kent State University, Clinical Psychologist Daniel Flannery now directs the Begun Center for Violence Prevention and Education at CWRU's Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences (MSASS). As a member of the Core Management Team for the Cuyahoga County Defending Childhood Initiative, he will be evaluating the initiative locally as well as collaborating on a national evaluation with counterparts in other demonstration sites. Jeff Kretschmar, Research Assistant Professor at MSASS and Senior Research Associate at the Begun Center, is also a member of the Initiative's Core Management Team and was the principal author of the Community Assessment Report for Cuyahoga County.¹ Dr. Mark Singer, Deputy Director of the Begun Center and the Leonard W. Mayo Professor of Family and Child Welfare, chairs the Defending Childhood data and evaluation subcommittee.

To produce a baseline assessment of the nature and extent of childhood exposure to violence county-wide, Dr. Flannery and colleagues compiled quantitative data from approximately 20 local sources. Additionally, qualitative data from service-providing agencies, families accessing those services, and community stakeholders were collected using a combination of methods (7 key informant interviews; 4 focus groups with 10-18 participants/group; 48 online surveys, and a review of program materials). These data reveal

increasingly high rates of abuse, neglect, and violence in Cuyahoga County and Cleveland in particular. Consistent with previous studies,^{10,13} they also suggest a cycle of violence perpetration among youth exposed to violence.

Children exposed to violence in the home

Of the 5,440 incidents of domestic violence reported to the Cleveland Police Department in 2009, a juvenile was present in 1,542 (28.3%) of the incidents and a victim in 553 (10.2%) of the incidents. Additionally, 21,028 referrals for child abuse, neglect, and dependency were made to the county's Department of Children and Family Services during the first 10 months of 2010, representing a significant increase from the previous year. The Cuyahoga County Child Fatality Report identified 213 child deaths in 2009, many of which were related to physical abuse. For the first time in 12 years, homicide was the leading cause of death for children age 1-9 (n = 11).

In a focus group conducted by Mental Health Services, Inc. (MHS), parents articulated that children are greatly influenced by what they see adults doing, describing occasions in which children mirrored violent behavior that they had witnessed in the home. These observations are reflected in county-wide data on youth who have been charged with an offense: 75% of the randomly sampled youth placed on probation by the Cuyahoga County Juvenile Court had previously been either a witness to or victim of domestic violence. Likewise, caregivers of youth



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served by the Behavioral Health/Juvenile Justice (BHJJ) Initiative* reported that 28.1% of the youth had been physically abused, 40.6% had been sexually abused, and 51.6% had been exposed to domestic violence. Parents in the MHS focus group expressed a desire for more services for families living with domestic violence, but emphasized the need for discretion in order to protect the safety and privacy of victims. They cautioned against police involvement and suggested police training for more sensitive handling of cases requiring law enforcement.

Children exposed to violence in school

According to the Youth Risk Behavior Survey administered through the Cleveland Metropolitan School District, 38% of middle school students and 18.6% of high school students reported being in a physical fight on school property in the past year. 27.8% of middle schoolers and 11.9% of high schoolers were harassed, bullied, or picked on at school, and over 10% of high school students reported missing class in the past 30 days because they felt unsafe either at or on their way to school. 8.8% of middle schoolers and 3.2% of high schoolers reported carrying a gun, knife, or club on school property in the past 30 days. Parents in the MHS focus group attest that their children prioritize safety and survival over school and learning.

Children exposed to violence in the community

Youth participants in a focus group conducted through the STANCE** program of the Partnership for a Safer Cleveland discussed street crime as being commonplace, describing violence as an industry and as a means to survival rather than a problem to solve. Of the 200+ Cuyahoga County youth surveyed through the BHJJ Initiative

and the Youth and Family Community Partnership (diversion programs for juvenile justice-involved youth), 62% reported seeing someone beaten up in their neighborhood in the past year, with 24% seeing this often or every day. Likewise, 75% of these same youth reported beating someone up in the past year, and 22% reported beating someone up often or every day. 29% reported having a gun pointed at them in the past year. In separate STANCE focus groups, the prevalence of gun violence was mentioned by adults and teens alike, who commented that youth quickly resort to guns rather than fists.

According to the Cleveland Police Department, juveniles were present in 20% of the 120 homicides in Cleveland in 2009, and victims in 15% of those instances. Juvenile Court records show 15,395 charges filed on 7,169 juveniles in 2009: 866 charges for domestic violence, 579 for sex offenses, 1,699 for assault, 41 for homicide, 665 for robbery, 420 for menacing, 90 for harassment, 77 for kidnapping, and 323 for weapon possession. Despite these rates of juvenile crime, it is notable that even when prompted, youth in the STANCE focus group did not consider drug use or drug trade to be major cause of violence in their communities.

Effects of childhood exposure to violence

Data from the community assessment conducted by Dr. Flannery's team indicates that exposure to violence has penetrating psychological and behavioral effects on children. Youth in the MHS focus group noted feelings of anger, sadness, fear, and frustration when they were either a victim of or witness to violence. They also reported a variety of responses following such incidences, including running away from home, having nightmares and thoughts of

death and injury, acting out violently toward others, and in at least one case, channeling anger into dance and art. Parents in a separate MHS focus group correspondingly reported that, following exposure to violence, their children lose sleep, experience eating problems, and display anger and violent behavior. Over 67% of caregivers surveyed through the BHJJ Initiative reported hearing their child talk about committing suicide, and over 40% reported that the child had attempted suicide at least once. When exposed to violence, children in the MHS focus group reported wanting more love, protection, and fairness from adults that they trust; they reported simply wanting someone to listen to them.

The community needs assessment conducted by Drs. Flannery, Kretschmar, and colleagues demonstrates that while Cuyahoga County has numerous agencies and programs capable of addressing childhood exposure to violence, these agencies lack the staff and resources to meet the needs of all local families who are affected. Having completed a year-long strategic planning process, Cuyahoga County is now poised to take a leap forward, joining the national Defending Childhood program in developing a roadmap for other communities in which children are similarly vulnerable.

* The Behavioral Health Juvenile Justice (BHJJ) initiative of the Ohio Department of Youth Services consists of programs that enhance and expand local options for providing services to juvenile offenders with serious behavioral healthcare needs.

** Standing Together Against Neighborhood Crime Everyday (STANCE) is part of a comprehensive prevention, reentry, and enforcement effort, initially funded by the U.S. Department of Justice, to help prevent gang problems across the nation.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The collaborative of the Cuyahoga County Defending Childhood Initiative reflects a comprehensive approach based in sound principles which recognize that children and adolescents develop within the context of their families and communities. The U.S. Attorney General's Defending Childhood Initiative with funding from the Department of Justice is supporting the development and implementation of research-informed strategies to prevent and reduce the impact of children's exposure to violence in their homes, schools, and communities. The program emphasizes evidence-based practices addressing a broad spectrum of needs from birth to age 17.

Cuyahoga County Defending Childhood's collaborative reflects a partnership of over 150 public, private, and civic stakeholders. Planners envision a comprehensive approach with an ambitious vision: that *children are protected and healed from exposure to violence, allowing them to thrive and become healthy and compassionate adults in a supportive and safe community.*

The strategic plan developed by Dr. Flannery and colleagues, together with the Cuyahoga County Children Who Witness Violence Program and other partners, presents an integrated multi-pronged set of tactics including community awareness building, system design and implementation, training, service provision, policies and procedures development, data collection, and

evaluation. Cuyahoga County will incorporate several strategies to establish a local trauma-informed network of organizations that operate collaboratively: the **Cuyahoga County Child Trauma Services Network (CCCTSN)**. The CCCTSN will offer an accessible, coordinated system of care that will be responsible for: **increased identification** of children exposed to violence, **immediate response** and screening by designated organizations, **central intake and assessment** of cases, **intervention** with services provided immediately after exposure to violence, and **treatment** that addresses and prevents lasting consequences.

Maximizing public funds is essential for meeting the goals of the program and building an enduring framework. Initially a three-year effort, Cuyahoga County Defending Childhood seeks to leverage federal funding with additional local private and public dollars in order to expand the capacity of existing services in the region. It is anticipated that at least 7,500 children will be identified as exposed to violence and in need of care during the first three years of operation. An effective system will require a combination of improved coordination and infrastructure, enhanced quality and access to services, and rigorous evaluation efforts to increase program efficacy.

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- ¹² U.S. Census Bureau. 2009. <http://www.census.gov/did/www/saipe/index.html>.
- ¹³ Flannery, D.J., et al. Adolescent Violence Exposure and Victimization at Home: Coping and Psychological Trauma Symptoms. *International Review of Victimology*. 1998. 6: 63-82.

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