

The Impact of Urban Hassles as Chronic Stressors on Adolescent Mental Health

Adolescence as a life stage is a time of great potential and also great vulnerability. The experience of chronic stress during adolescence can have a significant effect on individuals' long-term mental health and well-being. Research has established a clear link between chronic exposure to social and environmental stressors and a number of poor outcomes among youth, including aggression, anxiety, school failure and depression.^{1,2} A better understanding of the source of stressors for adolescents would allow for further investigation of how stress affects health and other important outcomes. This understanding should ultimately lead to the development and implementation of prevention programs to combat these negative effects.

The context of the urban environment presents unique stressors for those within its boundaries. Current research on stress and its effects among adolescents has focused on the experiences of predominately white, middle-class youth living outside of urban environments. Youth who live in urban settings are often subject to stressors, such as poverty and exposure to violence,³ that differ from their peers who live outside of the city. The study of these chal-

lenges and their impact on adolescent stress and stress-related outcomes is an important, and often overlooked, consideration in the study of child and adolescent development. Specific attention to the unique social and environmental characteristics of the urban environment is critical to understanding the everyday stressors affecting youth in our cities. However, research examining stress has largely relied on measures of major life events. Measures of major life events capture serious yet periodic stress; they do not necessarily capture more common on-going difficulties that are part of everyday experiences.⁴ A measure based on daily hassles may be a better indicator of stress experienced by adolescents because it specifically addresses social and environmental stressors present in everyday life that may have a cumulative effect.⁵

The development and use of a valid, context-specific measure of stress that reflects the urban environment is crucial for understanding the effects of stress on the well being of youth, and for developing appropriate programs to address needs of the urban adolescent population.

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David B. Miller, PhD

Associate Professor
Mandel School of Applied
Social Sciences

Dr. David Miller's research has focused on gaining a deeper understanding of the stressors faced by adolescents living in urban environments. He and his colleagues have developed a new tool, the Urban Hassles Index (UHI), to assess the unique social and physical characteristics of the urban environment. This tool has been used to examine the relationship between stress and mental health outcomes.

On October 13, 2007 David Miller presented his research at a Schubert Center for Child Studies forum at Case Western Reserve University. He set the stage for his talk by displaying lyrics and playing a recording of *The Message* by Grandmaster Flash (1982):

*A child was born, with no state of mind
Blind to the ways of mankind
God is smiling on you but he's frownin too,
Cause only god knows what
you go through
You grow in the ghetto, living second rate
And your eyes will sing a song
of deep hate
The places you play and where you stay
Looks like one great big alley way
You'll admire all the number book takers
Dogpitchers, pushers and the
big money makers
Driving big cars, spending twenties
and tens
And you wanna grow up to
be just like them
Smugglers, scrambles, burglars, gamblers
Pickpockets, peddlers and even
pan-handlers
You say I'm cool, I'm no fool...
Don't push me, cause I'm close
to the edge
I'm trying not to loose my head
It's like a jungle sometimes,
it makes me wonder
How I keep from going under*

Development of the Urban Hassles Index

The UHI is the product of Dr. Miller's extensive experience and previous research with adolescents living in urban areas. Its development was a multi-step process. It began with a list of "hassles" thought to represent common events in the lives of urban adolescents that might induce stress. This initial list was then expanded with the help of a group of adolescents who suggested additional items and provided feedback on the relevance of each item to their own experiences living in an urban environment.

This preliminary version of the UHI was pre-tested with a sample of 131 African American adolescents recruited through local social service agencies in Cleveland. Adolescents were asked to indicate on a scale (0=none, 1=a little, 2=a lot) whether they experienced the hassle. The items were summed to obtain a total daily hassles score for each participant ranging from 0 to 18. The results illustrated the salience of the items in the lives of urban adolescents. The average daily hassles score was 14.24 out of 18, with young men reporting a slightly higher score (15.38) compared to young women (12.26). Each of the hassles was experienced "a lot" by a majority of the youth. The two most commonly reported hassles were being pressured to join a gang (84.5%) and being offered sex by drug addicts for money (89.3%)⁶ (see table 1 for sample frequencies).

THE URBAN HASSLES SCALE – SAMPLE FREQUENCIES

	A LOT (N) %	A LITTLE (N) %	NONE (N) %
Take different routes home to keep safe	(87) 66.9%	(28) 21.5%	(15) 11.5%
Pressured by friends to join a gang	(109) 84.5	(3) 2.3%	(17) 13.2%
Made fun of because of grades	(95) 73.6%	(22) 17.1%	(12) 9.3%
Worried that someone will try to take your clothes, shoes, or money	(71) 54.6%	(38) 29.2%	(21) 16.2%
Pressured to carry weapon for protection	(79) 60.8%	(31) 23.8%	(20) 15.4%
Must work to help pay bills at home	(97) 74.6%	(22) 16.9%	(11) 8.5%
Nervous about gunshots/sirens at night	(74) 56.5%	(33) 25.2%	(24) 18.3%
Keeping your fear about safety secret from your friends	(81) 61.8%	(29) 22.1%	(21) 16.0%
Offered sex by drug addicts for money	(109) 83.2%	(8) 6.1%	(14) 10.7%

TABLE 1

Following preliminary development and testing of the UHI, the scale was expanded from the original nine items to 32 items, based on input both from complementary research on urban environments and input from professionals working with adolescents in urban areas. Additionally, principle components analysis was used to identify different types of stressors present within the UHI resulting in four subscales: environmental conditions, interpersonal interactions/surveillance, safety concerns, and anticipatory victimization .

URBAN HASSLES AND ADOLESCENT MENTAL HEALTH

RESEARCH FINDINGS

In addition to its utility in identifying the stressors adolescents' face, the UHI has been used to examine the relationship between these stressors and adolescent mental health.

Dr. Miller and colleagues recruited 254 junior and high school adolescents (ages ranging from 10-20 years). These youth were approximately half male

and half female. The majority (64%) were African American. Youth were asked to complete the expanded UHI as well as two measures of mental health, the Hopkins Symptom Checklist (HSCL) and the Adolescent Symptom Inventory (ASI), which together assessed symptoms of anxiety, depression, conduct disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder.

The results indicated a significant relationship between urban hassles and symptoms of poor mental health (as measured by both the HSCL and ASI). Individuals with higher scores on the UHI indicated more symptoms of anxiety and depression and higher ASI scores. Even those adolescents reporting a moderate hassles score had significantly better mental health outcomes than those with high hassles scores. Furthermore, each subscale of the UHI was significantly related to each measure of mental health. When the results were examined specifically in terms of neighborhood safety, data suggests that as perceptions of neighborhood safety decreases (when neighborhoods are perceived as more dangerous) adolescents experience heightened internalized difficulties while also exhibiting externalized negative behaviors.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

The research being conducted by Dr. David Miller illustrates the importance of assessing the stressors affecting adolescents using context-relevant concepts and experiences. The study demonstrates the contribution of urban hassles to adolescent stress and, ultimately, the effects of stress on adolescent mental health and well-being. The UHI provides a new tool for researchers to assess stress among urban adolescents, and provides an alternative or complementary measure to traditional life events indexes. This tool may be utilized by practitioners working with youth in community-based and level interventions, by schools, in policy initiatives, and in future research studies.

Practitioners and school personnel: Understanding the impact of urban social and physical environments on adolescent mental health and well-being is crucial to designing and implementing targeted programming to prevent the negative effects of stress on adolescent health and well-being. Practitioners must consider the contextual circumstances confronted by youth in urban environments and the manner in which these youth adapt to and cope with them. Especially in urban environments, assessment should include discussion of chronic stress with an understanding about its potential impact on neglectful or dysfunctional behaviors and physical and psychological symptoms. The UHI could be used by practitioners as a rapid assessment instrument for this purpose.

Policymakers and stakeholders at all levels must understand the relationship between the environment in which children live and their well being. Policies and initiatives should focus on prevention by working to change the conditions of neighborhoods through efforts at community and environmental revitalization and community building strategies. Efforts must also include

education about, and early intervention and treatment of the negative effects associated with chronic exposure to stress.

Next steps for research: Dr. Miller's research has demonstrated the utility of the Urban Hassles Index in identifying the stressors that adolescents living in urban environments face and understanding the ways those stressors impact their lives. However, a deeper understanding of the context in which youth live and their perception of it and reaction to it will provide valuable information to practitioners and policy makers working or concerned with youth. To this end, Dr. Miller and colleagues plan to continue to work refining the UHI, including for use in measuring the perceived severity of stressors and the level of risk or danger youth feel are posed by stressors. They also plan to continue to examine the relationship between scores on the UHI and other health indicators and coping strategies.

¹ Rasmussen, A., Aber, M.S., & Bhana, A. (2004). Adolescent coping and neighborhood violence: Perceptions, exposure, and urban youths' efforts to deal with danger. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 33, 61-75.

² Schmeelk-Cone, K.H., & Zimmerman, M.A. (2003). A longitudinal analysis of stress in African American youth: Predictors and outcomes of stress trajectories. *Journal of Youth and Adolescents*, 32, 419-430.

³ Safyer, A. W. (1994). The impact of inner city life on adolescent development: Implications for social work. *Smith College Studies in Social Work*, 64, 153-167.

⁴ Kanner, A. D., Coyne, J. C., Schaefer, C., & Lazarus, R. S. (1981). Comparison of two modes of stress management: Daily hassles and uplifts versus major life events. *Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, 4, 1-39.

⁵ Luthar, S.S., & Zigler, E. (1991) Vulnerability and competence: A review of research on resilience in childhood. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 61, 6-21.

⁶ Miller, D.B., Webster, S.E., & MacIntosh, R. (2002). What's there and what's not: Measuring daily hassles in urban African American adolescents. *Research on Social Work Practice*, 12(3), 375-388.

⁷ Miller, D. B., & Townsend, A. (2005). Urban hassles as chronic stressors and adolescent mental health: The Urban Hassles Index. *Brief Treatment & Crisis Intervention*, 5(1), 85-94.



Schubert Center for Child Studies
614A Crawford Hall
10900 Euclid Avenue
Cleveland, OH 44106-7179

216.368.0540
www.case.edu/artsci/schubert/
schubertcenter@case.edu