Developmental & Ecological Perspective on the Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma & Violence

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person. There is a meaningful perceptual difference between discussing the behaviors of a violent person and discussing a person who engaged in violent behaviors; the former is more likely to be associated with immutable characteristics of a person, and the latter is more likely to be associated with attempts at understanding social and contextual causes of the behavior.

The combination of chronic exposure to traumatic events and limited access to coping supports describes the life contexts of many children growing up in low-

and biological vulnerabilities).[10] These risk factors also identify numerous points

to adolescent perpetration of violence. We need to expand the lens to questioning the nested ecological systems that place children at risk for abuse and neglect.[21] Without this perspective, it is easy to overlook the fact that most of the factors that increase the likelihood that abused and neglected children will develop violent behavior patterns as adolescents are the same factors that increase the likelihood that parents will abuse and neglect their children.[22] The search for direct pathways from experiencing abuse to perpetuating violence also runs contrary to research showing that experiencing neglect appears to be as much of a pathway to adolescent violence as experiencing abuse, suggesting that the pathways are complex and contextual.[23]

The intergenerational transmission of trauma and violence is determined by the accumulation of risk factors across one's life course coupled with the lack of protective factors. This accumulation of exposure to violence and other traumatic experiences is more than additive: it has an exponential relationship with the likelihood of poor developmental outcomes.[24] The effects of exposure to violent, traumatic, and adverse life experiences are also not independent from each other. For example, the effect of exposure to chronic housing and food insecurity and chronic community violence are particularly damaging for the emotional and behavioral development of children who are also growing up in homes with "impaired caregiving system[s]."[25] Especially for children, trauma occurs when high levels of toxic stress are experienced "in the absence of the buffering protection of a supportive adult relationship."[26] Supportive caregivers are pivotal in determining whether potentially traumatic experiences will instead be tolerable.

The inconvenient truth about preventing adolescent violence is that children who experience abuse and neglect early in their childhood are significantly more likely to experience ꞏ ꞏ ꞏ ꞏ ꞏ : repeated subsequent victimization and trauma throughout their life course.[27] Polyvictimization creates diverging developmental trajectories: some children's developmental trajectories are repeatedly negatively affected by needing to recover from traumatic life experiences, while other children's developmental trajectories are advantaged by having to cope with only a limited number of traumatic events that are discrete from their otherwise developmentally supportive environment. Exposure to these divergent development trajectories is not racially and ethnically neutral. Black, Indigenous, and Latinx children have a significantly higher likelihood of experiencing chronic trauma without coping supports, and White children have a significantly higher likelihood of experiencing a limited number of traumatic events coupled with coping supports.[28]

The risk and protective factors embedded in the nested ecological system in which children live are the greatest early opportunities of both prevention before violent behaviors emerge and intervention at the earliest sign of violent behaviors.[29] This nested set of ecological contexts begins with formal and informal social policies that shape all other ecological contexts. Formal and informal social

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istic outcomes. Because our neurobiological systems are continuously developing in response to input, children who have been neurobiologically "changed" in response to their developing environment can be supported in "resetting" their neurobiological stress response systems to enable more adaptive coping.[35]

Only by integrating a range of developmental theories and in relation to the ecological context can something as complex as violent patterns of behavior be understood, especially if the goal is identifying points of prevention and intervention.[36] Reviews of developmentally based interventions point to several time periods and contexts across an individual's life course, from the prenatal period to late adolescence, for evidence-based interventions that decrease the likelihood that children placed at risk will develop violent patterns of behavior as adolescents. A few examples of those time periods and categories of intervention are listed below.

There are numerous known targets for prevention long before children are placed at risk for abuse and neglect. This includes parents' need for healing from their own abuse and neglect to ensure they have the psychological and emotional capacities to engage in supportive parenting as well as ensuring parents have the socioeconomic and community resources that are associated with reducing the likelihood of abuse and neglect.

Prevention efforts can continue immediately after birth for families with known risk factors. These interventions can be delivered through proven home visiting programs that target parent-infant attachment and parent-infant stress regulation.

For children who have experienced abuse and neglect, parent development interventions can be delivered for parents and foster parents to ensure that children's home environments improve and that any initial learning of violent behaviors is mitigated. Effective interventions can be delivered in as few as ten to twelve weeks.

The school-going years are an opportune time for direct teaching of the social and emotional skills and the problem-solving and decision-making skills that have been shown to reduce the likelihood that children who have experienced abuse and neglect will be rejected by prosocial peers. This peer rejection increases the likelihood that abused and neglected children's social interactions become concentrated with children exhibiting aggressive and deviant behaviors, which escalates and reinforces those behaviors.

The school-going years are also the best opportunity for identifying and accessing children placed at risk and delivering mental health supports to help

them cope with the cognitive and emotional effects of abuse, neglect, and other traumatic stressors.

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American society has by decision and default largely deferred paying the costs of supporting children who have experienced abuse and neglect until those abused and neglected children enter the juvenile and eventually adult criminal justice system. National estimates of the direct cost of incarcerating youth are about $401 per day. There are also broader juvenile justice system costs and collateral individual and social costs that result from victimization experienced during confinement that are much higher than the direct cost of confinement.[37] In contrast, evaluations routinely show positive financial returns to investing in preventative interventions.[38] However, the current system of family, community, and school interventions repeatedly fails most children placed at risk during the years when prevention and intervention would be most effective. Instead, American society pours money and resources into punishment when victims become perpetrators: "aggression, substance abuse, and other symptoms targeted as problematic behaviors by the legal system are often coping strategies to increase safety and security in individuals with histories of trauma."[39]

The intergenerational transmission of historical trauma is essential to understanding contemporary racial and ethnic group differences in both victimization and the perpetration of violence. Historical trauma includes three successive phases: 1) a dominant group perpetrating mass traumas on a subgroup of the population, resulting in cultural, familial, societal, and economic devastation; 2) the initial generations that directly experienced these traumas develop negative biological, cultural, psychological, and behavioral symptoms;as bT.eas) the in (cultur)8 (al, psy)4 (chologvis tha)1 populat ag petraau

ity is directly due to the ways that slavery created and necessitated the insecure parent-child attachment that has been passed down through generations.[43] It also owes to the ways that Jim Crow, segregation, mass incarceration, and other social policies have made it disproportionately difficult for Black families to create the conditions that are conducive to secure and supportive parenting.[44]

Below is an incomplete accounting of the perpetuation of historical trauma through racial and ethnic disparities in present-day ecological factors that affect the likelihood that an adolescent will engage in violent behaviors.[45]

- Colonization, slavery, Jim Crow
- Housing segregation, economic discrimination, disproportionate incarceration
- Popularization of negative stereotypes through mainstream media
- Disrupted cultural transmission of history and heritage

- Exposure to daily neighborhood activities and social interactions that increase risk
- Experiencing and/or witnessing chronic violence and assault
- Unconcealed alcohol and drug abuse
- Low levels of social capital and social cohesion
- Low quality of public institutions, from school to health care, that promote healthy development and buffer against abuse and neglect at home

- High concentration of socioeconomically disadvantaged peers
- Lower per-pupil spending, larger class sizes, and less experienced teachers
- Increased behavioral sanctioning with harsh and exclusionary discipline
- Lower levels of safety at school

- Poverty and associated housing and food insecurity
- Alcohol and other substance abuse
- Parental incarceration
- Low or lack of emotional bonding among family members
- Chronic or episodic family violence
- Child abuse and neglect

The negative effects of historical trauma are maintained through state sponsored (that is, institutional) retraumatization through the foster care, juvenile justice, educational, and other state systems. As noted above, one

factor associated with whether abused and neglected children will go on to develop violent patterns of behavior is the extent to which they experience continued victimization and other traumatic stressors throughout childhood and adolescence. Institutional retraumatization occurs in juvenile justice and educational settings when those institutions use punitive and coercive sanctions rather than supportive interventions in response to children exhibiting behavioral dysregulation that is the direct result of their inability to cope with traumatic life experiences.[46] Holding the state accountable does not absolve communities and families from the responsibility of contributing to the healthy development of children, but state institutions must be resourced and organized in ways that enable them to meet children where they are.

According to the National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence, about four million children in the United States are exposed to violence each year, and about half of those children experience lasting trauma.[47] National studies estimate that over 70 percent of children in need of mental health treatment do not receive services, and this is especially true of children in economically disadvantaged families.[48] Because of the self-regulation demands, schools are one of the primary plac-

- Physical and sexual victimization at home and/or in the community
- Post-traumatic dissociation and emotional numbing
- Chronic stress of poverty and associated housing and food insecurity
- Self-medicating through substance abuse

- Violent victimization by own and rival gang members
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disorder.[58] In contrast, little is done to aid former youth gang members in the United States. They are left to themselves to identify the need for assistance and seek out coping supports. As developmental psychologist Patricia Kerig and colleagues have noted, "for [American] youth growing up in violent and gun-ridden inner-city environments, giving up gang life might seem to be the equivalent of being individually disarmed in a still heavily militarized zone."[59]

Exposure to assault and gun violence is an ever-present threat in too many economically disadvantaged and mostly minority neighborhoods, and in the wake of youth assaults, shootings, and homicides are traumatized siblings, friends, and schoolmates.[60] Predictably, many of these children arrive at school displaying varying levels of dysregulation. However, very few enter schools that teach them how to regulate the complex cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dysregulation caused by trauma. Many schools instead respond with punitive and exclusionary discipline when these students are unable to meet behavioral expectations.

Because chronic exposure to traumatic stressors compromises children'e wTm   inited St1eomp

as random locker and bag searches and metal detectors.[66] These practices are primarily in schools attended by racially and ethnically marginalized urban students and work against their developing a strong sense of school belonging because they foster antagonistic relationships between and among students and staff, and incite emotional distress and lowered self-esteem.[67]

When police are in schools, student misbehavior becomes criminalized, and discipline problems that were previously handled by school staff are delegated to the school police officer.[68] This creates a pathway from the school to the juvenile justice system, rather than a pathway that directs students exhibiting dysregulated behaviors to the social and emotional health counselor and then back into the classroom. This alternative pathway is trauma-responsive discipline, which focuses on building students' capacities to manage dysregulated behaviors, replace them with regulated behaviors, and ultimately cultivate resiliency.[69]

I have focused on traumas that are passed from one generation to the next and from one victim to the next via interpersonal violence: one individual or group of individuals doing harm to another. This means that _[illegible]_ . Once we understand that the behaviors of adolescents who are violent offenders were developed and are maintained through the accumulation of interpersonal traumas, it becomes clear that _[illegible]_ .

As American society is waking up to the need to hold police officers and the criminal justice system accountable for their roles in state-sponsored violence, we must similarly hold all our public institutions accountable for state-sponsored retraumatization of children. Because of their access to and time with children, schools are uniquely positioned to provide children placed at risk for developing violent patterns of behavior with preventative and rehabilitative interventions.[70] From kindergarten to twelfth grade, a student spends more than fifteen thousand hours in school. How those hours are used has a significant effect on breaking versus reinforcing the intergenerational transmission of trauma and violence.

Schools, our largest state sponsored socializing agent, must change if they are to be transformative in the lives of children coping with abuse and neglect at home and violence in their neighborhoods and social networks. To this end, there are new frameworks and models for schools that intentionally build resilience: the capacity to engage in adaptive coping that enables one to be functional in the short and long term despite acute or chronic experiences of trauma and adversity.[71] Schools can intervene for effective violence prevention in two critical areas: 1) decreased exposure to risk factors such as community violence and contact with antisocial peers by increasing attendance and sense of school belonging and 2) increased exposure to protective factors such as strengthening emotional and

behavioral regulation and the intentional development of planful decision-making through the provision of psychological interventions at school.[72]

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