



Causes



Causes of Violence¹

Violence is a complex phenomenon that has not one but many causes. Hence there is no single solution or response. In order to decrease the incidence of violence, one needs to identify the numerous factors that are associated with the phenomenon and implement a set of solutions designed to address the different root causes. This is the challenging task that lies ahead in the fight against violence. The point of departure in the search for solutions must be an analysis of the factors that promote violence (risk factors) as well as the factors that inhibit violence (protection factors). In any given situation, the likelihood that violence will emerge increases as the number of risk factors rises; the risk of violence decreases as the number of protection factors increases.

There are several ways to categorize risk factors associated with violence. In analyzing risk and protection factors, it is useful to differentiate between those that operate on the following levels:

- ▶ Individual
- ▶ Household
- ▶ Community or society

When violent behavior is analyzed from a time perspective, factors associated with violence can be organized into:

- ▶ Biological predispositions and social antecedents
- ▶ Situational characteristics
- ▶ Triggering events

Table 1
Risk (Protection) Factors for Violence

Individuals	Home	Community/Society
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Demographic (age, gender) ● Biological ● Early exposure to violence ● Socioeconomic and educational level ● Employment status ● Alcohol and drug abuse 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Household size/density of household ● Household structure, dynamics and rules ● History of family violence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● (Legal and illegal) weapons and drug markets ● Violence in the media ● Effectiveness of private and public institutions of social control ● Cultural norms ● Neighborhood crime rate ● Neighborhood socioeconomic level ● Neighborhood environmental characteristics ● History of social violence ● Degree of inequality

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Biological Basis of Violence

Genetic and biological factors, as well as alcohol and drug abuse, increase the predisposition to exhibit aggressive and violent behavior. It is believed that genetic influences, should they be documented, will involve several different genes and significant interaction with environmental stimuli (Reiss and Roth, 1993). On the other hand, the results of studies increasingly point to the existence of a link between violence and cerebral and neurobiological anomalies, which for the most part are preventable. Factors that increase brain activity and reactivity (traumas) or decrease its capacity to moderate impulses (child abuse or neglect, drug or alcohol abuse), increase the individual's capacity to respond in a violent fashion (Perry, 1996). Early childhood experiences have a disproportionate significant effect on the development of the adult brain. Physical and/or emotional negligence during the prenatal and early infancy stages, as well as exposure to traumatic violence during infancy, alter the development of the central nervous system and predispose an individual to violence. These events also contribute to the learning of violence and emphasize the interaction between biological and environmental factors.

Even though cerebral damage or child abuse in themselves do not necessarily lead to violence and even though violence can be exhibited without the presence of cerebral damage or prior abuse, the combination of cerebral anomalies and child abuse significantly increases the likelihood of future violent behavior.



Findings

- Mice raised in an enriched environment have a 30% higher synaptic density in the cerebral cortex (which regulates impulses of the nervous system) than mice raised in deprived environment (Perry, 1996).
- Perry and his collaborators have shown atrophy of the cerebral cortex in 7 out of 12 children who were severely neglected or abused.
- Studies conducted by psychiatrist Dorothy Lewis and neurologist Jonathan Pincus show that the majority of repeat criminal offenders experienced both child neglect and cerebral traumas as a result of accidents or physical abuse.
- A study of a group of individuals from childhood until adulthood revealed that the adults who were abused or neglected as children were arrested more often as adults (15.8% arrest rate) than a control group that had not experienced child abuse (7.9% arrest rate) (Windom, 1989). (The research controlled for the effects of age differences, gender and race).
- Data from Cali, Colombia, show that 56% of all reported homicides occur on the three days of the weekend—when most alcohol consumption takes place— and one fourth of all reported homicides occur on Sundays. Also, a disproportionate number of homicides occur on holidays and during celebrations of sporting triumphs (Guerrero, 1997).

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Violence Is A Learned Behavior

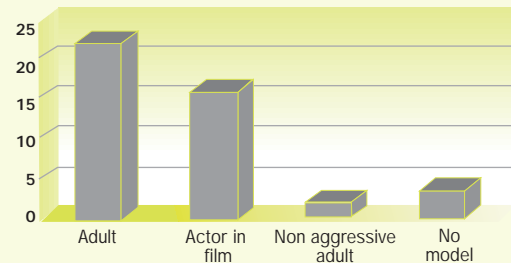
Violent behavior is learned, and the first opportunity people have to learn to behave aggressively is at home by observing and imitating aggressive behavior of parents, other family members and even television and movie characters (Bandura, 1973). When parents reward their children for behaving aggressively or abuse their children, they are in effect teaching their children at a young age to express themselves in violent ways (Berkowitz, 1996). Children learn to associate aggressive stimuli with violent behavior and to respond to frustrations or other harmful events with violence. Even though abused children may not necessarily grow up to repeat the type of abuse to which they were subjected and not all violent adults were victims of abuse as children, studies show a direct link between violence victimization rates during childhood (including both abused children as well as children who witnessed chronic abuse of other family members) and subsequent propensity toward violent behavior (Dahlberg, 1998). Violence is also learned in school and on the street.



Findings

- Numerous experiments conducted by psychologist Albert Bandura and his collaborators revealed that infants who observe an adult behave aggressively imitate such behavior, even though the adult role model is not present. This imitation of aggressive behavior occurs whether the child is exposed to an adult in person or watches an adult behaving violently on videotape. Imitation is more frequent when the aggressive behavior of the adult is rewarded, or when the child anticipates being rewarded if he or she behaves aggressively (Bandura, 1973)

Aggressive Child Behavior After Observing Several Different Role Models (Averages)



- Children who were aggressive at 8 years of age were characterized in the same way by their friends 10 years later, and were also prone to use physical punishment on their children (Eron and Slaby, 1994).
- Research conducted by Rowell Huesmann and Leonard Eron (1984) in the U.S. shows that continued exposure of third graders to violent television programs is a good predictor of violent behavior ten years later, regardless of the child's initial level of violence.

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Demographic Factors and Violence

Age, population density and gender are factors which affect violence in different ways and can be useful in predicting general violence trends in society. In Latin America, as well as other regions of the world, most homicides are perpetrated by young males between 18 to 24 years of age. Moreover, most victims of criminal violence are also males from the same age group. Among the factors which make young people predisposed towards careers of violence are: high youth unemployment rates, impunity in the judicial system, easy access to alcohol, drugs and firearms. In addition to these factors, the culture of violence in the media incites young people to imitate violence and weakens social inhibitions against violent behavior.

Population growth and increased population density, especially in large cities, leads to increased stress, frustration and anonymity, which promote violent behavior.

Aggressive behavior, one of the few characteristics that differentiate infant boys from infant girls, develops before children reach two years of age. Girls are less aggressive than boys (Maccoby and Jacklin, 1974). In Latin America, authoritarian family cultural patterns, derived from Napoleonic Code, accentuate and reinforce this difference between the sexes. According to this code of law, the *pater familias* is lord and master of his wife and children; this concept makes women and children very vulnerable to violence.

Women also are discriminated against by legal systems that provide unequal protection to men and women. This legal bias against women has become an important obstacle to efforts for the prevention of violence against women.

Findings

- A study of 90 different societies showed that societies with high levels of violence also have authoritarian household norms, where the man is dominant and physical violence is acceptable (Levinson, 1989).
- A nationwide survey of family violence in the U.S. revealed that there is a higher likelihood of violence against wives when there is economic and psychological dependence on a dominant husband (1975 National Family Violence Survey, cited in Berkowitz, 1996).
- Chilean parents with four or more children are three times more violent with their children than are parents of an only child (Larrain, et al 1997).
- Numerous experiments with animals have confirmed that crowding leads to aggression (Calhoun, 1962; Scott, 1975). In human beings, crowding appears to intensify aggressive responses (Freedman, 1975).

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Poverty, Inequality and Violence

Studying the relationship between inequality, poverty and violence is a difficult task because a number of factors are closely associated with these variables or mediate the relationship between these variables and violent behavior. Nevertheless, studies on inequality have been recently conducted in Latin America which mirror the results of studies that have been conducted in industrialized nations. These studies find a link between inequality and violence: the more inequality, the more violent a society (as measured by homicide rates) (Vilas, 1998; Fanjzylber, 1997). The fact that inequality breeds violence is probably due to its close association with high unemployment and underemployment rates and to feelings of economic deprivation and frustration among specific population groups. It is also possible that inequality promotes social disintegration, which is another factor that is related to violence.

In Latin America and the Caribbean a similar relationship, between poverty and social violence has not yet been found. Recent surveys have not yielded a clear link between poverty and violence, at least using the homicide rate as the measure of violence. In several countries of the region, the highest indices of violence are found in the highest income cities (Franco, 1999; Rubio, 1999). The validity of these comparisons is debatable, however, given the extent to which data has been aggregated in these studies.

Studies in industrialized nations, however, do document a relationship between poverty and social violence. The typical profile of poorer neighborhoods—which includes high population and housing density, lack of social organization, high migration rates and pervasive illegal drug and gun markets—are closely linked to poverty and could help to explain the higher incidence of violence among the poor. Other factors that are known to be precursors to violent behavior include economic deprivation, which leads to frustration and stress, and limited access to prenatal and childcare, as was previously mentioned (Reiss and Roth, 1993). Therefore, it is plausible that poverty in the region is also a risk factor for violence, not because the poor are more aggressive by nature, but rather because poverty is itself damaging and leads to several other risk factors which are associated with violence. It is also possible that the link between poverty and criminal violence may be explained, at least in part, by the fact that the poor are more vulnerable and, therefore, have a greater likelihood of being arrested (Sanjuan, 1999).

The empirical link between poverty and domestic violence is clearer. Even though violence against women and children within the home can be seen at all income levels, more physical violence, as opposed to psychological violence, takes place in poorer households. There is a possibility that the observed relationship between poverty and physical domestic violence is partly due to the fact that lower income groups are more inclined to report incidents to the authorities or reveal the presence of violence in response to survey questions.

Recent research on the consequences of domestic violence against women and children have also found that this type of violence can generate or worsen poverty, suggesting both the existence of a vicious cycle between violence and poverty and the need to target actions to reduce domestic violence in poor communities.

Findings

- After controlling for a set of economic and social variables, a study of large cities in the U.S. found that communities with the highest homicide rates per capita also had the highest poverty rates and population densities (Williams and Flewelling, 1988).
- Controlling for the income level of each household, a study in the city of Baltimore revealed that residing in relatively poorer neighborhoods increased the risk that a woman would be a victim of domestic violence by a factor of four (O'Campo, et al, 1995).
- In Santiago, Chile, and in Managua, Nicaragua, working women who are abused earn lower incomes than non-abused women (Morrison and Orlando, 1999). In Santiago, Chile, children who are victims of violence perform more poorly in school than children who have not been victimized. (Larraín, et al 1997).

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Protection Factors: Institutional and Social Capital

Effective institutions of social control play a key role in deterring violent behavior. These institutions include the police and the judicial and penal systems in the public sector, as well as the church and social and community organizations in civil society. In Latin America, the weakness of social control institutions in the public sector and consequent impunity of criminal behavior is viewed by many as one of the main risk factors for high criminal violence rates (Sanjuan, 1999). Despite growing evidence that harsher sentences do not have a significant deterrent effect, the likelihood of being caught and prosecuted does have an impact. It is no mystery that people are more likely to act violently as the likelihood of negative consequences diminishes.

Private institutions and groups that promote what is known today as “social capital” play a similar social control function. “Social capital” can be defined as the characteristics of social organization—such as public trust, social policies and networks—which, by facilitating coordinated actions, can help to improve the effectiveness with which the social system operates (Putnam, 1993). Thus, communities with little or inadequate social capital are likely to be more susceptible to violence. High migration rates seem to contribute to the weakening of social capital.

Crime reduction efforts are more successful when solutions involve community-wide participation. Similarly, prevention and treatment of domestic violence are more effective when a strong social network is in place. The study of the relationship between social capital and violence is just beginning. One of the challenges for this research (aside from how to measure social capital) is to separate cause from

effect. Is inadequate social capital a cause of violence or does violence destroy social capital? Or both? In a recent study in Jamaica, Moser and Holland observed that violence causes the destruction of social capital (1997).

Findings

- Over the last two decades in Colombia, the homicide rate has quadrupled, while the capacity of the penal system to investigate homicides has been reduced by a fifth. In 1970, for every homicide that was reported, 1.7 preliminary investigations were opened; presently, the rate is one preliminary investigation for every three homicides reported (CEDE, 1997).
- Estimates in the U.S. show that a 50% increase in the likelihood of serving a jail term prevents twice as many crimes as does a 50% increase in the average length of jail terms (Reiss and Roth, 1993).

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Romano, 1998). Some factors that explain how violence may breed violence include: learning violent behavior through observation and imitation; a weakening of social control (police, penal and judicial systems); changes in incentives and deterrents for committing violent acts; and, in the case of violence that follows armed civil conflicts, greater availability of guns among the civilian population and higher unemployment rates among young men.

Violence Breeds Violence

One of the strongest predictive factors of future violence is past violence. A violent family history is a strong predictor of individual violence (Huesmann and Eron, 1986). Civil conflicts or wars often generate increased criminal violence (Archer and Gartner, 1984). For example, a study conducted on youth gangs or “maras” in El Salvador concluded that the fact that these youngsters grew up during the war is a critical factor in explaining their preference for violent behavior (Cruz and

Violence-Inducing Factors

There is a greater possibility that a violent act will be triggered when frustration and stress combine with aggressive stimuli. An example of aggressive stimulus that promotes violence in individuals who are predisposed to behave violently is violent scenes in the media, particularly

where violent behavior is rewarded. It is believed that firearms not only make violence more lethal, but also may be an instigating factor. In Latin America, firearms are used in 70% to 95% of all homicides (Sanjuan, 1999).

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Web Sites

International Centre for the Prevention fo Crime
www.crime-prevention-intl.org

International Society for Research on Aggression
www.israsociety.com

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
www.cdc.gov

