



# The Impact of Exposure to Violence on Violent Criminal Offenses Amongst Juveniles

Clarissa Leyva, MSW Student | Dr. Karen Lee, Research Advisor

Department of Social Work

## ABSTRACT

In the United States Juvenile Justice System, there are about 44,000 youth incarcerated. The incarcerated population consists of individuals with a childhood trauma history of parental incarceration, substance issues in the home, and abuse. Previous research suggested associations between abuse and criminal activity in later adulthood. The purpose of the current study was to examine the significant relationship between juvenile youth's exposure to violence (i.e., witnessed, victimized, none, or both) and the various type of violent crimes committed. The researcher also explored family systems to determine if parental risk factors (e.g., substance abuse, incarceration, domestic violence) significantly correlate with the amount of violent crimes committed and exposure to violence. Results showed that parental influences and exposure to violence were positively correlated to aggressive offenses committed by juveniles. There was a significant difference in aggressive offenses based on if a person had witnessed and been a victim to violence opposed to no exposure to violence. Researchers should continue to study preventative factors to combat the likelihood of continuous violent criminal behavior.

## INTRODUCTION

### Significance of the Study

- The U.S. incarcerates youth at a higher rate than other countries (Barnert et al., 2015), contributing to mass incarceration rates.
- Most youth incarcerated are due to non-violent crimes, violent offenders are often at the risk of being institutionalized (Sawyer & Wagner, 2020).

### Purpose

- To examine the variety of violent crimes a juvenile commits based on their exposure to violence.

### Research Question

- 1. Is there a significant relationship between the variety of types of violent crimes a juvenile commits to their amount of exposure to violence.
- 2. What are the significant differences between the types of exposure to violence to the variety of violent offenses.
- 3. Is there a significant relationship between parental influences and the variety of of violence crimes committed.

### Hypothesis

- Individuals who have a high amount of victimization will have committed more violent crimes than individuals who have witnessed violence.
- Exposure to violence will have committed more violent crimes than those with no exposure to violence.
- A high score in parental risk factors (e.g., substance use, incarceration) would have a high proportion of aggressive offenses

## LITERATURE REVIEW

- Adverse Childhood Experience study suggests maltreatment and negative household dynamics lead to negative health outcomes (Farley et al., 2020). Negrieff (2020) examined further to find that those with maltreatment were more likely to develop mental health disorders, such as post-traumatic stress disorder.
- Parental incarceration and witnessing domestic violence contributed to emotional and behavioral difficulties (Forman & Rennert, 2017).
- 90% of youth incarcerated have been exposed to trauma (Zettler, 2020).
- Narvey et al. (2017) found that 40% of juveniles who had four or more ACEs were more likely to become severe violent and chronic offenders in their study.

### Gaps

- Lack of differentiation between victimization and witnessing violence and their outcomes on the types of criminal activity.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Research Design

- The current study is a secondary analysis of data from the Research on Pathways to Desistance study, 2000-2010.
- The original study is a longitudinal study starting from baseline with a 96 month follow up in 2010.
- The current study utilizes data gathered during baseline data collection.

### Sampling Method

- The sample of the study consisted of 1,354 Juvenile offenders from juvenile and adult court settings.
- The inclusion criteria were youth of at least 14 years old and under 18 that were found guilty of a serious offense. Felony offenses were a requirement to be eligible participation.

### Measures

#### Independent Variables

1. Exposure to violence: Utilized the Exposure to Violence Inventory questionnaire three separate categories of questions, victim, witness, and both. An additional composite variable was created to represent four different groups based on their type of exposure.
2. Parental Influences: Composite score made up of four questions created to represent number of parental risk factors of incarceration, drug exposure, and domestic violence they have been exposed to by their biological parents.

#### Dependent Variable

- Aggressive offending: Utilized a 22-item Self-Report Offending questionnaire.
- A total score was created to represent the proportion for each "yes" response to 11

different type of aggressive criminal offenses; Destroyed/damaged property, set fire, forced someone to have sex, killed someone, shot someone bullet hit, shot at someone no hit, took by force with a weapon, took by force without a weapon, beat up someone serious injury, in a fight, beat someone as part of gang.

Table 1  
Sample Characteristics (N=1,354)

Characteristic	n	%
Gender		
Male	1170	86
Female	184	14
Age in years	M = 16.04	SD = 1.143
Ethnicity		
White	274	20
Black	561	41
Hispanic	454	34
Other	65	5
Family Structure		
Two Biological Parents	199	15
Single Parent	633	47
Step Parent	280	21
Adopted	10	0.7
Other	232	17
Gang Involvement		
Yes	315	23
No	1035	77

## RESULTS

### Descriptive Analysis

- **Demographics:** Black or African/American youth: 41% (n= 561), Hispanic: 34% (n= 454), White: 20% (n= 20), and Other 5% (n= 65). There was a majority of male participants (86%) than female participants (14%)
- **Parental Influences:** Parental fighting: 27.3%, Father drug abuse: 18.3%, Father arrest 17.9%, Mother drug abuse 13.7%, and Mother arrested 9.1%.
- **Exposure to Violence:** Exposure to violence in both victim and witness categories were reported the most 65.6% and 5.2% of participants reported no exposure to violence.

### Inferential Statistics

- Two **Spearman's Rho test** were conducted. One to examine the relationship between exposure to violence and aggressive offenses. Another to examine the relationship between parental influences and aggressive offenses.
  - A significant positive relationship between exposure to violence and aggressive offenses.
  - A significant relationship between parental influences and aggressive offending,  $r_s(734) = .279, p < .001$ .
- A **Kruskal-Wallis H test** was conducted to examine the difference in the aggressive offending scores based on the type of exposure to violence.
  - A significant result was found ( $H(3) = 301.375, p = .000$ ), indicating that the four exposures to violence groups were statistically different from each other.
    - No Victim, No Witness: *Mean Rank* = 349.61
    - Victim of Violence, No Witness: *Mean Ranks* = 400.28
    - Witness, No Victim: *Mean Rank* = 441.17
    - Witness and Victim: *Mean Rank* = 805.29

Table 2

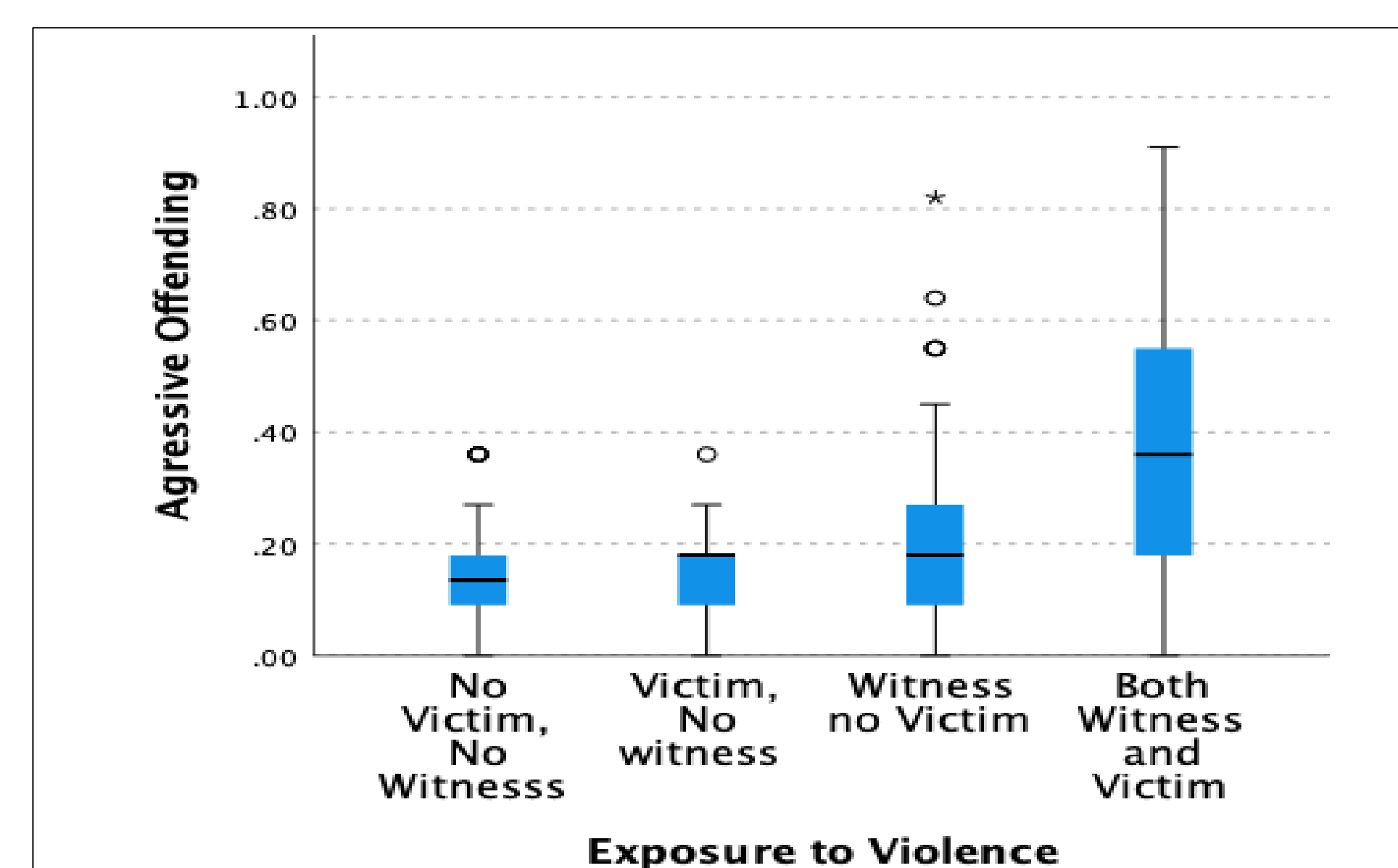
Means, Standard Deviations, and Inter-correlations for Aggressive Offending, Parental Influences, and Different Types of Exposure to Violence

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Aggressive Offending	.3017	.20	-				
1. Parental Influences	1.58	1.40	.28**	-			
1. Victim to Violence	1.58	1.46	.55**	.24**	-		
1. Witness to Violence	3.77	1.96	.52**	.23**	.53**	-	
1. Victim and Witness	5.34	3.00	.61**	.26**	.83**	.91**	-

Note. \*\*p < .01.

Figure 1

Exposure to Violence Differences in Aggressive Offending



## DISCUSSION

- Confirmation to previous studies that violent, aggressive behavior and criminal activity are related to exposure to violence. The more exposure to violence a person has, the more criminal offenses they commit.
- Exposure to violence is a risk factor for violent criminal behavior as those who were exposure to violence committed more violent type offenses.
- The more youth has adverse parental impacts, such as parental incarceration, substance abuse, and domestic violence, the more types of violent crimes they commit.

### Strengths and Limitations

- **Strength:** Original study used effective tools to support the methods needed for the current study.
- **Limitation:** Limited representation of female offenders, grouping category of violence no victim, aggressive offending variable limitation study measures does not consider number of occurrences.
- Future research should examine gender differences and parental factors as moderators in the relationship between exposure to violence and violent criminal behavior.

### Implications

- Informs practice through reactive and proactive forms of intervention for youth exposed to trauma.
- Trauma-informed policy

## REFERENCES

- Barnert, E. S., Perry, R., & Morris, R. E. (2015). Juvenile incarceration and health. *Academic Pediatrics*, 16(2), 99-109. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acap.2015.09.004>
- Farley, McWey, L. M., & Ledermann, T. (2020). Trauma and violence as predictors of internalizing and externalizing symptoms of youth in residential child welfare placements. *Journal of Family Violence*, 36(2), 249-258. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-020-00140-w>
- Forman, B., Rennert, L. (2017). The geography of incarceration in a gateway city: The cost and consequences of high incarceration rate neighborhoods in Worcester. *Massachusetts Criminal Justice Reform Coalition*, Retrieved from [https://massinc.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/geography.crime\\_report.8.pdf](https://massinc.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/geography.crime_report.8.pdf)
- Hutchinson, E. D. (2017). Essentials of human behavior: integrating person, environment, and the life course (2nd ed.). Sage.
- Narvey, C., Yang, J., Wolff, K. T., Baglivio, M., & Piquero, A. R. (2021). The interrelationship between empathy and adverse childhood experiences and their impact on juvenile recidivism. *Youth violence and juvenile justice*, 19(1), 45-67. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1541204020939647>
- Negrieff. (2020). ACEs are not equal: Examining the relative impact of household dysfunction versus childhood maltreatment on mental health in adolescence. *Social Science & Medicine* (1982), 245, 112696-112696. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2019.112696>
- Sawyer, W., & Wagner, P. (2020, March 24). *Mass incarceration: The whole pie 2020*. <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2020.html>.
- Zettler, H. R. (2020). Much to do about trauma: A systematic review of existing trauma-informed treatments on youth violence and recidivism. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, 19(1), 113-134. doi:10.1177/1541204020939645

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the mentors and academic programs that believed in my abilities and supported me through my educational journey. Thank you to my friends and family for the tremendous support. Above all, I thank God for making the impossible possible.