

Listen to My Story:

Perspectives of African-American
Mothers and Male Offenders on
Violence in Omaha, Nebraska

Prepared by:

University of Nebraska Medical Center
College of Public Health

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Authors/Research Team

Dejun Su, PhD

Eric R. Meyer, MA, MLA, CPH

Kandy Do, BS

Nizar Wehbi, MD, MPH, MBA

Melissa Tibbits, PhD

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Executive Summary

Homicide is the leading cause of death for young African-American people, with most victims being male (86%). The objective of this project is to explore the complexities of violence among African-American youth who reside in Omaha, Nebraska based on in-depth interviews with African-American male former offenders and African-American mothers with children enrolled in a local gang prevention program. With the assistance from Compassion in Action and its RAW DAWGS Youth Gang Prevention Program, we recruited and conducted interviews with a convenience sample of 16 African-American adults (8 men who are former offenders and 8 mothers) to ask them about their personal experiences and views of violence.

Based on qualitative analysis of the interview transcripts, five themes surfaced including (1) personal experiences and perceptions of violence; (2) individual level consequences from exposures to violence; (3) personal challenges; (4) whom to rely on for protection; and (5) perceptions of how to stop violence.

In light of the findings that relate to these five themes, we reached the following conclusions:

1. It would be important to adopt a trauma-informed approach to violence prevention in vulnerable communities that have been constantly suffering from high prevalence of violence for decades. The essence of this approach lies in its recognition that trauma contributes to the cycle of violence and is founded on the principle “Hurt people hurt people”. Addressing traumas and their root causes becomes critical to stop the origin and spread of violence.
2. This trauma-informed approach to violence prevention must include a life course perspective on violence prevention. Many of our study participants shared their experience of violence early in life whether it was domestic violence or bullies by peers. An effective approach to violence prevention has to start with addressing identified risk factors early in life.
3. Many participants in our study mentioned the issues of lack of fathering role model for their sons and broken relationships between parents. Furthermore, they described how these issues contributed to gang participation and related violence. This underlines the importance of addressing the decline of marriage and traditional families as a risk factor for violence. One recommendation from our study participants is to offer parenting education services to better equip parents with the skills and knowledge of child rearing and education.
4. It is disheartening to see that despite severe traumas and exposure to violence experienced by many of our participants, none of them reported that they had received professional assistance to help them deal with or heal from the traumas.

5. Our participants mentioned the importance of investing into local learning and recreational infrastructure such as the provision of mentoring and exercise and musical facilities to attract youths to spend more time in positive socializing and learning.
6. Faith-based interventions would be uniquely important and promising when it comes to violence prevention and control in African American communities. Many of our participants reported the centrality of religion and faith in their lives. They explained how spirituality is a source of protection from violence.





“Listen. A lot of people have a whole bunch of alphabet behind their names that read about it, that learn about it. You have to hear from people who made it out of it, who grew up in it and are different. You know?”

— From a mother who was interviewed in this study

Introduction

There has been a steady decline of youth violence since the mid-nineties. This drop is true throughout not only the United States, but also globally (Zimring, 2007). For some, it may be tempting to focus on the decrease and have less concern with the current rates of violence, or the contexts that attribute to its risk. However, the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control reported that in 2012, nearly 4,800 youth between the ages 10 and 24 years old were murdered. This equates to an average of 13 deaths each day. Moreover, homicide ranks as the leading cause of death for young African-Americans, with most victims being male (86%). Prior history of violence is the top risk factor for future exposures to violence (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015). Slutkin (2012) argues that because prior exposure of violence often leads to future exposures, violence matches the definition of an infectious disease. Therefore, evaluation and treatment of violence should be like public-health strategies. For example, the methods in use for tobacco prevention or the promotion of mothers to breast-feed their babies. Otherwise, violence prevention efforts, particularly the reactive models in use by police, will continue to be counterproductive (Slutkin, 2012).

There is a need for the analyses of personal narratives to achieve an understanding of the relationship between exposure to violence among young Black men and the environments where they live (Anderson, 1999). This framework described in Anderson’s (1999) *Code of the Street*, is a multi-level process in which macro-structural patterns of social disorganization (e.g., poverty, unemployment, violence, anomie, lack of faith in the criminal justice system) have resulted in a neighborhood street culture that influences how young African-American men negotiate violence. These conditions can lead many to a sense of hopelessness about their lives and cynicism toward mainstream rules (Stewart & Simons, 2010). For instance, Matsueda, Drakulich, and Kubrin (2005) concluded that African-Americans often distrust the police. Therefore, youth turn to their own strategies, using violence as a means of resolving their conflicts. This distrust can also lead those who follow mainstream values to turn to non-governmental institutions for protection. Anderson highlights the value of religion in communities that are suffering from violence. Spirituality provides many residents with a sense of stability and support when they have little else to draw from (Anderson, 1999).

Chronic exposure (direct and indirect) to violence among African-American youth may come with severe mental-health consequences (Richardson, Brown & Van Brakle, 2013). Rich and Grey (2005) concluded that many young African-American men who ascribe to the *code of the street* display symptoms that parallel posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). These symptoms include chronic hyperarousal, emotional numbing, nightmares, and flashbacks and if left untreated, PTSD can increase the likelihood for carrying a weapon, drug and alcohol abuse, incarceration, and violence (Corbin, Rich, Bloom, Delgado, Rich, & Wilson, 2011; Richardson, Brown & Van Brakle, 2013).

Objective

To explore the complexities of violence among African-American youth who reside in Omaha, Nebraska, we drew on the personal narratives of African-American mothers who enrolled their sons in a local gang prevention program in north Omaha. Furthermore, we completed in-depth interviews with African-American men who all spent much of their lives in prison. We based our questions on Anderson's seminal work (*Code of the Street*) and asked both groups about their views of and experiences with violence, how they negotiated and avoided it, the effects violence had on them and their families, who they went to for protection and what they believe the community should do for the prevention of violence. We completed these interviews to not only identify and examine the relationships between risk factors for violence, but also to learn the protective factors the respondents were self-implementing and examine their personal histories that could explain these outcomes. This project was exploratory in nature; thus, we proposed preliminary recommendations in regards to what the next steps should be to help reduce and prevent violence in Omaha.

Methods

The research team collaborated with Compassion in Action (CIA), a locally based community organization in north Omaha, to recruit participants for this study. CIA serves two purposes. First, the organization is a pre-release reentry program for offenders housed at the Nebraska State Penitentiary. Inmates receive guidance and counseling by CIA prior to their release date. The offenders continue receiving assistance from CIA until there is no longer a need for it. Second, CIA provides an out-of-school program, the RAW DAWGS Youth Corps Gang Prevention Program, for boys between the ages of 5 and 13 years. The youth's school or parent(s) consider these boys as at-risk for gang involvement.

After the project received approval from the University of Nebraska Medical Center's Institutional Review Board, the research team and CIA recruited a convenience sample of 16 participants from an initial list of potential participants. A final sample was made of two separate groups with eight respondents in each group. The first group comprised of adult mothers all of whom had at least one son enrolled in the CIA gang prevention program. The second group consisted of adult African-American men who previously or currently receive the assistance of CIA's reentry program.

All of the sixteen participants are African-Americans who currently live in Omaha, Nebraska. The age range for the men is 22 to 65 years, with a median age of 47. Five of the men were married, seven had received a high school diploma (or equivalent), and two had some college exposure (no degree). Only one of the men did not have employment. Their release dates from prison range from 6 months to 22 years ago, with a median of approximately 8 years. The final sample of men varied in the criminal offenses they committed, which led them to prison. Five of the men committed narcotics offenses, two for armed robbery, and one for felony assault. Most had abstained from criminal activities since their release, while others were currently





members or have associations with local street gangs, dealing narcotics, and carrying weapons. All of the men said they had exposures to violence. A few reported they were only victims or witnesses, but most said they were perpetrators, victims and witnesses of violence.

In regards to the mothers in our sample, their ages range between 20 and 64 years, with a median age of 34. All eight were single mothers. Six of the mothers were working full-time, one has a disability and is unable to work, and one is retired. Six of the mothers received at least a high school diploma (or equivalent), and five of those mothers had at least some college experience. The number of children under the age of 18 the mothers were caring for ranges between one and five, with an average of three children. In regards to past criminal activities, two women said they had served time in prison for non-violent crimes. All of the women said they had experienced past exposures to violence. Most women said the exposures were indirect with them witnessing acts of violence or losing a friend or relative to violence.

The interviewer obtained informed consent from all participants prior to each interview. Each interview was approximately one-hour in length, semi-structured, and occurred within a private room at the facility of CIA (See Appendix A for interview questions of mothers and Appendix B for interview questions with male participants). Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The project team used NVivo software for the study. Grounded theory guided researchers during the analysis. The reasons for selecting grounded theory was that the team wanted to build a theory from the data. Grounded theory allowed for the development of a set of questions to examine the social phenomenon of violence. This framework allowed the team to create concepts that were directly from the interviews. Each concept was temporary until it repeatedly surfaced in other interviews, at which point a concept became a theme. The themes became the basis for developing the final theory (Charmaz, 2012; Creswell, 2013).

The following result section represents the themes that surfaced during the analysis of the personal narratives for both the mothers and male participants. They include: (1) personal experiences and perceptions of violence; (2) individual level consequences from exposures to violence; (3) personal challenges; (4) whom to rely on for protection; and (5) perceptions of how to stop the violence. The first section within the results will be the personal narratives of the mothers followed by those from the men.

Results

Mothers

MOTHERS' PERSONAL EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS OF VIOLENCE

All of the mothers had past experiences with violence. Most of their experiences, however, were indirect exposures. Some heard of the violence through word of mouth or knew someone that was a victim to gun violence. A common sentiment among the mothers is evident in the following description offered by one of the mothers:

"I haven't had no encounters like that with, like shooting or deaths or anything like that. We don't have none of that in our family, but just people that he knows, you know. The kids he has to go to school with. He has a friend that, you know, that was just protecting his brother and got shot, you know. He's paralyzed now. Just for protecting his little brother, you know."

However, a few mothers had traumatic violent events that occurred in their presence and even at home.

"Their sister was killed by a stray bullet, so the thing for me is helping them get over that obstacle. I think the memories are starting to fade a little bit for him now."

"We were just walking to the store and just out of nowhere, this guy is running up pass the street and this one guy starts shooting and my daughter took off running and she was screaming and running and she ran behind these houses and she was so scared"

PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA FROM VIOLENCE

Some of the participants from the mother's group experienced psychological trauma after their experiences with violence. None of the mothers received consistent professional assistance for their trauma. A mother of a murdered child explained the effects on her son.

"[Son A] jumps when he hears loud noises now because she was killed by a stray bullet. But besides that, we forgave the guy that killed her within 12 hours of her death. I see that in them now and I'm very grateful that I made the right decision for them. So they, [Son B] wrote...I don't know what the assignment was, it was a paper he had to write for school and he brought home the paper. It had four numbered lines on it. And number four line said, 'After his sister got killed by a stray bullet, the gang members put the guns down and had a smiley face next to it.' Stuff like that makes me pretty happy. [Son C] found a letter that I wrote to [daughter] shortly after her death, in a notebook that he took to school one day and when he read it started crying."





He had to go to the counselor's office to talk about it. Then he wrote me a letter back that said, 'Mom, [daughter] is always with you, love [son C]. So in them I see, they clearly go, they were clearly hurt by the whole situation but I see them slowly becoming more understanding and trying to heal through it.'

The same mother also shared the effects of her daughter's death on her and the child's father.

"When [daughter] died, I became suicidal, he became homicidal. We split ways. But I see him as trying to heal too and trying to be a part of the kids' lives. As long as none of the violence is directed at my kids, I want him to be a part of their lives just so that they can know their dad."

Another mother revealed that her teenage daughter became too frightened to go outside after she witnessed a shooting while walking to the grocery store.

"She was like 'no, nah, no, I'm not checking the mailbox, I'm not going to the car to get groceries, like no.' 'Well, do you guys want to go walk to the store?' 'Nope, can you just bring me something back?' You know, and so it made her not want to leave home, you know. So then I have to reiterate to you at home, you don't have to be stuck in your house, you know. But how do you tell a kid, how do you go from telling a kid that the world is dangerous and anything can happen to know that anything can be ok. It's kind of like a double jeopardy or something. You know, because that could have been you! Or that bullet could have missed him and hit you! But how do I reiterate to you that you're fine, that everything's going to be ok, you know. I can talk to you all day long, but it has to be a self-thing. At the end of the day, everything deals with self. You know what I mean? You can talk to a therapist, a counselor, you can talk to the president, if you want to, but until you feel comfortable, but until you feel comfortable with the situation, with whatever it is, but until you feel comfortable yourself, you're still going to remain the same."

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All of the mothers revealed that the effects of neighborhood violence influences their parenting strategies. Even if their exposures to violence were indirect, they expressed mental stress that their families are at risk for victimization. This stress comes through the following narratives:

"My kids can barely go on the front porch without me knowing about it. Like I need to know your every move. You can't go to nobody's house. I don't let nobody spend the night. Nobody can come to your house. You can't have company. I just, I don't do it. I don't do it at all. Is it fair? No, it's not fair at all. It's driving my kids up the wall."

"Because the drive by shootings. I don't know when they come down our street because about a block from me, one year they had a house party and a bunch of people got killed. Yeah, stuff like that so when the sun go down, we go in."

"I'm worried that if we don't leave north Omaha, I might have something to worry about, but I'm trying to keep them...they go to school every day, they have basketball practice after school. If they're not at basketball, they're at the Boys and Girls Club. If they're not there, they're with me making dinner, having conversations, watching TV, playing games and stuff. I try to make sure that, and they ask if they can go to their friend's houses and I tell them no. I don't want to discriminate against north Omaha but I don't know your parents, their parents. And I know that they love their kid but sometimes they get involved with bad people and bad things. And somebody can run into their house and start shooting at any time or drugs can be involved. I just don't feel comfortable with it unless I absolutely know whose house they're going to. I don't allow them to go at all."

PERSONAL BARRIERS

All of the participants said they are facing personal barriers, which inhibits them from making progress. The mothers' challenges were mostly in regards to their children. Those obstacles ranged from educational needs, little time to spend with their children, to no father figure for their sons.

"I have one that has dyslexia so like tutoring, more on steady tutoring. Like, I think that I had to really like find different ways... when you have a kid with a learning disorder, you have to find different ways to teach them. You know what I mean?"

"Life. Life in general because I work a full time job, I work a full time job, you know. On top of the fact that other things take time. Any time I have to step away and I have to go pay a bill. That's time away from my kids. When I go to work, that's time away from my kids, you know what I'm saying. They have to go to school. So all that separation, that's time that you're separated, you're not really getting to spend that time so I don't get to know who you are when I'm not around you, you know, and that's where I can understand when they say 'you can be around a person your whole life really never know them,' you know, that's very true."

"So their dad... well, their dad is in jail. He's been in jail for eight years now or nine years. Nine years this year. So, I mean they don't have him."





The mothers also expressed concern for negative peer influences on their sons. They worried the pressures to join gangs may be too strong to overcome.

"It's a lot of peer pressure in schools and especially when they start going to middle school and having other friends they hang out with, that's when it gets challenging. When they get up in the teens, it starts about maybe around ten and then goes from there."

"The gang members. There are so many kids that didn't have dads that think that, I don't know, whoever they looked up to, wasn't the right person to look up to."

"If you're not strong enough to be a leader then you're going to be a follower. And if you follow these guys in this city, you're going to end up in jail."

Among a few of the mothers, their biggest challenge is separating their previous involvement with criminal activities from their sons now.

"Keepin' the children I have... I raised [the older children] when I was a gang member, using drugs, in and out of jail, and they this one set of life. Then I have younger children that I'm raising now, and the biggest challenge is to keeping my younger children out of the shadows of my former life. Even though I don't introduce them to that life or haven't brought them around, they have [older] siblings who have seen me in that life and who participated in that life themselves and so sometimes it's hard to keep, especially my son, keep his eyes from wandering to the other life."

"When I went to prison, my kids have never been the same kids ever since I've been home. And I've been home years."

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The mothers were utilizing the out-of-school program of Compassion in Action/ RAW DAWGS to help them with their challenges. For them, this community-based organization helped fill in some of the gaps they felt were missing in their sons' lives.

"Yeah, [Compassion in Action] actually saved me my job last year because [son A] was having issues with violence in school... my two youngest last year were having issues in school and were getting kicked out and [Compassion in Action] was always there to pick them up, talk to their teachers, talk to them, talk to their counselors. And then he would call me and let me know what's going on. And he'd keep the kids for the whole day even though he's not supposed to start until after school starts. And I mean, he gives them cakes and stuff when he's done with them for the day. They really like that. Me not so much. It's a treat for the kids. So yeah, I feel like, I feel like I've done the right thing."



WHOM DO YOU RELY ON FOR PROTECTION?

When asked, whom do you rely on for protection? The theme of spirituality surfaced. For the mothers, their spiritual belief in God provided them with protection from violence for themselves and children.

"I believe in my heart and in my mind that I am already protected because I know an awesome God that's keeps me protected. So I don't worry about violence or if I'm going to die from violence. I don't worry about those things."

"Naturally, I just know that I know a God who keeps you protected, you know what I'm saying. Now, the life that they choose to live as they get older, all I can do is ask God to keep them covered, but you can't control what somebody else does."

MOTHERS' THOUGHTS ON VIOLENCE PREVENTION

The mothers shared what they believe is needed to stop the violence in their community, which included a community of resources, parenting classes, and eliminating unjustified biases from police officers.

"So we need these programs in our community to help. It does take a village to raise a child and we need the sources and resources and everything to help parents, not only single parents. There's some parents that are not single but it still takes another hand. It's so important. It's so important."

"Yeah I think there need to be more parenting classes and let them be accountable for how the kids come to school and talk to people or talk to people in the street. Now I got a kindergartener at some of the schools curse you out but can't even write his name."

"Well first of all, the... some of the officers here aren't, they aren't helpful at all. Been in a couple situations that had to do with gun violence, you know, just being around here, you run into stuff like that and the police aren't helpful at all. I know, I've been in a situation where officer, there was a victim layin in the car and they told me, "you know, thug life doesn't pay off, do they" and we hadn't anything to do with what had happened. That's how they were talkin to us. So I feel like, you know, people always say don't talk to the police or don't do this or don't snitch or whatever, but you know, we would be more willing to help or talk to them if they weren't so rude, if they didn't judge a young man cuz he's a young black man. So you livin' a thug life already if they see you in your, you know, I don't think that's ok. So I would just say if I was mayor, I wouldn't want officers on a task force team if it's not in their heart to do good for the young boys in the community cuz that's not ok, it's not right."





Male participants

MEN'S PERSONAL EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS OF VIOLENCE

All of the males in this study had violent experiences that started in childhood. Some of the men consider much of these experiences as minor in severity compared to what they currently observe in Omaha.

"Well, when we grew up, I was young... We fight all the time but we fought and then we went and got drunk. We never went to the next level like that. You know, that was just fighting, saying, you know I'm going to stand up for myself and I'm not going to let you bully me. So we grew up fighting, you know. It just was the way it was in our neighborhood."

"Not with guns. Not with the guns. We just fighting, you know. Very seldom you've found murders and shooting. It wasn't a whole lot going on in our age. It was a lot of fights. You know, the whole neighborhood would fight, you know. And at that time, when we got into a fight, sometime the parents of whoever we fought, them parents would whoop us and the next parents would whoop us and the next one would whoop us. You know, it's ya'll neighborhood. Ya'll shouldn't be fighting each other. When we did something, the whole neighborhood, the parents, everybody chastised us like a village."

However, a few of the males had serious exposures to violence during their childhood. Despite the events occurring years ago, their ability to recall the details was clear and vivid. Three of the men who are currently in their fifties recalled:

"Growing up as a kid, I seen all types of acts of violence. It was violence on me. I got into all types of fights, growing up, you know. My dad, he was violent, you know, so, whenever like, him and my mom get into it or she would lock him out, I'd be like, I'll be outside playing and I see him coming and I know she told me to lock the door. You know, 'don't let him in because you got to listen to your mom. I wouldn't let him in and when they, if they would get back together, when she would go to work, he would come and he would beat me up. I would only be eleven or twelve, you know, but he punched me like I'm a man. You know, face shots, chest shots, all that. You know, I knew it was my dad but it channel my anger because I didn't feel like somebody so close to me should physically touch me in that type of way."

"I think I was 13 or 14. Everybody used to hang out on 24th and Fort. We go up there and shoot pool. And when you playing pool, we be playing like, for time. So your game is played by time. So you get charged by how long the game is played. So loser would have to pay for the time. Well, like a week before the shooting happened, we were in the back behind the same pool hall shooting dice. Then everybody getting into an argument, and they were

playing, then one player pulled a pistol on one and the other one didn't have a pistol so nothing went down with that. But later on at night, the guy that got the pistol pulled on him, came back with the pistol. But he was under the influence of wet [smokable mixture of PCP and marijuana]. And when he went to the pool hall, I remember like it was yesterday, my sister's boyfriend he was over the pool table like this, and the guy walked around on him on the other side at him...and he had a pistol. He pointed the pistol at him. At the same time, when the dude stood up and turned to him, it sounded like the cap gone pop, 22. And he stood there for a minute and he came... I'm standing in the door, and he ran towards the door, but he fell before he got to the door. And the other dude came behind him. By that time, he had rolled on the other side of the pool table up under the floor and the other dude went back around, he started pointing the pistol at him. But when he came back on this side of the table, he has stopped. He had urinated on himself and everything and he had stopped. And I can still remember like it was today, man. And when they cut his shirt open, he had a little bitty hole, man, right in his heart. And it messed me up man, for like a week! Because you know, I used to go to play basketball at the gym with him all the time. And then I had to tell my sister, 'Well your boyfriend got shot, you know, and killed.'"

"Was violent every day, all day. I was from a young boy bullied at school, talked about, miss shoes, pushed around, rocks, kicked, spit on, you know by some of the bigger kids. Domestic violence, in the home, mom and my stepdad fighting every day. Alcohol in the house. Domestic violence to the point my mom was beaten unrecognizable. There was a time I think I was about twelve years old, vengeance set in, by the time, I was 14, I hit my stepdad on the head with a bat. Then from that point on I decided to join a street gang and violence just escalated from that point on so I was about 14, 15 years old."

The violent exposures continued into adulthood for all of the men. Most of the males would only share their experiences when they were victims of violence. A man in his sixties recalled a shooting just a few years prior to this interview:

"I got shot on my way to a bible study, in recovery. Nothing in my doing. My nephew is in that gang mix when they can't get to him, they broke into his grandmother's house and I was coming out the door. Me and my other nephew, on the way to bible study, and they jumped out and shot me twice and shot my nephew. And I, 57 years old and getting shot, you know that was amazing because I never was a violent person, I never did a thing to harm nobody as far as physical harm to receive, to be on that side."





In a separate interview, we spoke to the son of the previous male. Through committing, what he described as gang-related crimes, like his father, he also served a few years in prison. He is currently in his twenties and described a shooting that occurred a few years prior to this interview:

“Well I got shot. I got shot nine times too. I think that, I think that what’s so crazy about it is that it happened so fast. Man, it happened so fast. You go from just a conversation without no warning, it just changes so...”

One of the male participants explained his involvement with gun violence throughout his life course. He started with his first experience being a victim of gun violence as a youth and ended with his last victimization just before he went to prison as an adult. His release date from prison was just 6 months before this interview. He served 15 years and is now in his thirties.

“Well, I was shot three different times. I was shot one time when I was 14. I got shot in the face and the chest with a shot gun. Thank God they didn’t know what they were doing, they had some bird pellets. I was shot in the arm in 1995 and in 2001, I was shot... I was shot in the back.”

A male respondent, who is now in his fifties, agreed to share his most severe violent exposure that occurred over two decades ago. It was one where he murdered his friend in self-defense.

“Ah yeah, I had a manslaughter case when I was around twenty-one. Twenty, twenty-two, twenty one years old and I was found innocent because it was self-defense. This individual pulled a 16 gauge shot gun on me and fortunately, a weapon was passed to me in the process of him ordering me to get up out of my seat. He had not realized that I had a weapon and I got up with the mind frame I was already a dead man. I just, you know, just taking him with me. The Lord had mercy on me that day. And I just kind of leave it right there. There... I don’t even think if he was here, he could even give you a reason. I don’t know what prompted him to do what he did. He was a very close friend to me. This gentleman grew up with my mother, ok. His stepdaughter was like my sister. She can come out and play in this. I was out there... so I don’t know. There was nothing that I did, as far as I know to provoke him to do what he did to me. Okay?”

PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA FROM VIOLENCE

Some of the men shared the effects of violence, which include symptoms that are similar to post-traumatic stress disorder. None of these men received professional help for their psychological problems. The symptoms continue to this day even though it has been years since the initial exposure.

"Yep, yep, they be following me ever since. I would never thought that... It's been almost ten years or however long it's been, they be following me. Man, I wake up every morning, I got scars on my body, crazy, I got bullets still in me. I had to walk away with that with the bullets still in me. One was close by my chest. So the first year, I mean, I was thinking, what if I'm playing something and my blood pressure goes up, what if it just clicked, what if it just push. And that was a nightmare. Then the next nightmare was about, man what about people, the other dude's family? Dude, do I want to go out right now, you know? I don't know who his peoples is. I have no idea. I mean, anybody I could be talking to enemy. That was, that was something. That was something to... it took a few years to get over that. You can say I had social anxiety and stuff, going to places because I didn't know who was who, so. That's something... now that didn't put me in the right mind state either because I was thinking if that was something somebody can do to me, I could be quicker to do that to somebody. Should I, should I be even more quicker to do it? Because it could happen. That put you in a terrible mind frame. That put you in a place like ...like you're at war... combat readiness at all times. Like, dude... ahhh. I did my physical therapy to the most part but nobody was... was no mental therapy. I didn't even know until years later on my own research and my own look up was survivor guilt. Man, I got shot [several] times. I got a partner that only got shot once. Why I'm still here? And this was survivor guilt. There was more physical therapy than mental, like, the mental therapy. Because like that's what everybody that goes through something dramatic, they go through that survivor stage and they going to be like 'why me? Why me?' A baby just got shot, why me, why? And that is, that's something."

We asked the same participant if the mental trauma from being a victim of gun violence affected his decision as to whether or not he should carry a gun. He responded:

"Yeah, yeah, I did, I did, I did, yep, I did and it wasn't a good feeling though. I did and somehow when I finally got over the hunch of thinking like his people are out to get me, I finally reach to the point where, they got me then they got me. I can't keep walking around with no gun on me, you know. I'm so obvious and I know if you got a gun in your hand, it's there to be used. It'll make you use it more when you got than if you gotta go somewhere and get it, you know."



Other respondents gave similar accounts of traumatic stress from violence. A young adult admitted to carrying guns because he fears for his safety.

"My [friend]. He is in jail right now for murder. He got sentenced to the murder of [name] and yeah. It's a homicide of [names of victims]. He just recently, you know, just yesterday was his birthday. It was just one of their birthday, one of them that died. So yes I have to have a gun with me. Why? Because I know they looking...they all together, riding around, looking for us because it's his birthday and they want to honor him by trying to get some revenge. So for that whole week, his birthday week, I know I need to be around a gun because a lot would have happened, you know."

PERSONAL BARRIERS

The challenges for the men varied. Some had similar obstacles that the mothers expressed for their children. Other challenges were education and the lack of a father.

"My reading and writing is still one of my struggles... I don't let it be an excuse to hold me down."

"I didn't know there was black college till I got grown. I did not know there was black institutions of education until I got completely grown. Twenty years old and I realized...what? What?! Our people do this? What? Where the heck have I been living my ...? Like what?! Here I go, thinking we ain't nothing but bang bang, here, that. That if I walk into a place of institution, trying to better myself that I'd be walking into with the other side. Mixing it up with the white people and they know all this. And sometimes, I man, when you're hard core, you're hard core in poverty, man that's just like... we got a thing we say, we ain't trying to be white."

"I remember the day he [father] got out. I cried for about four hours. Like even when I could actually have him in my arms, I remember I just couldn't stop crying, just, just the fullness of my heart that I had felt. And he was cool for some time being. And a year into it, maybe two months later, him and my mom got married. And the responsibilities of real life kicked in and like, I give him... like I have forgiven him, I believe, even though I cry a lot throughout this. But like he had a lot thrown at him for someone who needed to adjust, you know. Like you can't spend ...like he actually went to jail the year before I was born so he can't spend years in a box, in a cage and then expect to come home and have it all figured out. And he didn't really have any time to adjust to responsibility, everyday work life, paying bills, you know what I mean or being a full time father. Actually having your kids in the house and actually being able to pour into them. And so he wasn't

really properly equipped, so he got home and my mom didn't really give him a chance to get ready. They just both jumped into it like a year later, it comes out that my dad has always been addicted to smoking crack."

The men said they sought relief for their challenges through the street. Gangs helped them close the barrier of not having fathers in their lives.

"Well, we all was lacking fatherhood. None of us had dads, so you know. Like birds of a feather, flock together. So we all gave each other a sense of love, a sense of respect, a sense of belonging to something greater than my single parent mom can give me as a young man at 14 years old and having sisters and a brother so totally mom couldn't do it."

"Gangs, gangs fit into this because that's who accepted me... that's who I felt the most accepted by. You know, I felt more of a all the way around structure than I did at home because, like if I get in trouble... say I got suspended from school for fighting. My peers, or my homies, if you would say they would just be like 'you can't come to the hood until your suspension from school is over. As long as you suspended from school, you suspended from the hood. You can't come here.' You know what I'm saying?"

Despite the gangs providing structure in the men's lives, it also created problems that often led to violence.

"I mean, you know being in a gang we always robbed people. That was nothing new, that's how we made money. That was our economic structure. We either sold drugs or we took money, you know... It something I grew up with. You ain't got it, you take it. I mean, it's a mindset, I mean. Whether it was robbery, whether it was extortion, whether it was selling drugs, you gotta do what we gotta do to get money."

For many of these men, being a member of gang provided them with protection and respect from rival gangs. Thus, respect for them was the most valuable thing ("crown") they owned. One participant in his twenties, who admits to current gang affiliation said:

"The crown! The crown! If you get the respect, you get the juice. If you got the juice, you got the authority."





However, a commonly expressed sentiment for many of the men was that the quest for respect was a double edge sword. Respect can increase a person's vulnerability to violence, as well as protect him from it. When we asked the participants, "If you do not defend your own self-image, what are the consequences?" The following represents common responses:

"You become a coward. You got to man up. You can't, you can't... I got four sisters at home, so at some point in time, I got to man up. You know, whatever it costs me, it costs me. If it costs me getting shot, if it costs me getting beat."

"The consequences is that you're a punk, you know what I'm saying. If people are calling you a punk, you lose street cred, you lose street cred, you lose the females, you lose the money and that's a part of it so if someone disrespects you, then retaliation is the only way to stand your ground."

"Zero, you get no respect. You what we call a zero. That means you're on the toilet bowl. People step and walk all over you whenever they want to."

Only a few of the men said they had positive male-role models as a child. However, none said the role models were their fathers and the influence from the few positive role models they had was limited. Thus, the question posed was "Who were the men you considered positive-role models?"

"The only people I ever saw as role models growing up was my football coaches and they don't really count. I say they don't really count because you only see them two in a half months in a year and after that, there's no more, you know what I'm saying. There's no parties on the weekends, one-on-one hang out sessions. Like nothing like that, and so those are the people I called my role models like all my life."

"I did, like a few football coaches but the guys from my neighborhood, I looked up to more. Like I was more impressed with them than anybody else."

Almost all of the men expressed that at particular points during their lives they felt a powerful sense of hopelessness. They said the hopelessness was rooted in the violence they encountered throughout their lives. A common narrative among them is similar to the following statement offered by a man in his twenties.

"They [violence] almost common things, you know. Shooting here, see somebody shot right there. Man... Now... I'll be honest, I never thought I'd make it to see 18... Not too many of my friends did."

As a means of coping with this sense of hopelessness, many of the men said they used narcotics to escape their problems.

"Came back and started running the streets... Didn't care about nobody. Got introduced to crack, cocaine. Pshh, when you get introduced to crack, cocaine, everything else goes out the window."

"When I found out what cocaine could do, not only to me but for me and my needs. Like females. When I got high, I got introduced to cocaine by females and I wasn't even getting high. But you know it was things that she was saying that she would do if you know, I smoked up, you know what I'm saying. And on that, getting the dope, doing things for the dope, and now I'm participating now. Now I'm smoking, now at the bottom of the month, I'm out here. Out here chasing ghosters. It's crazy, it's crazy."

Despite the proximal relief that drugs provided, many shared the violent consequences that soon after surfaced for them.

"I've had guns pulled up on me. Pistols put up on my head, because I think when you an addict...because I was an addict and being out there you know what I'm saying, you do what you gotta do to get your drug. And I had robbed the dope man. One day he found out that I did and he called me to his house and not me even knowing he knew. And they had me at my car. In a matter of fact, my car was parked on the streets, I remember. And I got out in the middle of the streets for about 30 minutes until the police came and I was on the porch and they had the pistols on me. Right now the only thing that saved me was the police coming down asking who car this was."

WHOM DO YOU RELY ON FOR PROTECTION?

The men were asked "Whom do you rely on for protection?" Their answers include the themes of spirituality and guns.

"Jesus Christ. My Lord and Savior. That's who protected me when I got shot."

"Jesus. That's it, like Jesus. I say that because I realize living in the middle of a war zone, on 40th avenue. And we hear gun shots all the time. We hear helicopters flying overhead all the time. And the only thing that allows me to sleep at night, knowing that no one's kicking in my door is my relationship with Jesus Christ, for real."

"Currently, guns still because now there are so many threats. Like I was in one of the most hated hoods in the city. Like my hood, we didn't have affiliates."





"When I realized, and this sounds like a movie script, but once I understood the power of a weapon, I didn't think I need anyone after that."

THE MEN'S THOUGHTS ON VIOLENCE PREVENTION

The men shared what they believe is needed to stop the violence in Omaha.

"They should literally assign certain police officers to certain sections or hoods. You know what I mean, so that way, people could see them every day over there. Every day sections like to where the police, they walk around, interacting with the community. really, people be sitting on their porch 'hi, how are you doing?' You see this person every day, five o'clock, just like your mail man. You see him every day at 3 o'clock. 'Hey, how you doing?' He's a regular, you cool, you trust him with your mail, you know what I'm saying. Then if you see the police officer, every day, the same one in your neighborhood, you get familiar with him, you know what I'm saying. Versus you see him and then you won't see him again for another month or two or to something else that happened over here, you know what I'm saying, you don't see him in your neighborhood, you know what I'm saying."

"More mentors, that's for sure. Man, because I don't like putting people in jail, so I don't want to be like, I don't know. That's a tough question because you can't just be like, be harder on gun charges and that. That break down families. I would say just more mentors. It would have to be, just more mentors. People that's really open with their heart."

"Honestly, like me being me, I would tell you it's nothing that you would be able to do. But if I had to give some suggestions, give people more stuff to do. People have too much free time. Don't give them what you think they should do. Give them what they want to do. Start building, build a gym for straight 18 and older. Basketball. You know. Then you have time to talk to one of your enemies. You see him in the gym, he playing basketball. You know what I'm saying, ya'll in a middle of the game. At first ya'll might not like each other but ya'll had to play on each other team real quick. So by the time ya'll then pass the ball to each other at the end, 'good game, bro.' On accident, but you know, he's a rival, you know what I mean. Because now they build a gym for kids. Yeah that's cool but you got to do something for the people that are influencing the kids. Because if you can change the way people influencing the kids think, then you will get the kids. Because the kid is going to follow whoever who looks like they're something. You know what I'm saying, they're going to follow that regardless, you know what I'm saying. So you got to get to the people who they look up to, you know what I mean. People be all like 'oh, he's

grown, it's too late, you can do nothing to get help.' That's a lie, that's the people you want to help because that's the people that's telling their kids and giving them their direction, you know what I'm saying."

"Yes! Yes! Attack them 20 year olds. Them 20-25 because when you make it to 25, you OG. Everybody know, everybody know. Younger homies listen to their older homies, which will be OGs. Get to the OGs ...not saying like, 'aww, help a grown man that's doing nothing.' I'm not saying that, you know what I'm say. I'm just saying like create more opportunities to where they wanted to do something, they would, you know what I'm saying. Give them other outlets. Build a studio that don't have a censor on music. No you can't talk about shooting. That would be the only censory. No gang activity in the music. Other than that, you can make whatever... you can cuss if you wanted to. Just no gang activity, you know type of deal. You know. Everybody loves it. You see the black community love music! Who don't rap?! What black kid don't think they don't know how to rap? Build a big studio, you know what I'm saying. You can have security there if you want. There's ways to enforce it. You manage it however you want to do it because ya'll built it so you guys can enforce it however you want and make the rules, you know. Just don't restrict them to the point where nobody wants to come because they can't feel like theirsself. You see what I'm saying?"





Discussion and Recommendations

Addressing violence can be challenging and complex because the risk, as well as protective factors associated with violence can be multifaceted (economic, social, cultural, psychological, policy, and so forth) and occurring at individual, family, community, and societal levels. Violence, when left unaddressed, can be transmitted across individuals, neighborhoods, and generations, which highlights the importance of treating violence like a potent infectious disease and mobilizing needed resources to remove the conditions necessary for violence incidence, growth, and transmission through an epidemiological or public health approach (Slukin, 2012).

Based on in-depth interviews with African American mothers of youth at-risk of violence and male offenders in Omaha, one of the major findings of this study concerns the importance of adopting a trauma-informed approach in violence prevention in vulnerable communities that have been constantly suffering from high prevalence of violence for decades. According to Corbin et al. (2011), a trauma-informed approach to violence prevention acknowledges that trauma contributes to the cycle of violence and is founded on the principle, “Hurt people hurt people” (Bloom & Reichert, 1998, p. 162). Literature in the medical and psychiatric disciplines supports the deduction that trauma is at the epicenter of considerable physical and psychological pain and has a direct causal pathway to many important physical and mental health, and social maladies. Both the mothers and males in our study talked about how their exposures to violence in their family or community has influenced their social, psychological, and emotional well-being. As a result, many of them resorted to gangs or guns for protection.

This trauma-informed approach to violence prevention cannot be possibly separated from a life course perspective on violence prevention. Many of our study participants shared their experience of violence early in life whether it was domestic violence or bullies by peers. Besides their negative impacts on intellectual and psychosocial development, these encounters of violence early in life might well encourage the use of violence as a way of self-protection. Correspondingly, an effective approach to violence prevention has to start with addressing identified risk factors early in life.

Many of the social ills we are dealing with today have something to do with family problems or dysfunctions. Violence and crimes are no exception. Quite a few participants in our study mentioned the issues of lack of fathering, role model for sons, broken relationship between parents, and how these issues have contributed to gang participation and related violence. One recommendation from our study participants is to offer parenting education services to better equip parents with the skills and knowledge of child rearing and education. These kind of programs could also potentially help parents make more informed and responsible decisions related to child rearing and education.

It is disheartening to see that despite severe traumas and exposure to violence experienced by many of our participants, none of them reported that they had received consistent professional assistance to help them deal with or heal from the traumas. The reasons behind this harsh reality could be complex including, but not limited to short supply of social and psychiatric counseling, lack of behavioral health services,

uneasy access to these services, lack of culturally appropriate services, affordability, and so forth. Besides these services, our participants also mentioned the importance of investing into local learning and recreational infrastructure such as the provision of mentoring and exercise and musical facilities to attract youths to spend more time in positive socializing and learning. These service gaps should become a priority in future endeavors to address violence in our local communities.

Faith-based interventions would be uniquely important and promising when it comes to violence prevention and control in African American communities. Many of our participants reported the centrality of religion and faith in their lives. Thus, they would like to resort to their places of worship for protection from violence. Among major racial and ethnic groups in the U.S., African-Americans are the most religious. Close to four out of every five (79%) African-American adults reported that religion is very important in their lives, compared to 56% among other adults (Sahgal & Smith, 2009). African-American churches and other places of worship usually serve as a central platform for organizing local social and cultural events and for promoting community solidarity and efficacy, which can greatly help with violence prevention and control.





Appendix A

Interview Guide for Mothers

1. Overall, how would you describe your relationship with your child?
2. What is the single most important challenge you have in parenting?
3. Are you worried about your child's future? Why?
4. Do you think you and your family made the right decision by enrolling your child into the D.A.W.G.S. Youth Corps Gang Prevention Program? Why?
5. Do you have any suggestions or advice for the program?
6. Thinking about your child's education and future, if you are asked to name one thing you really need help with, what would that thing be?
7. Do you know any organization who can help you with the problem you just mentioned?
8. Reducing and preventing violence is important for any community. Do you have any advice on what we need to do to further reduce and prevent violence in Omaha?
9. Whom do you rely on for protection?
10. What are some of your experiences with the police? Do you trust them?

Appendix B

Interview Guide for Male Offenders

1. Could you describe your experience with violence?
2. Based on what you can recall, what caused you to be involved in violence in the beginning?
3. How do you define respect?
4. Whom do you rely on for protection from violence?
5. Do you trust the police?
6. Thinking about your future, what are some of the major challenges you have in life?
7. If you are asked to name one thing you really need help with, what would that thing be?
8. Do you know any organization or agency who can help you with the problem you just mentioned?
9. Reducing and preventing violence is important for any community. Do you have any advice on what we need to do to further reduce and prevent violence in Omaha?



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