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# Neighborhood-Level Factors and Youth Violence: Giving Voice to the Perceptions of Prominent Neighborhood Individuals

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Youth violence is a significant public health problem. Although the relationship between neighborhood-level factors and urban youth violence is recognized, the specific mechanisms of this relationship are often unclear. Prominent neighborhood individuals were identified within four select low-income urban neighborhoods in Baltimore City. In-depth interviews were conducted to explore these individuals' perceptions of the relationship between social and structural neighborhood-level factors and urban youth violence. Employment opportunities, local businesses, trash management, vacant housing, and street lighting were perceived as important neighborhood factors influencing young people's experiences. The relationship between these neighborhood characteristics and the local illicit drug market and youth violence is highlighted. Results provide an enhanced understanding of the importance of using a participatory-based research approach and the mechanisms of the relationship between neighborhood-level factors and youth violence. Both are critical components in designing and implementing multilevel youth violence prevention efforts.

**Keywords:** *neighborhood factors; participatory research; youth; violence; urban*

Despite widespread violence prevention efforts, the homicide rate for young men in the United States is the highest in the world (Gelles, as cited in Fetsch & Silliman, 2002; Richters, 1993), and homicide still remains the leading cause of death among

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15- to 24-year-old African American men and the second leading cause of death for African American women (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2006), with an average of 15 young people between the ages of 10 and 24 being murdered everyday (CDC, 2004). Focusing on homicides alone, however, underestimated the true magnitude of this public health epidemic. Recent research indicates that the ratio of nonfatal intentional injuries to homicides is 94:1, suggesting the health impact of violence is far more substantial (CDC, 2002). The devastating impact of violence also extends far beyond that of physical injury alone. Exposure to, or involvement in, violence has been linked to increased negative psychological and behavioral outcomes such as internalizing (such as depression, anxiety, fear, suicide) and externalizing behaviors (such as aggressive behavior and attention problems), and difficulties with adjustment in school and life-course development (Weist & Cooley-Quille, 2001).

Frequently, interventions to address youth violence focus on young people themselves and their families, whereas more efforts to understand and illustrate the role of factors at all levels are necessary for comprehensively addressing risk factors for youth violence at all contextual levels (Kellerman, Fuqua-Whitley, Rivara, & Mercy, 1998; National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center [NYVPRC], 2006). Neighborhoods at highest risk for violence are often characterized by a variety of social and environmental factors, such as poverty, poor housing quality, unemployment, drug use, and poor health (Devuyst, Hens, & De Lannoy, 2001). Understanding more about how such contextual factors contribute to young people's experiences with violence is essential to understanding and designing effective violence prevention and intervention efforts (NYVPRC, 2006).

Previous research efforts have identified a variety of macro-level contextual factors such as neighborhood disorganization, dilapidated and vacant housing and physical environment, decreased social support, and limited resource availability associated with youths experiencing violence (Anderson, 1999; Earls, 1994; Harries, 1997; Lipsey & Derzon, 1998; Moffitt, 1993; Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997; Shaw & McKay, 1942; Speer, Jackson, & Peterson, 2001; Taylor, Gottfredson & Brower, 1984). Although neighborhood-level factors are thought to mediate the relationship between disadvantaged neighborhoods, children, families, and negative outcomes (Sampson, 1993), recent studies suggest that neighborhood factors may actually play a more direct role in the development of antisocial behaviors of young people, thereby potentially influencing their likelihood of experiencing interpersonal violence (Ingolsby & Shaw, 2002; Wikstrom & Loeber, 2000).

Building on this existing body of literature, our study uses qualitative research methods to gain in intensive understanding of how various community and environmental-level factors influence young people's experiences with violence in their communities. We used a participatory grounded needs assessment approach, increasingly recognized as a valuable element of effective research and intervention development, to engage and involve local individuals in the process of identifying and illustrating such factors (Israel, Eng, Schulz, & Parker, 2005). This article presents a subset of findings illustrating the locally perceived relationship between neighborhood-level factors and urban youth violence. The data presented are a subset of findings from a larger study designed to explore the perceived individual and contextual dynamics of urban youth violence involving local individuals of all ages (Yonas, O'Campo, Burke, Peak, & Gielen, 2005).

## METHOD

### Identification of Study Neighborhoods

For our investigation, the concept of *neighborhood* was used to refer to a specific geographically bounded region that could potentially include the concept of *community* (Coulton, Korbin, & Su, 1996). We operationalized neighborhood designations through the use of census block groups, because their size is relatively confined—a “walkable” area of city blocks. Census block group characteristics, rather than zip codes or census tracts, have been found to be an appropriate proxy for identifying immediate influences on the lives and experiences of local individuals, including young people (Coulton et al., 1996).

To identify neighborhoods at increased risk for youth violence, we first limited our selection process to all neighborhoods falling within the lowest quartile of wealth in Baltimore City. Wealth, an economic measure of overall financial assets minus liabilities, was used as a more robust proxy measure for overall socioeconomic status rather than relying on per capita income alone (Muntaner, Nieto, & O’Campo, 1996). Of the 711 block group neighborhoods present in the Year 2000 census, 178 were identified as falling within the lowest quartile of wealth. Upon further inspection, 20 of these neighborhoods were removed from the database because of their industrial or municipal status (i.e., cemetery, industrial park, train station), leaving 158 neighborhoods with predominately residential composition for inclusion in our investigation.

Focusing on this subset of neighborhoods, a combination of demographic, economic, and violence-related data were used to sort neighborhoods based on their “risk” for youth violence. There are two primary reasons that drove our decision to use multiple variables rather than relying on violence-related data alone for identifying our potential study neighborhoods. First, the majority of aggravated assaults, robberies, and rapes are never reported to law enforcement officials and when they are, arrests are made in less than 50% of these crimes (Cook & Laub, 1998; Maguire & Pastore, 1999; Snyder & Sickmund, 1999). Second, most young people involved in violence and violent crimes are never arrested for a violent crime (Elliott, Huizinga, & Menard, 1989; Huizinga, Loeber, & Thornberry, 1995; Loeber, Farrington, & Waschbusch, 1998). Given the inconsistent nature of police violence data available, it was deemed appropriate to use a combination of variables in the process for identifying potential study neighborhoods.

To identify neighborhoods at high or low risk for youth violence, we used a multi-variable analytic approach. A combination of 17 variables previously found to be associated with youth violence (i.e., female-headed households with children younger than 18, per capita income, education, vacant housing units, unemployment, juvenile total assault rate per 10,000, and adult aggravated assault rate per 10,000) were entered into a principal components analysis (Duntman, 1989). When using multiple correlated variables such as ours, principal components analysis has been found to be a preferred method for identifying high- and low-risk neighborhoods for particular outcomes (O’Campo, Caughy, Aronson, & Xue, 1997). The results of our principal components analysis reduced the original 17 variables into five new indices that became new variables: (a) youth violence, (b) adult violence, (c) low education/female-headed households, (d) employment/high education, and (e) home ownership/wealth. Cronbach’s alphas for these five scales were .91, .98, .73, .86, .66, respectively.

For each census block group neighborhood, individual scores were assigned statistically to each of the five new variables using the statistical software package SPSS (SPSS Inc., 2001). These were sorted in ascending order and divided into quartiles with particular attention given to neighborhoods in the extreme quartile categories (i.e., the highest and lowest quartiles). Census block group neighborhoods were then ranked based on these “risk” profiles for youth violence, according to which quartile the neighborhood fell within each of the five scored indices. For example, a neighborhood that fell within the highest quartile for youth violence and adult violence and in the lowest quartile for education, income/employment, and homeownership/wealth would be considered as “high” risk for youth violence.

Potential study neighborhoods were identified upon a city-level census block group map of Baltimore City and labeled according to their risk status in order to visually explore the presence of any geographic trends. A number of neighborhood clusters with contiguous high- and low-risk profile neighborhoods were identified. Two such clusters, each composed of a pair of contiguous high- and low-risk neighborhoods, were selected for inclusion in our study. Geocoding police violent crime from the years 1999 to 2003 to the census block group level confirmed that trends in reported violent crime between the contiguous census block groups were substantially different.

Using city planning data, we determined that our high- and low-risk study neighborhoods were otherwise very similar. A majority of the households (70%) had median household incomes below \$25,000 per year. Very few of the households (13%) in the neighborhood were owner occupied. Close to one third of the all the houses in the study neighborhoods were vacant (Maryland Department of Planning, 2003).

### Participants

To accurately learn about the local social and environmental dynamics related to youth violence, it was essential to meet and engage people involved in, or perceived as being involved in, efforts to address youth violence. We first sought to identify *neighborhood experts* or *prominent neighborhood individuals* (PNIs). PNIs were people who were identified by others in the neighborhood as being particularly aware of neighborhood issues and actively involved in efforts to prevent or address youth violence.

PNIs were identified through an iterative process that involved both contacting local businesses directly and conducting systematic neighborhood walk-throughs. Local businesses, organizations, and faith-based institutions were identified by the first author (M.Y.) while walking street by street throughout the study neighborhoods. The neighborhood walk-through process was essential because it (a) increased the visibility and recognition of the researcher; (b) facilitated interactions between local individuals and the researcher; (c) increased the researcher familiarity with local dynamics, structure, and culture; and (d) contributed to the development of micro-level community maps. These maps were used to define and discuss local environmental issues with neighborhood individuals.

The types of businesses contacted were both formal establishments (i.e., corner stores, a counseling center, a Laundromat) and informal businesses (i.e., a curb car wash and illicit drug markets). To assist the process of meeting and engaging local individuals, a small handout card was prepared with information about the study; contact information of the principal investigator (P.O.) and the institutional review board; and a listing of local and city resource numbers such as the free legal aid, the city services referral hotline, and a local domestic violence shelter number. The number of PNIs to

be involved in the study was not predetermined, and priority was given to involving representatives from all four of the study neighborhoods selected.

Although contact was made with more than 60 individuals from among the four study neighborhoods, priority was given to triangulating the appropriateness of those individuals invited to participate. That is, the final selection of PNIs involved the individual's self-identification combined with the impression of other neighborhood individuals living or working within the same community. Only 1 individual who was not perceived as being a PNI by other local community members steadfastly self-identified as a PNI and was invited to participate.

A total of 16 PNIs were invited to participate, and all agreed to be interviewed. A majority of these "experts" were either current or past residents of the study neighborhoods (13 of 16) and included program coordinators, pastors, unemployed parents, and drug dealers. Ten were men and 6 were women and ranged in age from 32 to 77 years, with an average age of 49. Initial contact and in-depth interviews were conducted over a 16-week period (April to August 2003).

### Data Collection

Data regarding the role of neighborhood-level factors were collected through the use of in-depth interviews with PNIs. A field guide composed of semistructured and open-ended questions was used to guide the interviews. Drawing from previous research highlighting the role and impact of specific neighborhood factors on violence and delinquency (Anderson, 1999; Earls, 1994; Harries, 1997; Ingolsby & Shaw, 2002; Sampson et al., 1997; Shaw & McKay, 1942; Taylor et al., 1984; Wikstrom & Loeber, 2000) and a local assessment of the particular study neighborhoods' characteristics (i.e., presence of vacant housing, trash, vacant lots, local businesses, churches, and schools observed through neighborhood walk-throughs), a list of potentially important neighborhood-level factors was prepared.

During their interview, each participant was asked to reflect on the role of the neighborhood factors presented in relation to youth violence. The list of neighborhood factors was designed to serve as a reference point for the interviews and was not intended to be exhaustive. Examples of neighborhood factors provided for participants to reflect upon included safe places for children and young people to play; number and types of local businesses; jobs; schools and education opportunities; transportation access; parks and recreation; police; places of worship; city services including garbage collection, rodent control, and lighting; as well as quality, quantity, and affordability of local housing. Sample field guide questions include the following: Is violence involving young people an issue in your neighborhood? If so, in what ways does youth violence affect the lives of people, old and young, who live in your neighborhood? How, if so, do you feel that these (list of factors described above) or other neighborhood factors influence or affect neighborhood young people in relation to their experiencing violence?

To obtain a common understanding, youth violence was introduced at the start of each in-depth interview as physical or emotional acts involving young people that cause harm, pain, or injury of any sort (National Center for Injury and Prevention Control [NCIPC], 2003). Participants were also provided the opportunity to articulate their own concept of youth violence.

The interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes each and were conducted by a researcher trained in qualitative data collection methods (M.Y.). Interviews were scheduled and conducted at a time and location most convenient for each participant. The

majority of the interviews took place in or around the participant's home, and all were conducted within the study neighborhoods. Participants were reimbursed \$20 for their time and involvement. The interviews were tape-recorded after receiving approval from the participant. All procedures were approved by the institutional review board, The Committee on Human Subjects Research for the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

### Data Analysis

Analyses proceeded according to established standards for qualitative data (Bernard, 2000). The audiotaped interviews were transcribed verbatim and reviewed for accuracy. All PNIs were provided a copy of their transcribed interview and an opportunity to further illustrate concepts explored during the initial interview. No changes or edits were requested by our study participants.

Two of the project investigators (M.Y., J.B.) analyzed the transcripts. Thematic codes were developed and applied to relevant segments of text. For example, all text segments that addressed vacant housing/dilapidated housing in relation to youth violence were identified using a code called "neighborhood factor—housing." The thematic coding structures applied by each investigator were highly consistent. Any coding discrepancies were resolved through review and discussion with the entire investigative team. The coded interviews were entered into QSR NVIVO, a qualitative data management software program (Fraser, 2000). Consistent with Spradley's (1979) guidelines for conducting qualitative data analysis, as additional data were gathered, segments of the text were consistently reviewed for recurring themes. The results presented here are those factors that were mentioned most frequently during the interview process. First, however, we provide a brief summary of the perceptions and impact of youth violence as a neighborhood issue.

## RESULTS

Although study neighborhoods were selected based on their high and low risk profiles for youth violence, the perceived impact of neighborhood-level factors was consistent in both groups. Therefore, findings among all study neighborhoods, despite their risk for youth violence status, are presented together.

### Youth Violence as an Issue

All PNIs reported that youth violence was a serious issue in their neighborhood. The severity of violence in general, drug trafficking, and the use of weapons were perceived as much more common and brutal in the two high-risk neighborhoods versus the low-risk neighborhoods. In all of the four study neighborhoods, there was a great deal of block-by-block variation in neighborhood perceptions and experiences of youth violence.

One PNI stated,

We have a different breed of youth today that have *no* respect for human life . . . [it is] rampant and raging . . . the open air drug markets . . . and it's a strong pull . . . ah . . . to the street [for youth] and survival of the street . . . you know the rules . . . if you weak, you get taken, and if you tough, you get tried . . . so there's *no* just getting along!

He expressed his frustration with the culture of violence in his neighborhood and how the “Dodge City–like” mentality had only increased in recent years, “especially given the increased access that young people have to weapons such as handguns and semiautomatic weapons . . . it’s just the feeling or belief over here . . . that they all got to be armed.”

### **The Perceived Impact of Youth Violence**

The majority of individuals interviewed felt that youth violence has a serious impact on their neighborhood as a whole and negatively affects the ability to open legitimate businesses within the neighborhood. The most commonly described impact of violence was a tremendous and overwhelming sense of fear instilled among neighborhood residents. Many individuals mentioned having lost children, loved ones, and friends in the recent past because of the violence.

PNI’s shared that people were being “forced” from gathering or meeting in public areas or were unable to access necessary services such as bus stops, corner stores, and the metro for fear of being harassed, assaulted, or shot. They described that many young people and children in their neighborhoods were never allowed to play outside—confined to playing in the basement or some other safe, window-free location inside. One prominent neighborhood resident stated,

There is a quiet fear . . . they [parents] don’t want their children to go down to the corner . . . relegated to the basement, things of that nature. So yeah, it increases the fear factor and a sense of um, I think a lot of times hope, hope, hopelessness.

Another PNI commented during the interview that “these youth have no conscience and no value . . . they will snuff your life out in a moment . . . many people are held hostage in their homes and in their community as a whole . . . it’s really . . . really pathetic.”

## **NEIGHBORHOOD FACTORS AND YOUTH VIOLENCE**

The neighborhood factors that received the most attention from participants were employment opportunities, vacant and dilapidated housing and local businesses, trash management, and street lighting.

### **Employment Opportunities**

The most common sentiment expressed by the participants was that there were simply no “legitimate” jobs in or around the neighborhoods for young people and adults. The lack of employment opportunities, the low economic position of each of the study neighborhoods, and the inherent need for both money and resources lead to the development of a setting where neighborhood individuals of all ages may look to the street and local drug culture for support. Involvement in the illicit drug markets was mentioned as the primary source of attainable “employment” for the young people in the neighborhoods. One participant, who grew up in the neighborhood and was recently released from jail for drug possession said,

There ain't none [jobs] around here! We don't have none. Some 18-year-olds work [sell drugs] round here, and some 10-year-old want to work . . . and know they can't . . . I mean, the 10-year-olds look up to the 18 year olds . . . the 18-year-olds say, "Do you see me do that . . . but don't *you* do that . . . what I do, you *don't* do!"

Many participants expressed the belief that given the lack of options, it was almost an inevitable outcome for many of the young people living in the neighborhoods to become involved with drugs.

Several participants commented that young people become involved in selling drugs at very early ages for a variety of reasons. The most common reason presented was to provide financial support for themselves and their family, to pay the rent, and to put food on the table. For example, one said,

You know . . . he's [the young man] gonna help put food on the table . . . he's gonna help chastise the younger kids and hold them in line . . . people think it's an unusual thing to see these mothers wailing in the street about their dead son . . . but they are often crying about a lot of guilt . . . many of these sons are out there taking care of their household! Stepping in where their father wasn't . . . you know . . . and being the provider.

### **Local Businesses**

The lack of "legitimate businesses" in the neighborhoods was felt to be a significant factor related to youth violence. Specifically, the lack of productive and minority-owned businesses was felt to lead to the absence of role models. For example, one participant stated,

I am extremely dissatisfied with the fact that there are not enough businesses. There aren't any factory-working jobs here anymore. It used to be different at one time. When you think about businesses . . . they bring something to the community . . . someone to look up to . . . someone coming and going everyday from a business. . . . Who they *do* see are people with money are the drug dealers so that becomes attractive to them, which leads to a part of a great deal of the violence in this area around drugs.

The type of local businesses in the neighborhoods was also felt to be related to youth violence through the connection with drug activity. Participants spoke of how corner stores, Laundromats, and liquor stores served as "duck in" places, or hiding places from police for young people and adults using and dealing drugs. They buy their way in by giving the business owner money to gain entry. A participant illustrated the phenomenon in the following comment,

This store on the corner . . . they should close it down because when the police come after the dealers . . . they run in there and he [the store owner] allows it . . . they throw the man a couple of dollars. . . . So he's influencing them, encouraging them to continue doing whatever they are doing instead of saying no!

Participants spoke of how individuals successful at dealing illicit drugs in the area "*flip*" the money acquired from selling drugs and start "*clean*" businesses to invest and channel their drug money. Through the development of such businesses and real estate, the drug culture itself becomes further entrenched and integral to the ethos and identity

of the community itself. A few examples were provided of young men in the neighborhood making such large amounts of money that they start their own businesses, buy property in the neighborhood to live in, or even properties to rent as a way of sheltering their money. One participant stated,

They [the young men dealing drugs] buy these houses for \$5,000, and they take \$15,000 to get it up to a livable, you know, . . . we're talking kids who are walking the streets, who have tennis shoe boxes under their beds [motioning as if filled] . . . I mean, my salary's \$30,000 a year, and that's what they made for the month or even made for the week! Actually, . . . I had a little kid that used to hang with me, and he is doing [buying] houses now. He might have five or six houses right now.

Another participant, who had been heavily involved in the illicit neighborhood drug market and was currently involved in a local job development program, stated the following,

They [drug dealers] have businesses, you would think that owning these businesses, you would abandon [selling drugs] now that you're living on a more productive business-oriented side . . . but it's not like that. One just funnels and finances the other. What they do is flip the money . . . cleaning it up a little bit, but nevertheless, he still uses part of that money to reestablish himself [in the local drug market].

### **Vacant Housing**

Housing quality, specifically vacant and dilapidated housing, was considered an important neighborhood factor that affects youths and their experiences of violence. Vacant houses often serve as a neighborhood location for illicit drug selling where young people are exposed to, learn about, and too often are recruited into the drug culture. Vacant housing also provides a neighborhood space for the stashing and selling of guns.

In addition, one participant illustrates the use of vacant homes for storing and selling drugs by illustrating this dynamic during her interview:

That house right there [pointing across the street] . . . it's been vacant for 5 years. But see what they do . . . do you see him standing up there like that . . . see that piece of . . . he's gonna pull that chunk of wood out and stash "something" [drugs] like that . . . see how the wood he just pulls out . . . there is a whole lot of [drug] traffic up in here . . . you know . . . it is just what's happening.

Vacant housing was also regarded as psychologically affecting young people in the neighborhood. The feeling was that by looking at dilapidated and run-down housing, the trash and debris that accompany it, and the type of people who commonly gather or occupy the vacant houses, young people's feelings change, and they begin to value themselves and others around them less. This devaluing of oneself and others was mentioned frequently as a major factor "causing" young people to engage in high-risk violence-related activities. One participant shared:

Just imagine that you get up every day . . . and you look at abandoned houses across the street . . . the feelings of depression and anger . . . men and women act differently . . . and it spills into the street with youth and other innocent people in the area being victimized.

### **Trash Management**

Trash was felt to have both psychological and physical impacts on neighborhood youths and their experiences of violence. According to one participant, seeing trash and being around it creates “a numbing effect of one looking at trash, one feels like trash, sees other people as trash, and therefore it isn’t hard to injure or kill them.”

Trash in the alleys, on the corners, and in vacant lots was felt to seriously influence youth violence because young people “stash drugs and guns” in these areas of high trash buildup where no one else will go. When specifically asked about city services such as trash removal and the possible role that trash in his neighborhood might play in the incidence of youth violence, one participant shared that

because those services aren’t taken seriously, and they don’t come around here and remove a lot of the trash from alleys and in front of houses. . . . So that kind of creates a hiding spot . . . a lot of youth stash stuff [drugs and guns] in certain spots. If the city keep stuff clean, I think that it helps [prevent] the youth violence.

### **Street Lighting**

Street lighting was felt to be indirectly related to youth violence because of its relationship with drug activity. Participants spoke of how street lighting, specifically the lack of lighting, created or fostered the development of marginalized pockets within the neighborhood where people participating in activities such as drug using or selling and violence can do so without being seen as well. For example, one participant said,

They need to brighten the lights . . . cause [the lack of lighting] gives them a chance to do what they do . . . you know [motioning to the young man selling drugs across the street]. For instance . . . he ain’t gonna stand out there in the bright lights right?

## **DISCUSSION**

To date, a great deal of violence prevention and intervention attention has focused on addressing individual-level and family-level characteristics of young people thought to be at risk, such as home nurse visitation programs, cognitive behavior therapy models, and law enforcement–based approaches (Kellerman et al., 1998; Satcher, 2001). As illustrated by our findings, broader environmental conditions of impoverished urban neighborhoods shape the well-being and experiences of their residents. The conditions of such neighborhoods, often marked by high unemployment, dilapidated and vacant housing, trash and neighborhood decay, deteriorating economic and educational institutional structures, and deteriorating social networks, increase the potential of neighborhood violence (Ingolsby & Shaw, 2002; Kramer, 2000; Sampson et al., 1997; Shaw & McKay 1942; Wilson, 1996). In our findings, participants clearly stated that they perceived an obvious and direct relationship between the lack of businesses and employment opportunities, vacant and dilapidated housing, and aspects of overall neighborhood decay with youth violence.

One of the most important factors illustrated as influencing neighborhood youth violence was the relatively low number and types of businesses remaining in the study

neighborhoods. Together with the overall lack of legitimate employment opportunities, these two factors were perceived as significantly influencing the neighborhood culture through cultivating conditions fostering the local illicit drug markets and subsequent prevalence of youth violence. The intersection of employment and businesses dynamics within economically deprived communities (i.e., lack of jobs, job loss, lack of job networks, lack of quality education and job training, and lack of positive neighborhood role models) and youth violence have been well documented (Anderson, 1999; Kramer, 2000; Sampson, 1993; Sampson et al., 1997; Skogan, 1990). Data from our investigation provide detailed illustration of how local dynamics associated with economic deprivation manifest and cultivate conditions associated to neighborhood violence involving youths.

Obtaining this insight is critical to gaining a true understanding of local dynamics that is necessary for designing and implementing effective youth violence prevention efforts. Economic and employment development efforts have been found to promote lasting change when coupled with neighborhood organizing strategies to address youth violence (Kellerman et al., 1998; Kramer, 2000). One essential component of such strategies to prevent youth violence includes supporting local job development initiatives that relate to and redirect unemployed and business-savvy young people through the development of comprehensive training, businesses, and job opportunities (Kellerman et al., 1998).

Vacant housing has been identified as a significant neighborhood risk factor associated with youth violence (Sampson, 1993; Sampson et al., 1997; Skogan, 1990; Taylor & Covington, 1988; Taylor et al., 1984). Despite such recognition, few studies have explored from the perspective of those living in such neighborhoods how vacant and dilapidated housing specifically influences youth violence. Exposure to vacant housing was perceived as having a psychological as well as contextual influence on neighborhood youth and violence. Psychologically, vacant and dilapidated housing negatively affects the way in which young people feel about themselves and others around them and their neighborhood. These conditions were perceived as making it more acceptable or possible for young people in the neighborhood to engage in acts of violence. In addition, vacant and dilapidated housing was perceived as being related to other risk behaviors such as drug and alcohol use, selling and using drugs, and the storing and selling of guns.

Vacant and dilapidated houses in the neighborhood were often perceived as places where young people learned, and engaged in, delinquent behaviors from peers and older individuals involved in activities related to youth violence (Bandura, 1971; Skogan, 1990). Our findings suggest that private and municipal programs and policies aimed at reducing and eliminating vacant housing should remain a priority, because such programs are perceived as integral to the neighborhood-level efforts to address and prevent youth violence.

The data obtained from PNIs also provide an important contextual perspective regarding the importance of trash removal and street lighting enhancement in relation to neighborhood youth violence. Our findings provide further qualitative evidence that exposure to trash and dilapidated environmental conditions overall has a significant psychological impact on young people, influencing their self-perceptions, their peers, and their community, and potentially their experiences with delinquency and violence (Bursick & Webb, 1982; Murray, 1983; Skogan, 1990). In addition, the findings from this investigation further illustrate the importance of trash as a physical environmental risk factor where weapons and drugs are stashed or hidden, ultimately contributing to the potential for violence that young people and neighborhood residents experience.

City governments are increasingly facing budget constraints, which often leads to cutbacks in city services that disproportionately affect low-income communities. These communities are often hardest hit and least capable of affording private substitutes (Sampson & Wilson, 1991).

Results from this investigation further illustrate the relationship of neighborhood-level factors, the effect of living in economically desperate conditions, the endemic illicit drug culture, and young people's experiences with violence (Anderson, 1999; Kramer, 2000; Prothrow-Stith & Spivak, 2004). Many young people living in economically deprived urban neighborhoods are faced every day with the opportunity to become involved in the illicit drug culture. Whether involvement in the illicit drug trade is predicated on a desire for social status, money, power, or a need to survive and support family, association with the local drug trade increases the risk of exposure to violence for everyone living in the community. Involvement in the drug trade itself is vicious, where arguments over business or territory are often settled through violence. All individuals living within these communities, whether involved in the drug culture or not, are at risk of becoming the victims of associated violence (Anderson, 1999).

Overarching our findings is the broad and devastating impact of extreme economic deprivation on young people and the neighborhoods in which they live. The connection between young people, violence, delinquency, and extreme deprivation is compelling and consistent (Anderson, 1999; Currie, 1998; Kramer, 2000; Ness, 2004; Satcher, 2001). These effects are compounded even further by the elimination or restricting of municipal support services affecting many of the same neighborhood-level factors identified here. These factors, together with social isolation and increasing poverty and percentage of working poor helps explain why conditions sustaining violence in the United States persist despite extensive violence prevention efforts (Currie, 1998; Kramer, 2000; O'Campo & Yonas, 2005).

These findings broaden our current understanding of the process by which a variety of neighborhood-level factors influence youth violence and also illustrate for public health interventionists and community-based organizations the value of using a participatory research approach. It is through this time-intensive, respectful, and transparent process that relationships were developed with neighborhood experts who were able to provide a unique and local understanding of the culture and issues present within the study neighborhoods in relation to youth violence. This process lends itself ultimately to more cohesive community, organizational, and institutional collaborations, which together may engage in intervention efforts that are informed and designed prioritizing issues unique to the local context and neighborhood culture.

Utilizing a participatory approach facilitated the development of a culturally sensitive perspective that is often overlooked, especially when youth violence prevention and intervention efforts that are deemed successful in one low-income neighborhood are exported to other somewhat "similar" low-income neighborhoods (Prothrow-Stith & Spivak, 2004). Engaging in such a collaborative research process provides those being "studied" with a voice and opportunity to inform and shape the interpretation and use of data, a process that is often conducted by individuals from different cultures and contexts (DePue, Wells, Lasater, & Carleton, 1987; Hatch, Moss, Saran, Presley-Cantell, & Mallory, 1993). A number of successful and compelling models exist for collaborating with community individuals through the use of participatory methods and community-based participatory research methodologies to understand and prevent youth violence (Prothrow-Stith & Spivak, 2004) as well as with other health-related intervention and prevention efforts (Israel et al., 2005; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2003).

## LIMITATIONS AND STRENGTHS

Although this study provides unique insights into the relationship between neighborhood-level factors and youth violence, it does suffer from select limitations worth noting. The findings from this qualitative investigation are not generalizable for various reasons.

First, our use of qualitative methods for data collection with select neighborhood individuals is not necessarily representative of all those living in the study neighborhoods. Second, our focus on four municipal census block group neighborhoods within Baltimore City is not necessarily representative of Baltimore City overall. Although we encourage thoughtful consideration of our findings when working in similar urban settings, caution should be taken. Third, the findings presented here are not exhaustive and rather reflect those neighborhood-level factors that received the most consistent attention from the study participants. A few of the neighborhood characteristics explored in the in-depth interviews that have not been presented, for example, places of worship, police, parks and recreation, did elicit comment, but with far less consistency than those reported. Other neighborhood factors such as schools/education opportunities, transportation, and/or health and medical resources received unexpectedly little attention. One possible explanation for the lack of focus on such distal neighborhood factors might be that such factors (e.g., schools/education opportunities) were not considered directly relevant given other more pressing, immediate issues such as concerns about employment and the physical condition of the neighborhood.

Future research, including the examination of additional neighborhoods and the involvement of additional PNIs, to explore dynamics of a variety of neighborhood-level factors in relation to youth violence is recommended. Although expanding the scope of this investigation's findings and process might provide more generalizable results, maintaining an emphasis on understanding of the local perceptions related to youth violence, including the role of neighborhood factors, local social norms, and cultural attitudes, is essential for characterizing and addressing the multidimensional nature of youth violence (Prothrow-Stith & Spivak, 2004).

Despite these limitations, there are a number of methodological strengths to this study. First is the use of a multivariable approach for identifying neighborhoods at low or high risk for youth violence. This unique approach uses the wealth of knowledge available from previous research to inform a study neighborhood identification process. Second is the systematic process used for identifying potential study neighborhoods and identifying and engaging our study participants.

Results from this study provide support for the need to recognize and address neighborhood-level factors as important factors affecting the lives of young people and their experiences with neighborhood violence. Many previous studies have demonstrated an association between neighborhood factors and youth violence using nationally representative samples or findings from school-based populations. Although not generalizable, our study's findings depict the importance of context by illustrating the valuable perceptions and insight that local neighborhood individuals possess with regard to their neighborhood's dynamics. This insight is critical to youth violence prevention efforts as it provides a micro-level perspective to gather and frame information and inform decisions that are most often made at the macro-policy and programmatic level.

These findings also provide useful insight into the development and application of how a participatory research methods approach may be used within a short period of time. Such an approach is ultimately necessary for gaining a culturally sensitive understanding

of factors associated with youth violence while facilitating the development of relationships between community and academic experts. As in this study, giving voice to neighborhood individuals as valuable assets demonstrates the ability and importance of public health practitioners to develop cohesive collaborations, grounded in transparency and respect, with local individuals that honor the culture and dynamics of each specific neighborhood.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

Despite the limitations, the current study provides an important and unique example of how public health practitioners and interventionists can engage community members using a participatory-based needs assessment in an effort to understand the local culture and dynamics associated with youth violence. Building on important previous research that has demonstrated the relationship between neighborhood-level factors and youth violence (Earls, 1994; Ingolsby & Shaw, 2002; Lipsey & Derzon, 1998; Sampson et al., 1997; Shaw & McKay, 1942; Taylor et al., 1984), this research illustrates *how* and *why* such contextual factors influence and affect young people's experiences and exposure to violence. To effectively address critical issues of public health such as youth violence, pursuing prevention and intervention efforts that honor and incorporate the culture(s) of each specific neighborhood is essential.

In terms of policy and program development efforts to address youth violence, this study serves as an example of how, within a short period of time, a participatory-based research process can provide a framework and context for learning about local neighborhood issues. It is through cultivating this partnership approach, involving community individuals, public health practitioners, local organizations, policy makers, and others, that effective, appropriate, and sustainable youth violence prevention efforts are possible.

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