



# Parental strain, mental health problems, and parenting practices: A longitudinal study



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## ABSTRACT

Although poor parenting practices place youth living in under resourced communities at heightened risk for adjustment difficulties, less is known about what influences parenting practices in those communities. The present study examines prospective linkages between three latent constructs: parental strain, mental health problems and parenting practices. Parental victimization by community violence and life stressors were indicative of parental strain; depressive, anxious, and hostile symptoms were indicators of parental mental health; and parental knowledge of their child's activities and child disclosure were indicators of parenting practices. Interviews were conducted annually for 3 waves with 316 female caregivers (92% African American) parenting youth in low-income inner-city communities. Structural equation modeling revealed that parental strain, assessed at Wave 1, predicted changes in mental health problems 1 year later, which in turn predicted parenting practices at Wave 3. These results suggest that parental strain can compromise a caregiver's ability to parent effectively by impacting their mental health. Opportunities for intervention include helping caregivers process trauma and mental health problems associated with parental strain.

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Parenting children in high-risk contexts is the common experience for millions of adults living in the United States (Ceballo, Kennedy, Bregman, & Epstein-Ngo, 2012). Living in high-risk contexts, such as neighborhoods with high levels of violence, noise, and crowding can take a toll on parenting practices, ranging from excessive and restrictive control of children's activities (Weir, Etelson, & Brand, 2006) to various forms of mistreatment and abuse (Zhang & Anderson, 2010). These alterations in parenting and family processes, in turn, can impact youth adjustment (White & Roosa, 2012). Due to the significant effect parenting behavior has on children's development (Furstenberg, Cook, Eccles, Elder, & Sameroff, 1999; Sroufe, Egeland, Carlson, & Collins, 2005), it is important to understand the pathways through which parents' own experiences in hazardous neighborhoods impact their parenting practices. The present study examines prospective linkages between three latent constructs: parental strain, assessed through victimization by community violence and life stressors; parental mental health, assessed through depressive, anxious and hostile symptoms; and subsequent parenting

practices assessed through parental knowledge of their child's activities and child voluntary disclosure of activities (see Fig. 1).

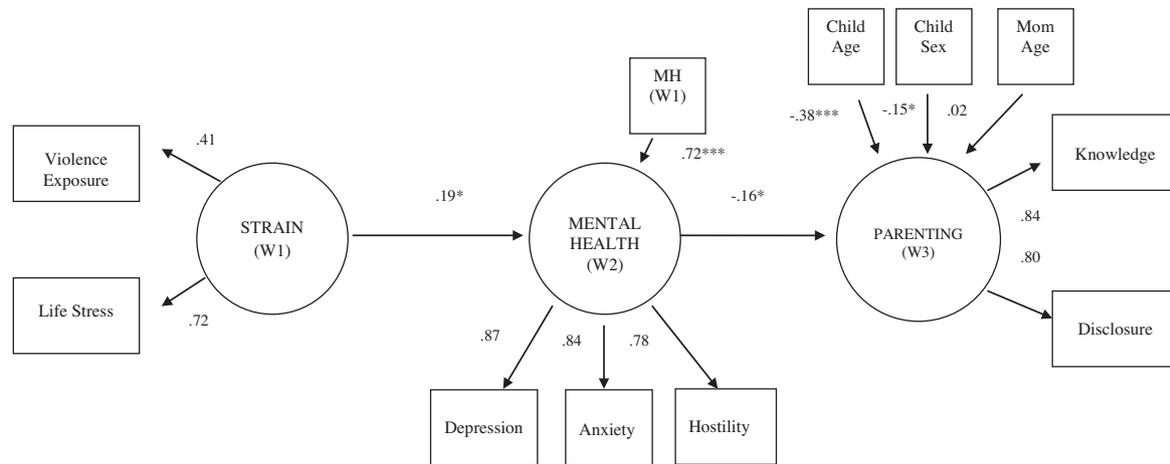
## 1. Parental strain, mental health and parenting practices

Neighborhood poverty can negatively impact parenting: it can affect the nature and extent of stressors to which parents are exposed, parental coping strategies, parental health, and the extent to which parents are warm and responsive to their children (Ernst, 2001; Klebanov, Brooks-Gunn, & Duncan, 1994). Many impoverished neighborhoods also are filled with danger and violence, including drug dealing, gang activity, robberies, and assaults. Although exposure to this type of community violence has documented effects on the well-being of youth (see Fowler, Tompsett, Braciszewski, Jacques-Tiura, & Baltes, 2009, for a review), less is known about how parents' exposure to community violence and the life stressors that co-occur in these environments may affect their mental health (Franco, Pottick, & Huang, 2010; Klebanov et al., 1994; McDonnell, 2007), which in turn affects their parenting practices.

Research supports the relation between parental exposure to community violence, compromised coping, and subsequent mental health problems (Aisenberg, 2001; Kliewer & Zaharakis, 2013; Weir et al., 2006). In general parents raising their children in

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**Fig. 1.** Structural model with standardized estimates. MH = Mental Health. W1 = Wave 1. W2 = Wave 2. W3 = Wave 3. \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

communities where the sense of safety is compromised and crime is prevalent tend to present higher levels of anxiety regarding neighborhood safety (Klierer, *in press*) and are at higher risk for depression compared to parents raising their children in communities where the sense of safety is not compromised. Certainly poverty and community violence contribute to the context of parenting. Parents' direct or indirect exposure to community violence contributes to mental health problems like anxiety, depression, and hostility; all of which have the potential to affect a parent's ability to effectively monitor and connect with their child (Aisenberg, 2001; McLoyd, 1998; Ross, 2000; Wandersman & Nation, 1998). As noted by Kotchick and Forehand (2002), parenting practices that include adequate monitoring and supervision of children's activities serve as protective factors for children growing up in neighborhoods characterized by poverty and danger. Adequate parental monitoring of child activities has been identified as an essential parenting skill that relates to better youth adjustment (Kerr & Stattin, 2000), and parental monitoring builds upon both parental knowledge and child's disclosure. Stattin and Kerr (2000) described how adequate parental monitoring involves parental solicitation of information as well as parental control, and/or voluntary child disclosure of information. These factors contribute to parental knowledge of the child's activities and whereabouts.

Because closeness to parents decreases while the importance of peers increase as children transition from childhood to adolescence, promoting voluntary child disclosure of information is key for optimizing parents' monitoring efforts (Kerr & Stattin, 2000). Furthermore, a child's voluntary disclosure of information is associated with parental acceptance, responsiveness and warmth in the parent-child relationship (Blodgett-Salafia, Gondoli, & Grundy, 2009; Smetana, Metzger, Gettman, & Campione-Barr, 2006), and all these factors are related to youth adjustment (Scott, Briskman, Woolgar, Humayun, & O'Connor, 2011). These data suggest that a better understanding of the factors that influence parenting practices, such as parental monitoring in under resourced communities, have important implications for enhancing optimal parenting.

Evidence suggests that in an effort to better protect their children, parents living in violent neighborhoods adapt their parenting strategies. For example, in response to community violence, parental awareness of their child's whereabouts increases, leading to higher monitoring and an increase in communication with children about safety issues (Ceballos et al., 2012; Kimbro & Schachter, 2011; Letiecq & Koblinsky, 2004). Nevertheless, parental efforts to protect their children do not guarantee effective parenting practices;

for instance, Byrnes, Miller, Chen, and Grube (2011) found that mothers who perceived higher levels of neighborhood problems used more rule-setting strategies, but also showed lower levels of awareness regarding their children's whereabouts, indicating evidence of less effective monitoring strategies.

Exposure to community violence – directly or indirectly – is stressful, and not all parents cope adaptively with this exposure. Echoing work cited earlier, Pinderhughes, Nix, Foster, Jones, and The Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group (2001) noted that the chronic stress faced by parents living in neighborhoods characterized by limited economic resources and public services, and high violence and crime rates, may impact a parent's ability to be warm, appropriate, consistent, and non-harsh. Along those lines, White and Roosa (2012) in their study with Mexican American fathers and adolescents found that neighborhood danger was associated with disruptions in parenting and family processes, which in turn led to elevated levels of internalizing symptoms for the youth.

Some work exists linking exposure to violence and life stressors to psychological vulnerability and disciplinary practices among African American women (Jarrett & Jefferson, 2004; Jenkins, 2002; Mitchell et al., 2009). However, to our knowledge this is the first study that examines the prospective relations between parental strain, mental health, and parenting practices measured by parental knowledge and children voluntary disclosure of information.

The present study augments the literature on influences on parenting practices in underresourced neighborhoods by testing a longitudinal model linking parental strain (exposure to violence and life stressors), parent mental health problems (depressive, anxious, and hostile symptoms), and parenting practices (parental knowledge and child disclosure). It is hypothesized that parental strain would affect their parenting practices indirectly via mental health problems. That is, parents' exposure to violence and experience of life stress would be positively and prospectively associated with mental health problems, which in turn would be associated with lower levels of parental knowledge and child disclosure.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Participants included 316 female caregivers ( $M = 39.42$  years,  $SD = 7.62$ ; range = 23–67; 91.8% African American) enrolled with one of their children in a longitudinal study of community violence

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