



Experiences of violence and deficits in academic achievement among urban primary school children in Jamaica[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The aim of this study was to examine the relationship between children's experiences of three different types of violence and academic achievement among primary school children in Kingston, Jamaica.

Methods: A cross-sectional study of 1300 children in grade 5 [mean (S.D.) age: 11 (0.5) years] from 29 government primary schools in urban areas of Kingston and St. Andrew, Jamaica, was conducted. Academic achievement (mathematics, reading, and spelling) was assessed using the Wide Range Achievement Test. Children's experiences of three types of violence – exposure to aggression among peers at school, physical punishment at school, and exposure to community violence – were assessed by self-report using an interviewer administered questionnaire.

Results: Fifty-eight percent of the children experienced moderate or high levels of all three types of violence. Boys had poorer academic achievement and experienced higher levels of aggression among peers and physical punishment at school than girls. Children's experiences of the three types of violence were independently associated with all three indices of academic achievement. There was a dose–response relationship between children's experiences of violence and academic achievement with children experiencing higher levels of violence having the poorest academic achievement and children experiencing moderate levels having poorer achievement than those experiencing little or none.

Conclusions: Exposure to three different types of violence was independently associated with poor school achievement among children attending government, urban schools in Jamaica. Programs are needed in schools to reduce the levels of aggression among students and the use of physical punishment by teachers and to provide support for children exposed to community violence.

Practice implications: Children in Jamaica and the wider Caribbean experience significant amounts of violence in their homes, communities, and schools. In this study, we demonstrate a dose–response relationship between primary school children's experiences of three different types of violence and their academic achievement. The study points to the need for validated violence prevention programs to be introduced in Jamaican primary schools. Such programs need to train teachers in appropriate classroom management and discipline strategies and to promote children's social and emotional competence and prevent aggression.

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Introduction

School and societal violence is an enormous problem in Jamaica and the wider Caribbean (Krug, Dahlberg, & Mercy, 2002; Meeks Gardner et al., 2005; World Bank, 2003). Children experience violence from a variety of sources, including exposure to violence in the home and community, corporal punishment at home and at school, and witnessing and involvement in violence with their peers.

Children's experiences of violence in the Caribbean

Reports from the Caribbean region indicate that children are exposed to very high levels of violence. In a community study in Guyana, 47% of the children interviewed knew someone who had been killed (Cabral & Speek-Warnery, 2004). In a study in Jamaica, 60% of 9–17-year-old children reported that a family member had been a victim of violence and only 28% of children thought their neighborhood was very safe (Meeks Gardner, Powell, Thomas, & Millard, 2003). One-third of school-going adolescents in the PAHO/WHO 12 Caribbean country study (World Bank, 2003) were concerned about violence in their community and wished to move elsewhere. In Belize, 40% of children felt unsafe on the streets (Rosberg, 2005). Violence and the fear of violence is thus a prominent issue in the lives of Caribbean children.

The use of corporal punishment as a form of discipline is common in the Caribbean region and there is a widespread support for its use (Joseph, 2002; Leo-Rhynie, 1997). Corporal punishment is common not only in the home context but also in schools. In Barbados, 90% of primary school children reported being beaten with an object at school (Anderson & Payne, 1994) while in a survey of 11–12 year olds in Jamaica, 75% of children reported being beaten with an object by teachers (Sammis-Vaughan, Jackson, Ashley, & Lambert, 2000). In a study of 74 primary school teachers from four schools in Kingston and St. Andrew, Jamaica, 80% of the teachers reported that they occasionally or often used corporal punishment as a means of punishment (Pottinger & Nelson, 2004).

Within the Caribbean region, violence perpetrated by children and youths is increasing in incidence. In Jamaica, adolescents aged 13–19 years, predominantly males, are responsible for a quarter of major crimes, including armed robbery, assault, rape, and murder (World Bank, 2003). Violence and aggression among children at school is of increasing concern in many Caribbean countries (Meeks Gardner et al., 2005) and in a study conducted in secondary schools in Jamaica, 61% of children had witnessed violence in their school and 29% of students had caused an injury to persons (Soyibo & Lee, 2000).

Effects of experiencing violence on children's development

Several studies have reported associations between children's experiences of violence and their social, emotional, and behavioral functioning (Osofsky, 1999). The cumulative impact was shown in a recent study in which children who experienced four or more different types of violence were at increased risk for poor mental health outcomes compared to children who experienced fewer types of violence (Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Turner, 2007). Furthermore, the study showed that children experiencing more kinds of violence have worse outcomes than children experiencing multiple episodes of one type of violence. The data on the association between corporal punishment by teachers and child functioning is limited although in a study of Nigerian boys, corporal punishment by teachers predicted child aggression even after controlling for several family and child characteristics including corporal punishment by parents, low parental affection, attributional bias, and poor school achievement (Ani & Grantham-McGregor, 1998).

In addition to studies investigating associations between violence exposure and mental health, there are also a number of studies, primarily from the US, examining associations between children's experiences of violence and their academic achievement. Higher levels of exposure to violence in the community has been found to be associated with a lower grade point average and lower school attendance among 7-year-old children (Hurt, Malmud, Brodsky, & Giannetta, 2001), with a lower IQ and with reading deficits amongst first grade children (Delaney-Black et al., 2002), and with a decrease in school attendance among middle and high school children (Bowen & Bowen, 1999).

Studies investigating the association between aggression among peers and child achievement have focused largely on children's involvement as perpetrators and/or victims and less on children as witnesses. Children's involvement in aggression with peers has been reported to be associated with academic failure in the US (Miles & Stipek, 2006) and in a study of girls aged 13–14 years in Kingston, Jamaica, involvement in fights was associated with poorer academic achievement after controlling for other risk factors for poor achievement (Walker, Grantham-McGregor, Himes, Williams, & Duff, 1998). In a large cross-national study of bullying behavior, conducted in 25 countries, bullies, victims, and bully-victims reported poorer school adjustment than children classified as non-involved (Nansel, Craig, Overpeck, Saluja, & Ruan, 2004).

Evidence of the effect of corporal punishment on academic achievement is conflicting and most of the studies focus on associations between parental physical punishment and achievement, rather than physical punishment by teachers. In a meta-analysis of published research, minimal negative effects of corporal punishment by parents on children's development and academic functioning were reported (Paolucci & Violato, 2004). However, in a longitudinal study in the US, corporal punishment by parents had negative effects on children's academic achievement (Murray & Straus, 2003).

One study examined the association between children's exposure to different types of violence and their academic achievement. In that study, which involved Grade 5 students in the US, children who reported experiencing multiple victimizations (in school, at home, and in the community) also reported earning lower school grades (Holt, Finkelhor, & Kaufman Kantor, 2007).

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