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Research article

Neighborhood crime undermines parenting: Violence in the vicinity of households as a predictor of aggressive discipline

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ABSTRACT

Child discipline is a central component of parent-child interactions. Evidence suggests corporal discipline impairs children's physical, cognitive, and socioemotional development and compromises their future chances, especially since it is more frequently used against at-risk children. Using geocoded data for 1209 children under the age of five and their mothers, this study analyses the relation between the occurrence of crimes in close proximity to households in four major urban municipalities of Colombia and a particularly violent corporal discipline practice: hitting children with objects. Results indicate that exposure to violent crimes, such as homicides and personal injuries, predicts a higher probability of hitting children with objects, even after controlling for a set of individual, family, and neighborhood characteristics. Sensitivity analyses suggest violent crimes are not related to other discipline methods, and less threatening crimes, such as robbery and drug trafficking, are not associated with hitting children with objects. These findings suggest households' walls are permeable, and outside threats may interfere with families' dynamics and well-being. Future directions and implications are discussed.

1. Introduction

Children's contexts play a critical role in their well-being and developmental trajectories. Households, one of the most influential contexts for children's successful development (Walker et al., 2007), are usually thought of as safe places where children are protected from threats. However, recent evidence suggests households' walls are permeable, and outside threats, such as neighborhood poverty, violence, and crime, may interfere with children's development (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; McCoy, Connors, Morris, Yoshikawa, & Friedman-Krauss, 2015), cognitive performance (McCoy, Raver, & Sharkey, 2015; Sharkey, 2010), and emotional processing and regulation (McCoy, Roy, & Raver, 2016).

Inside households' walls children can also suffer from maltreatment, abuse, and neglect. Evidence suggests physical and psychological violence at home, inflicted by main caregivers, is the most prevalent form of violence against children throughout the world (Pinheiro, 2006; Unicef, 2014). In developing countries, on average seven out of ten children in Sub-Saharan Africa, Middle East, and North Africa, and more than half in Latin America are subject to some kind of violent discipline at home (Unicef, 2014). These findings are worrisome; several longitudinal studies and meta-analyses of almost three decades of research have shown physical violence is associated with detrimental outcomes throughout the lifespan: impaired cognitive and socio-emotional development, higher risk for mental problems and substance abuse, more aggressive, delinquent, and antisocial behavior, and academic failure are often cited as consequences of such abuse (Gershoff, 2002; Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016). Some findings also reveal low Socioeconomic Status (SES) parents are more prone to use corporal punishment and other harsh parental discipline methods than higher SES parents (Ryan, Kalil, Ziolo-Guest, & Padilla, 2016), thus affecting at-risk children's prospects and social mobility chances.

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Considering this body of work, the aim of this study is to examine how households' exposure to crime and violence is related to physically aggressive parental discipline in the main urban municipalities of Colombia, a conflict-affected developing country. Particularly, this study analyses the association between objective police reports of crime in close proximity to households (within 100 m, 500 m, and in the neighborhood) and parental usage of an especially harsh discipline method: hitting children younger than five with objects. According to the Colombian Family Welfare Institute (ICBF for its acronym in Spanish), it is still common in Colombia to use cables, belts, whips, wooden spoons, and sticks to hit children when they misbehave. Moreover, according to Colombia's 2015 Demographic and Health Survey (DHS), 34% of mothers disciplined children by hitting them with objects, a percentage that although below 2010 levels (40%) is still very high.

2. Background

Exposure to an environmental stressor like community crime and violence may affect parental discipline methods through two main channels. First, biomedical and psychological research have shown that direct exposure to environmental stressors triggers physiological and psychological processes that directs individuals' attention towards the source of stress; these processes unchain fast and automatic, though prone to error, behavioral responses to cope with potential threats (Davies, Sturge-Apple, Cicchetti, & Cummings, 2007; McEwen & Sapolsky, 1995). Past research has shown that mothers living in crime-ridden communities display an array of distress symptoms and mental health problems (Franco, Pottick, & Huang, 2010; Linares et al., 2001). Parents experiencing high levels of distress may be less sensitive and self-controlled in their responses to children, and child misbehavior may be especially difficult for them to handle (Lynch & Cicchetti, 2002), increasing the likelihood that they rely on physical methods to correct children behavior. Second, neighborhood crime and violence may alter communities' social norms, support and justification for particular violent behaviors, and definitions of discipline and maltreatment; eventually these effects may induce violent behaviors inside households, such as harsher punishment methods (Coulton, Crampton, Irwin, Spilsbury, & Korbin, 2007; Sampson, Morenoff, & Gannon-Rowley, 2002).

Studies have found links between neighborhood stressors, particularly poverty and crime, and child maltreatment. A meta-analysis by Coulton et al. (2007) including 25 studies shows that reported cases of child maltreatment in the United States are far more common in disadvantaged and disorganized neighborhoods. Nonetheless, this meta-analysis points out two limitations of this literature: first, most studies use official reports of child maltreatment, not direct measures of parenting behaviors. Second, the majority of studies aggregate cases of maltreatment and neighborhood characteristics at the neighborhood level, ignoring variance in exposure to violence between families, as well as households' differences that may well explain child maltreatment. Even though some evidence suggests that there are significant between-neighborhood variation in parental warmth (Tendulkar, Buka, Dunn, Subramanian, & Koenen, 2010), studies using variance decomposition have found that differences in punishment strategies between families are greater than between neighborhoods (Molnar, Buka, Brennan, Holton, & Earls, 2003), which motivates analyses that consider variation at a lower level.

Recently, a group of studies have made important contributions using household level data that permits researchers to consider exposure to crime at the community level as well as variation between families. For instance, Zhang and Anderson (2010) found a relation between mothers' self-reported experiences of witnessing or being victims of different forms of community violence and psychologically aggressive parenting towards children younger than 18, even after controlling for a set of individual variables that may affect parenting. In addition, Chen and Lee (2017) found links between self-reported exposure to crime and psychological and physical aggression towards children and adolescents in the United States. Winstok and Straus (2011) found similar results for a national sample of parents and children younger than 18 in Israel, considering subjective perceptions about community insecurity as a predictor of interest. Another study, by Molnar et al. (2003), found links between neighborhood police reports of homicides and corporal punishment using a multilevel approach.

Although these studies have made important contributions to understanding the way negative contexts affect parenting, several limitations must be noted. To begin with, previous studies have used two main approaches to measure exposure to violence within the community: subjective reports of witnessing or being a victim of community violence, and objective police reports at the neighborhood level. Both approaches are prone to certain biases. First, as discussed by McCoy (2013), certain variables that influence subjective reports of exposure to violence or perceptions of insecurity (e.g., depression and anxiety) may simultaneously affect parental practices and discipline methods (i.e., individual reports may be endogenous). In addition, for most studies it is unclear whether reports of witnessing or suffering from a crime refer to events in the vicinity of respondents' households or, for example, in the other extreme of their neighborhood, thus measuring not exposure to violent environments nearby households but direct victimization. Second, the use of reports at the neighborhood level may be problematic in an unequal neighborhood that has safe areas in one end of the neighborhood and a crime hotspot at the other. Using this approach, households living at each extreme of the neighborhood would be considered exposed to the same level of criminality and violence (neighborhood aggregate levels), thus misreporting real exposure levels.

A second limitation relates to the measures used for child maltreatment. As noted by Coulton et al. (2007), most preceding studies have used official reports of child maltreatment; these reports, however, do not necessarily correlate with self-reported and observed measures of maltreatment behaviors, but with differences in social norms and monitoring practices between communities. Furthermore, most studies face biases from not controlling for important confounding variables in their analyses. For instance, no study on the association between parental discipline and community violence has controlled for the way children's caregivers were disciplined by their own parents, an important predictor of discipline strategies (Kaufman & Zigler, 1987; Lansford et al., 2007; Straus & Moynihan, 2001). Other studies (e.g., Zhang & Anderson, 2010) have not included measures of domestic violence, which are also

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