



# Low-income single mothers' community violence exposure and aggressive parenting practices

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## ABSTRACT

This study examined the association between maternal community violence exposure and parenting practices, with a sample of low-income single mothers from the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study (FFCW) and related in-home child survey. Psychologically aggressive and physically aggressive parenting practices were measured with two subscales derived from the Parent–Child Conflict Tactics Scales (CTSPC). Community violence exposure was measured with items indicating being a witness to or victim of community violence. Bivariate analysis indicated that the intensity of community violence exposure was positively associated with both types of aggressive parenting practices. In the multivariate analysis, mothers with moderate and high levels of community violence exposure were 2.1 time and 2.4 times, respectively, more likely to engage in a higher level of physically aggressive parenting, when compared to mothers with no exposure to violence. Such rates were 1.7 and 1.8 times higher with respect to psychologically aggressive parenting practices. The findings highlight the need for expanding research to better understand the association between community violence and the wellbeing of children and families, and suggest the importance of supporting low-income single mothers who have been exposed to community violence through effective parenting programs and other community social services.

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## 1. Introduction

Parenting is deeply rooted in a multi-level ecological system within and outside the family (Abidin, 1992). Because physically aggressive and other inappropriate parenting have been found to impair the social and emotional development of children (Gershoff, 2002), identifying risk factors associated with inappropriate parenting has important practice implications. Nonetheless, such factors have received limited attention, and even fewer studies have investigated social contextual factors related to parenting (Kotchick & Forehand, 2002; Simons, Simons, Burt, Brody, & Cutrona, 2005).

Community violence exposure has been used as an important indicator of social contexts to reflect the extent of community danger or prevalence of community violence (Kotchick, Dorsey, & Heller, 2005; Linares et al., 2001; Pinderhughes, Nix, Foster, & Jones, 2001). Research on community violence exposure has focused primarily on children, and such studies have identified community violence exposure as a serious risk factor associated with aggressive behaviors and other negative developmental outcomes (Aisenberg & Ell, 2005). However, few studies have examined whether parental exposure to violence is associated with aggressive parenting practices, which

previously have been found to impair healthy child development (Gershoff, 2002). This study responds by examining whether low-income single mothers' community violence exposure is associated with their psychologically aggressive parenting and physically aggressive parenting.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Consequences of aggressive parenting

Because of the fundamental impact of parenting on child development, the processes and consequences of parenting practices have been a major focus of family studies (Abidin, 1992; Belsky, 1984). Although aggressive parenting such as corporal punishment is usually not intended to injure children, its lasting adverse impacts on child development have long been a concern. For example, Gershoff (2002) reviewed 88 studies and reported that corporal punishment adversely affected nearly all measured child outcomes. The negative effects include increased aggressive, delinquent, criminal, and antisocial behavior; impaired parent–child relationships and mental health; and engaging in domestic violence and child abuse in later life. Harsh parenting and child abuse are also viewed as a continuum from a minor level to a severe level, in which the minor level of inappropriate parenting may contain the potential of gradually developing into increasingly punitive and abusive parenting (Knutson, DeGarmo, &

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Reid, 2004). It is thus important to examine risk factors both within and outside the family that are associated with psychologically and physically aggressive parenting, so that effective practice intervention strategies can be developed.

## 2.2. Parenting in social contexts

According to ecological theories, human behaviors are rooted in multiple interrelated contextual systems within and outside the family (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Early parenting research primarily focused on contexts within the family, including parent/child characteristics and family social economic status (SES) (Belsky, 1984). Although the importance of out-of-family social contexts on parenting has been addressed conceptually (Abidin, 1992), only limited empirical research attention has been paid to this issue (Kotchick & Forehand, 2002; Simons et al., 2005).

Among existing family studies, the concept of social contexts is primarily reflected by community social economic status (SES), which typically is represented by “objective” indicators retrieved from census data, such as community poverty levels, unemployment rates, and educational levels (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, Klebanov, & Sealander, 1993; Kohen, Leventhal, Dahinten, & McIntosh, 2008; Liu, Lau, Chia-Chen Chen, Dinh, & Su, 2009). For example, Brooks-Gunn et al. (1993) examined the effect of community SES on child development, and found that neighborhood income was positively associated with child academic performance and negatively associated with teenage child bearing. In a national study in Canada, Kohen et al. (2008) found that disadvantageous social contexts, as indicated by community income, education, unemployment, and single parent family levels, increased punitive parenting.

However, because such community SES indicators are primarily derived from census data collected every ten years and focus on limited aspects of the community, the information typically is lagged and can only crudely reflect community social contexts (McDonell, 2007). In addition, these indicators usually are presented at aggregate levels such as census tracts, and cannot reflect individual variances in terms of people’s perceptions of or experiences within their social contexts. Sampson (Sampson, 1991; Sampson, 2003; Sampson, Morenoff, & Gannon-Rowley, 2002; Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997) has been a leading scholar in extending the measurement of social contexts from these “objective” community SES indicators to “subjective” indicators, which primarily refer to respondent perceptions of community social contexts. Although “subjective” indicators may arouse concerns such as biases in reporting, they have the advantage of capturing features of the community in a timely and more comprehensive manner. Family studies have shown an increased interest in applying subjective indicators, which measure perceptions about community features such as community violence, quality of public services, social networks and trust, and physical aspects including building appearance, hygiene, and noise (Eamon, 2002; Kotchick et al., 2005; McDonell, 2007; Pinderhughes et al., 2001; Sampson, 1991; Sampson, 2003; Sampson & Morenoff, 1997). The nature of perceptions of community social contexts also allows researchers to treat these indicators at both the aggregate and individual levels (Sampson, 1991). Recent studies have revealed that these subjectively perceived community social contexts can significantly affect parenting and other family processes (Ceballo & McLoyd, 2002; Eamon, 2002; Kotchick et al., 2005; Linares et al., 2001; McDonell, 2007; Oravec, Koblinsky, & Randolph, 2008; Pinderhughes et al., 2001; Sampson, 1991; White, Roosa, Weaver, & Nair, 2009).

## 2.3. Community violence exposure and parenting

Violence exposure includes being a witness or victim of violence (Aisenberg & Herrenkohl, 2008). Over the past several decades, widespread community violence has aroused serious concerns and has

been viewed as a risk factor impairing childhood social emotional development (Aisenberg & Herrenkohl, 2008). However, most studies have focused on children’s direct exposure to violence and its consequences on their wellbeing. Few studies have examined whether parental exposure to violence affects parenting in ways that subsequently affect child wellbeing (Gershoff, 2002).

Some existing research does imply that community violence exposure negatively affects parenting. For example, using a sample of 368 parents in poor neighborhoods, Pinderhughes, Nix, Foster, and Jones (2001) examined the relationship between parenting and perceived neighborhood danger, as measured by respondent ratings of the frequency of muggings, burglaries, and assaults. They found that perceptions of neighborhood danger were negatively associated with parental warmth and consistency, but not with harsh parenting practices. Using a sample of 262 poor African American single mothers in high crime rate areas, Ceballo and McLoyd (2002) found that individual negative perceptions of community contexts, as measured by a latent variable that included perceived neighborhood quality and other factors, weakened the otherwise positive relationship between social support and parenting of seventh and eighth grade children. Using a sample of 123 low-income, urban, African American single mothers with a 7–15 year child, Kotchick et al. (2005) measured the impact of environmental stress on parenting, based on an individual level latent variable consisting of respondent assessments of community violence, illegal activities, and other factors such as housing conditions and hygiene. The authors found pathways which suggest this environmental measure was negatively associated with positive parenting via parental stress. White et al. (2009) reported that fathers’ perceptions of neighborhood danger were negatively associated with parental warmth via increased depression in a sample of 570 two-parent Mexican American families. Similarly, in a sample of 160 preschool children in high crime rate areas, Linares et al. (2001) found that the combination of parent and child community violence exposure was positively associated with parental distress.

## 2.4. Limitations of existing studies

Although previous studies thus have suggested the importance of negative social contexts on parenting, several limitations are apparent. First, social context measures of previous studies are nearly all latent variables that mix multiple distinct social environmental features in a scale. This makes it difficult to identify the unique effects of specific features of social contexts, which is critical in developing practice implications (Kessler, 1997). Second, most existing studies have used locally collected small samples, which limit the generalizability of the findings. Finally, there has been little research concerning the association between social contexts and the parenting of very young children (Kohen et al., 2008; Linares et al., 2001), although aggressive parenting such as corporal punishment is used most frequently when children are 3–4 years old (Straus & Stewart, 1999).

## 3. Data and methods

### 3.1. Data and sample

Responding to these limitations, this study investigated the effects of community violence exposure on aggressive parenting practices with a sample of low-income single mothers. We used data from the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being (FFCW) wave 3 and the associated Three-Year In-Home Longitudinal Study of Pre-School Aged Children. FFCW is a longitudinal national birth cohort survey. The baseline survey included face-to-face interviews with the mothers of 4898 newborns shortly after they gave birth. The sample was designed to oversample births to unmarried mothers, and three quarters of the surveyed mothers were unmarried at the time of the baseline survey. Fathers reachable in the hospital at the time of the

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