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The Impact of Gun Violence on African American Adolescents in Baltimore City, Maryland

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COUN 6785: Social Change in Action:
Prevention, Consultation, and Advocacy

Social Change Portfolio

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OVERVIEW

Keywords: African American males, Baltimore, gun violence, gun accessibility, public health issue, mental health, prevalence, risks/protective factors, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, prevention, Nisbett's cultural cognitive theory, community programs, diversity, ethics, advocacy.

The Impact of Gun Violence on African American Adolescents in Baltimore City, Maryland

Goal Statement: The aim of this social change portfolio is to prevent gun violence in African American males in Baltimore City, Maryland, through increasing awareness in schools and communities.

Significant Findings: African American males are perpetrators and victims of gun violence at a substantially high rate in Baltimore City, MD. They are disproportionately affected in socioeconomically disadvantaged communities" (Shulman et al., 2021). According to County Health Rankings & Roadmaps (2018), data from 2016 to 2020 revealed 44 firearm-related deaths per 100,000 people in Baltimore City, Maryland, compared to 12 people per 100,000 in the whole state of Maryland and 12 people per 100,000 in the United States. Easy access to illegal weapons, drug turf wars, and low self-efficacy contribute to delinquency, suicides, and homicides of young Black males in Baltimore. Because of its lethality and unpredictability, it seems probable that exposure to gun violence may have uniquely harmful psychological effects" (Shulman et al., 2021). Examining African American males' social-ecological relationships can help determine what interventions and strategies would be the most effective in bringing awareness to gun violence prevention in inner cities. Nisbett's cultural cognitive theory examines the role of culture and how it affects the intergenerational transmission of violence

(Kim, 2012). Nesbitt's theory can help practitioners understand that some children may become perpetrators of violence through the intergenerational transmission of their parents. Promising Practices Network (2014) states that evidenced-based prevention programs like Big Brothers Big Sisters, located in Baltimore, have successfully diverted young Black males from engaging in violence and severe conduct problems.

Objectives/Strategies/Interventions/Next Steps:

The objectives of this portfolio are to assess the impact of gun violence on African American males in Baltimore City, MD. To determine how social-ecological systems assist in observing how a child's development is affected through relationship interaction in the different systems. To determine how Nisbett's cultural cognitive theory role of culture affects the intergenerational transmission of violence. To assess the outcome of evidence-based youth prevention programs of Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS). To explain institutional, community, and public policy barriers and advocacy to preventing gun violence in African American males in urban areas.

INTRODUCTION

The Impact of Gun Violence on African American Adolescents in Baltimore City, Maryland

In today's society, many issues need to be resolved. Gun violence is a growing epidemic that has far-reaching effects on all communities, particularly young people in inner cities. "Gun violence is a tragic and costly public health problem in the United States, one that disproportionately affects young men – especially young Black men living in socioeconomically disadvantaged communities" (Shulman et al., 2021). Inner city communities continue to encompass serious mental health challenges. "Given the prevalence of gun violence, it is critical

to understand its impacts on adolescents and young adults, over and above other forms of community violence. Because of its lethality and unpredictability, it seems probable that exposure to gun violence may have uniquely harmful psychological effects” (Shulman et al., 2021). In Baltimore, African American adolescents, predominately males, feel compelled to carry guns due to involvement in gangs, selling illicit drugs, and participating in serious acts of violence that come with competing with rival gangs over turf wars. Easy access to guns increases their use in acts of delinquency, theft, carjacking, assault, and homicide.

PART 1: SCOPE AND CONSEQUENCES

The Impact of Gun Violence on African American Adolescents in Baltimore City, Maryland

Baltimore City adolescents are being gunned down at an alarming rate, with violence often occurring near or in school area properties. According to County Health Rankings & Roadmaps (2018), data from 2016 to 2020 revealed 44 firearm-related deaths per 100,000 people in Baltimore City, Maryland, compared to 12 people per 100,000 in the whole state of Maryland and 12 people per 100,000 in the United States. Firearm-related fatalities are a public health issue because they are largely preventable. “In 2020, 79% of all homicides and 53% of all suicides involved firearms. From 2019 to 2020, the firearm homicide rate increased by about 35%, and the firearm suicide rate stayed high. The firearm homicide rate in 2020 was the highest recorded in over 25 years. The largest increase in firearm homicides was among Black people (39%)” (CDC, 2022). “Male youth are over four times more likely than their female peers to die by firearms. From 2018 to 2021, the rate of deaths due to firearms increased by 53% among male youth but remained lower and stable among female youth. Firearm-related injury rates were also substantially higher for male youth than females (25.9 vs. 4.5 per 100,000). During the pandemic, the largest increases in gun assault deaths across racial and ethnic groups were among

Black youth (80% increase from 556 deaths in 2019 to 1,000 deaths in 2021) and Hispanic youth (46% increase from 195 deaths in 2019 to 284 deaths in 2021). Additionally, although suicide deaths by firearm are highest among White youth, the largest percentage increase of these deaths were among Black youth, 77% increase from 60 deaths in 2019 to 106 deaths in 2021” (Panchal, 2022). Gun violence affects underserved urban communities like Baltimore City, with a high concentration of African American children and adolescents who are substantially more at risk than white children and teens of the same age to die by gun homicide.

Adolescents’ exposure to gun violence causes mental health problems such as aggression, anxiety, and depression, as well as poorer social relations, academic outcomes, and increased likelihood of perpetrating crime (Shulman (2021). They also tend to have negative peer relationships and display conduct disorder in schools. Adolescents who experience gun violence perpetrated in or near their schools may suffer from PTSD and may lose educational instruction by staying home due to fear. “Boys who consistently affiliated with delinquent peers and exhibited high or increasing conduct problems during elementary school years were at highest risk for carrying a gun during adolescence” (Beardslee et al., 2018). Access to guns increases the chance of physical impairments or death during conflicts. Also, completing suicide is more attainable with the means to carry it out. “For decades, gun violence has been the leading cause of death and disability among 15–34-year-old Black males” (Smith et al., 2020). The effects of adolescent involvement with the judicial system can cause even more significant economic hardship for families who must obtain attorneys, pay restitution and or lose time from work for their child’s court appearances. The aim of this social change portfolio is to prevent gun violence in African American males in Baltimore City, Maryland, through increasing awareness in schools and communities.

PART 2: SOCIAL-ECOLOGICAL MODEL

The Impact of Gun Violence on African American Adolescents in Baltimore City, Maryland

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory explains how a child's development is affected by his interactions with his immediate environment (family, school, and peers) and his broader social environment (community, society, culture) which he explains through his model of five systems: The microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, the macrosystem, and the chronosystem (Guy-Evans, 2020). By studying social-ecological systems, we can observe how a child's development is affected through relationship interaction in the different systems.

Examining African American males' social-ecological relationships can help determine what interventions and strategies would be the most effective in bringing awareness to gun violence prevention in inner cities.

Youths can experience violence as perpetrators, victims, or witnesses. No matter how much violence is experienced, it profoundly affects the individual, relationships, community, and society. Risk factors do not necessarily cause a young person to engage in violent acts, but it does indicate a higher possibility of involvement. There are protective factors that mitigate risk factors allowing adolescents to lead successful, fulfilling lives. Guy-Evans, (2020) describes Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory as individual relationships in the microsystem being the most influential and involving school, family, neighbors, friends, and work. The mesosystem is the second level of relationships that functions independently but is interconnected with the microsystem environments; for example, "the mesosystem encompasses the interactions between the child's microsystems, such as the interactions between the child's parents and teachers or between school peers and siblings" (Guy-Evans, 2020). When the teacher and parent get along, it positively influences the child's development, whereas a negative relationship fosters a

negative influence on the child's development. "Prior studies have provided empirical evidence that teacher support and good child-school relationship are protective factors for adolescents' behavioral and mental health outcomes" (Moon et al., 2010). The same concept applies to other environments in the micro/mesosystems.

Risk factors for adolescents with a propensity for violence tend to experience bullying at school, parental unemployment, witnessed violence in the home, or an immediate family member being sentenced to prison. "Additionally, several research studies have shown that factors such as family closeness, school closeness, peer closeness, mental health issues, and substance abuse affect adolescent violence." (Moon et al., 2010). Protective factors offset risk factors allowing adolescents to flourish in their development, causing them to be less likely to be involved in violent acts. The CDC (2023) asserts that having a parent or trusted adult in the home to assist with everyday challenges and stressors, like being involved in school sports or other extracurricular activities or graduating from high school, are protective factors for adolescents who may be at risk for involvement in violent crimes. "Additional social support in the school context can come from peers who disapprove of violence. In the National Youth Survey, respondents who reported associating with peers who disapproved of violence reported less violent behavior by age" (Moon et al., 2010). Additionally, communities that support education, economic opportunities, and recreational activities act as a deterrent to youth's involvement in delinquent acts (CDC, 2023).

At the exosystem level, the child is not directly influenced by their neighborhoods, parents' workplaces, parental friends, and the mass media, but nevertheless, they can be affected. These environments are where social interactions occur, and risk factors are the characteristics of

these settings associated with becoming victims or perpetrators of violence. Protective factors would focus on improving the physical and social environment in these settings (e.g., by creating safe places where people live, learn, work, and play) and by addressing other conditions that give rise to violence in communities (e.g., neighborhood poverty, residential segregation, and instability, high density of alcohol outlets) (SAMHSA, 2023). An indirect influence on a child would be constant drive-by shootings in and around the neighborhood, which makes the child feel that the only way to protect himself and his family is to obtain a gun.

“The macrosystem is a component of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory that focuses on how cultural elements affect a child’s development, such as socioeconomic status, wealth, poverty, and ethnicity” (Guy-Evans, 2020). This level differs from the others in that the influences of individual environments are non-existent due to the child being associated with a recognized society and culture. The risk factors would depend upon a society that encourages or inhibits violence. Factors such as health, economics, and education are social injustices and inequalities that are influential in fostering an atmosphere of violence. To counteract those negative influences, “efforts to promote societal norms that protect against violence as well as strengthen household financial security, education, and employment opportunities, and other policies that affect the structural determinants of health” (SAMHSA).

The chronosystem, Bronfenbrenner’s final ecological system, consists of all the environmental changes that occur over the lifetime that influence development, including fundamental life changes and past events. These periods in life include normal (e.g., graduating from high school) and non-normative events such as premature deaths or parental substance abuse.

Every child deserves a safe, stable environment. Bronfenbrenner’s ecological system gives us the framework to understand how a child’s development is affected by his interactions

with his immediate environment and broader social environment. From this, we can recognize and replace risk factors with protective factors to help reduce the violent environments of African American males living in the inner city of Baltimore, MD.

PART 3: THEORIES OF PREVENTION

The Impact of Gun Violence on African American Adolescents in Baltimore City, Maryland

Nisbett's cultural cognitive theory was chosen to prevent gun violence among African American males in Baltimore City, Maryland, by increasing awareness in schools and communities. Typically, practitioners explore an individual's relationships with their immediate and social environment without delving deeper into how their cultural background plays a part in their decisions. Nisbett's cultural cognitive theory examines the role of culture and how it affects the intergenerational transmission of violence. "The intergenerational transmission of violence refers to the notion that abusive parents themselves might have been abused in their childhood, and that childhood victims of violence are likely to become perpetrators of violence as well as victims in their later life" (Kim, 2012). The vicious cycle of poverty and racism serves to undervalue individuals and families of marginalized high-crime communities. McCrea et al. (2019) note that the US legacy of race-based genocide, enslavement-engendered historical trauma, and ongoing racism continues to affect current generations' inner lives profoundly.

Research Support for Nisbett's Cultural Cognitive Theory

Nisbett's cultural cognitive theory suggests that culture plays a large part in how an individual perceives and interacts with violence. According to Nisbett, "differences in people's attitudes and beliefs, and even their values and preferences, might not be a matter merely of

different inputs and teachings, but rather an inevitable consequence of using different tools [cognitive process] to understand the world” (Kim, 2012). Thought processes influence reasoning, which governs how individuals identify with their cultural differences and behaviors. Nesbitt posits that caregiver socialization of their children is passed down from generation to generation. His theory on intergenerational mechanisms is akin to a system of thought. In this system, violence is endorsed and intergenerationally transmitted from caregiver to child. “Socialized into the system of thought endorsing violence, children can become more sensitive to an act of provocation. This provocation can evoke more intense anger and prime violent responses to the encountered stimuli, and children may eventually use violence as a primary means to resolve conflicts” (Kim, 2012). Nesbitt’s cognitive theory may appear simplistic and not without limitations. Nevertheless, it touts culture as essential to cognitive processing and decision-making. When incorporated with other determinants of violent behavior (i.e., micro, meso, and macro systems), it can give additional insight into causes and preventions of violence in adolescent perpetrators. Nesbitt’s cultural cognitive theory is appropriate because children make decisions based on how they are socialized and what is modeled in their surroundings. Caregivers process thoughts transmitted to their children from generation to generation until someone breaks the cycle. When children are in high-poverty and high-crime communities of color, they are in a culture with the accepted notion that violence begets violence; the assertion is that is how they will conduct their lives.

Existing Evidence-Based Program for Target Population

Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) is a program that matches non-related mentors with children to promote positive development and social responsibility. For over a century, BBBS has been composed of 440 agencies that served more than 220,000 nationwide in 2005.

(Promising Practices Network, 2014). Youth can benefit significantly from being involved with Big Brothers Big Sisters. Fortunately, one of their chapters is in Baltimore, MD. They have two programs, one is community-based, and the other is school-based. Based on the study by Herrera et al. (2007), this program received a "proven" rating for the indicators of juveniles not engaging in violent behavior or displaying serious conduct problems (PPN, 2014). One of the key findings from research on the BBBS program concerning antisocial behaviors, compared with control group youths, BBBS youths were 46 percent less likely to initiate illegal drug use (PPN, 2014). This is pointed out because one of the main reasons African American youths in Baltimore carry guns is to protect neighborhood turf from rival drug dealers. Youths from underprivileged neighborhoods who connect with mentors of different cultures and privileges can be exposed to alternative ways of making money and gain positive perspectives on handling conflict. In line with Nesbitt's cultural cognitive theory, these mentored children will have a different cultural cognitive process and system of thought from their caregivers. Additionally, they will have opportunities to break the intergenerational transmission of violence by socializing with mentors who may represent diverse cultures from their own.

PART 4: DIVERSITY AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The Impact of Gun Violence on African American Adolescents in Baltimore City, Maryland

Homicide has been the leading cause of death for African Americans between the ages of 15 and 34 for the past decade and the second leading cause of death for Latinos (Reese & Vera, 2007). As mentioned previously, gun violence involving African American young males is prevalent in Baltimore City, MD. They are also over-represented as perpetrators and victims of violent crimes in other large cities in the U. S. The leading cause of death is assault, with the

Black race having a value of 18,000 compared to a total value of 14,800 for Asian, White, and Hispanic (County Health Rankings & Roadmaps (2018)). They suffer barriers to health and mental care services due to racism, discrimination, and lack of culturally responsive interventions. “The views of African American adolescent males regarding their health care can be examined more directly. Because of their developmental stage, race/ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic circumstances, and experiences with medical care, it is possible that inner-city African American adolescent males have negative views of doctors and the healthcare system and that they face a range of obstacles when seeking care” (Perry et al., 2010). Between 2016 and 2020 in Baltimore City, 200 deaths per 100,000 people occurred due to injuries, such as homicides, suicides, motor vehicle crashes, and poisonings (County Health Rankings & Roadmaps (2018)). For prevention efforts to be successful, they must be culturally relevant and evidence-based to meet the needs of diverse, marginalized populations.

Mechanisms to Increase the Cultural Relevance of a Prevention Program

Due to ethnic and racial health disparities, there is a pressing need to intervene with specific populations, such as African American adolescent males. The solutions to the challenges of incorporating cultural relevance into prevention programs are not an easy task to undergo. Still, it is not a formidable undertaking for mental health and prevention practitioners. Challenges related to providing culturally relevant and culturally competent interventions are that specific conceptual and methodological procedures are not well articulated, and appropriate evaluation methods that may allow for more excellent empirical support for such efforts are not utilized. (Reese & Vera, 2007). There is an absence of cross-validation with ethnic minority populations. An additional challenge for some prevention scientists is to meet a particular community’s needs and satisfy federally funded research methods.

Several mechanisms are developmentally appropriate for African American males and have positive developmental outcomes that negate disparities in prevention programs. Firstly, programs should be personalized to make them more culturally relevant. “Reese & Vera (2007) “would argue that the core elements of successful, culturally relevant prevention can include scientific soundness balanced against interventions where the development, implementation, and evaluation goals are responsive to the targeted community.” Secondly, for prevention efforts to be successful, participants must have an active voice in all aspects of the design, implementation, and evaluation. (Reese & Vera 2007). Thirdly, counseling psychologists should expand their professional work to include efforts beyond traditional activities such as counseling and psychotherapy. Specifically, they should provide culturally relevant and competent services in advocacy, prevention, and outreach events. (Reese & Vera 2007). These mechanisms above are essential but not exhaustive in providing developmentally appropriate and culturally relevant program interventions for adolescent males of color. Baltimore youths would benefit from the program Choices, which has been proven to be a culturally relevant prevention program that promotes positive youth development and enhances social competencies and academic skills (Reese & Vera, 2007).

Ethical Considerations in Prevention Programming for African American Adolescent Males

Clinical mental health counselors must be culturally competent and adhere to several ethical considerations in offering a cultural prevention program. Specifically standard 2. c. Developmental and Cultural Sensitivity, counselors communicate information developmentally and culturally appropriate (ACA, 2014). This is important when explaining informed consent and involving participants in a prevention program's planning stage. An interpreter or translator

may be needed to assist the client. These service providers must be aware and sign off on client confidentiality in counseling sessions, which aligns with standard B.1.c. Respect for Confidentiality Counselors protects the confidential information of prospective and current clients. Counselors disclose information only with appropriate consent or with legal or ethical justification (ACA, 2014). Standard A.7.a. Advocacy, when appropriate, counselors advocate at individual, group, institutional, and societal levels to address potential barriers and obstacles that inhibit access and the growth and development of clients (ACA, 2014). This standard supports the aforementioned third mechanism of counselors going beyond traditional services by expanding their efforts to include advocacy, prevention, and community outreach. ACA, (2014) standard C.2. Professional Competence C.2.a. Boundaries of Competence Counselors should only practice within their scope of training. The expectation is that multicultural counseling competency has been fulfilled across all counseling specialties and that counselors gain knowledge, personal awareness, sensitivity, dispositions, and skills pertinent to being a culturally competent counselor working with a diverse client population. Standard E.5.b. Cultural Sensitivity Counselors recognize that culture affects how clients' problems are defined and experienced. Clients' socioeconomic and cultural experiences are considered when diagnosing mental disorders. This is especially important for African American males who do not seek mental health services due to robust belief systems against its benefits.

PART 5: ADVOCACY

The Impact of Gun Violence on African American Adolescents in Baltimore City, Maryland

“The Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC) provide counselors with a framework to implement multicultural and social justice competencies into

counseling theories, practices, and research. Included in its four developmental domains are: 1) counselor self-awareness, (2) client worldview, (3) counseling relationship, and (4) counseling and advocacy interventions” (MSJCC, 2015). Counselors should advocate for their clients at the institutional, community, and public policy levels to successfully effect social change. The social-ecological model provides a multilevel framework to help counselors understand the developmental domains of counseling individuals and social justice advocacy interventions. (MSJCC, 2015). Within the first three domains, aspirational competencies comprise attitudes and beliefs, knowledge, skills, and actions. These domains are further broken down into marginalized/privileged counselors and marginalized/privileged clients. Counseling advocacy and interventions are the fourth domain that explains how privileged and marginalized counselors should intervene with and on behalf of clients at the intrapersonal, interpersonal, institutional, community, public policy, and international/global levels. This paper will focus on institutional, community, and public policy barriers to preventing gun violence in African American males in urban areas.

Institutional Advocacy

Advocacy competence is the ability, understanding, and knowledge to carry out advocacy ethically and effectively (Toporek et al., 2009). Poverty is one of the varied reasons Baltimore’s adolescent males are frequently involved in gun violence. A large majority of African American males come from single-family households headed by their moms, who may be receiving welfare. They see themselves as breadwinners when their mom cannot financially sustain the family. Guns are used as a source of protection while selling drugs on community street corners. African American males experience a barrier to legal income due to self-efficacy and a lack of

employment skills and program funding. Counselors can advocate for employment opportunities on a school/community level. The counselor could collaborate with the school board on curriculums geared toward employment skills readiness. Intervention is more effective when all stakeholders are involved in finding a solution.

Community/ Public Policy Advocacy

Baltimore has a summer Youth Works program, but not all interested youths are hired due to funding. Counselors can also work with city officials to obtain more financial resources for youth participation and possibly year-round employment. Moreover, a counselor could work with social services on a welfare-to-work program to increase mom's income. The counselor's implementation of social advocacy is beneficial in removing systemic barriers experienced by marginalized clients within social institutions (MSJCC, 2015).

Counselors seek to engage in social action to alter the local, state, and federal laws and policies that benefit privileged clients at the expense of marginalized clients (MSJCC, 2015). A significant question to assert is how these guns are getting into the hands of minors. Too many illegal guns on the street are a national and local problem. It is a crisis when they get into the hands of violent young people. Adolescents are putting together "ghost guns" with instructions gained from the internet and using them to maim and murder. "Statistics suggest that age and race/ethnicity also impact risks for firearm morbidity and mortality, yet race/ethnicity, as an important dimension, has received less attention in the mass media. "Some leaders within the African American community, including health care professionals and political frontrunners, have expressed their concerns regarding firearm violence among African Americans. In an editorial by Cornwell, African Americans in positions of responsibility were urged to speak out

about the crippling effects of firearm violence” (Payton et al., 2015). Counselors realize that when a barrier or problem is complex, it must be addressed on the social/political level. Social/political advocacy focuses on recognizing when a client or client community's problem must be addressed at a policy or legislative level and advocating for change within those areas (Toporek et al., 2009). At this level, the counselor can advocate with or without client/community participation due to recognizing that blatant injustices are at play. Toporek et al. (2009) identified legislators as the top three benefits of supporting various firearm violence prevention legislation and the top three barriers: The benefits include would reduction in the level of violence in the African American community (81 %), it would result in African Americans feeling safer in their communities (66 %), and it would reduce premature mortality in the African American community (59 %). The top 3 barriers: It would be a waste of time because fellow legislators would not support such legislation (34 %), uncertainty regarding which legislation would be effective (25 %), and the likelihood of being targeted for defeat by the NRA (21 %). In that vein, counselors would find that much social-political advocacy is needed at the public arena level regarding getting guns out of the hands of African American youths.

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