

Emotional Problems Among Underrepresented Adolescents:

Community Violence and School Climate

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### **Abstract**

Latinx adolescents experience community violence (CV) at disproportionate rates (Rubens et al., 2018) in comparison to other ethnic-racial groups (e.g., White, Asian American). Of concern, CV is associated with numerous emotional problems (e.g., depressive symptoms, trauma symptoms) among adolescents. Fortunately, various factors such as positive school climate aspects (e.g., safety) have been identified in reducing the effects of CV on adolescents' emotional well-being (Wang & DeGo, 2015). Studies suggest school climate aspects can buffer the effects of CV for youth (Ozer & Weinstein, 2010); however, little research has examined these associations among Latinx adolescents. Therefore, this study will explore the associations between CV and emotional problems, and it will examine whether two aspects of school climate (i.e., safety and bonding) are protective against the effect of CV on Latinx adolescents' emotional problems. Participants comprised a community sample of Latinx adolescents (N=457; 39% female) attending an urban public-school district (grades 9th-12th). It is hypothesized that a positive association between CV and emotional problems will be found; it is expected that school climate (i.e., safety and bonding) will reduce the effect CV has on Latinx adolescents' emotional problems. Implications for school-based preventive interventions to help Latinx adolescents manage CV will be discussed along with future directions for research.

## Emotional Problems Among Underrepresented Adolescents:

### Community Violence and School Climate

Community violence exposure among adolescents is a major concern (Rubens, Gudino, Michel, Fite, & Johnson-Motoyama, 2018). Research suggests approximately 38% to about 90% of youth are exposed to community violence, with Latinx youth being among one the highest percentages to experience such exposure (Rubens et al., 2018). Studies show neighborhoods with high poverty rates seem to have higher documented rates of community violence. Almost 30% of Latinxs are living below the poverty line in the United States (Rubens et al., 2018); that's about 10% more than the rest of the total population (Lawton, & Gerdes, 2014). Previous research suggests that school climate, specifically school safety and school bonding, can reduce the negative effects of community violence on youth's psychological outcomes such as depression, stress, anxiety, and other emotional problems (Lester and Cross, 2015). When it comes to academic settings, studies show that positive community promoting factors has been linked to positive emotional health compared to academic settings where poor community climate exists (Wang & Deogo, 2016). In addition, school safety helps promote healthy emotional well-being, and lowers emotional distress (Wang et al., 2016). According to literature, Latinx adolescents over all are a high-risk population to community violence, but positive community climate in an academic setting might be a strategic way to buffer the effects community violence has among this population.

While there exists much research on community violence in relation to emotional problems among Latinx adolescents, not many studies have examined how school bonding and school safety could protect Latinx adolescents from community violence. Due to the lack of research on this specific topic, this study will strive to identify and understand the connection between these factors; how school climate buffers emotional problems, specifically the problems that Latinx adolescents face as a result of community stress exposure (community violence). Thus, this study will answer the following questions: does community violence influence emotional problems among Latinx adolescents, and how does school climate (i.e., school safety and school bonding) protect against the impact of community violence. Given various factors in the Latinx community, it is expected that there will be a positive association between community/family stress and emotional problems. Additionally, due to various literature about school climate and its effects on students, it is expected that school safety and school bonding will reduce the effect of community violence on Latinx adolescents' emotional problems.

### **Community Violence**

Community violence is widely classified from two broad categories of witnessing community violence and community violence victimization; with violence victimization being the primary point of view as it is the most common (Gaias, Johnson, White, Pettigrew & Dumka, 2019). Research on community violence has posited that unlike abuse within the family that is kept private, community violence is something that is typically discussed openly. This can result in effects that even children who do not directly witness violence can form their own mental imagery of the event and thus be

impacted in similar ways to those directly victimized (Margolin, 2000). Community violence behaviors include, but are not limited to being beaten, attacked, witnessing and/or experiencing gun violence, gang or drug violence. Compared to children and adults, adolescents continue to be the age group who experience the highest rates of community violence victimization (Rasmussen, Aber, & Bhana, 2004). Studies found that 23% of adolescents have reported being both a victim and witness to community violence (Aisenberg & Ell, 2005). While other studies have reported from 50% to 96% of urban children have reported witnessing at least one act of community violence (Aisenberg et al., 2005). It is apparent that adolescents are among the most at risk to community violence victimization, but urban adolescents are at even more risk.

According to a study examining neighborhood violence, data showed 28% of Latinx adolescents were threatened, 14% robbed, 10% beaten up, and 8% shot (Rasmussen, Aber, & Bhana, 2004). Further, when it came to witnessing violence, 90% of Latinx adolescents heard gunshots, 79% witnessed a beating, 46% saw shootings, and 26% witnessed a stabbing (Rasmussen et al., 2004). Overall, an average of more than 50% (3 out of 4 student adolescents) reported high levels of community violence exposure and direct victimization (Aisenberg, Ayón & Orozco-Figueroa, 2008). As Latinx adolescents continue to experience and witness these traumatic violent events, serious consequences can emerge. Overall, studies show community violence having negative impacts among Latinx adolescents at high rates, but studies also indicate several factors may help buffer the negative emotional and psychological effects community violence creates towards these adolescents.

### **Emotional Problems**

The exposure to community violence for all adolescents regardless of race and ethnic group are related to various psychological issues and many of these psychological issues are emotional issues (Epstein-Ngo, Maurizi, Bregman, & Ceballo, 2013). A study focused on community violence among inner-city adolescents links emotional issues to community violence exposure and many of these emotional effects are found to have long lasting (Cooley-Quille, Boyd, Frantz, Walsh, 2001) and short-term consequences (Gaias et al., 2019). In addition, community violence has been associated with long-term mental health problems (Gaias et al., 2019). Research implies the modality or type of violence exposure may cause the emotional impact to vary (Cooley-Quille et al., 2001). Higher severeness of exposure to community violence exhibit significantly higher rates of distress compared to those with less exposure (Cooley-Quille et al., 2001). Although the distress varies, the impact is still present for all victims.

Some psychological issues that emerge as a result of community violence among adolescents include, but are not limited to: “hopelessness, depressive symptoms, trauma symptoms, and internalizing symptoms” (Epstein-Ngo et al., 2013). Anxiety has commonly been linked to a common emotional impact of community violence; out of the various anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) has been widely recognized as being an impact (physiologically, behaviorally, and cognitively) due to its natural response following a stressful situation (Cooley-Quille et al., 2001). Adolescents may also experience other emotional problems such as emotional habituation. Emotional habituation can be defined as the continuous exposure to community violence eventually being perceived as “normal”, potentially

making the adolescent emotionally numb to future similar stressful situations (Fowler, Tompsett, Braciszewski, Jacques-Tiura, & Baltes, 2009). Emotional habituation could impact adolescents emotionally, but also affect their behavior in a negative way. Moreover, literature has suggested that emotional reactivity has been linked to community violence exposure (Heleniak, King, Monahan, McLaughlin, 2017). Emotional reactivity can be defined as “involuntary and usually overly intense reaction to an external emotional stimulus, which often leads to feeling victimized by your emotions” (Desert Alchemy, 2018). In other words, depending on your experience, your emotions may increase in intensity or can randomly spring up making you feel unbalanced, confused, or helpless (Desert Alchemy, 2018). In addition, as a result of community violence, adolescents have been identified to aggressive and conduct behavior, and at risk for substance and dependency abuse (Aisenberg et al., 2005). Literature shows us that the impact of community violence has a diverse impact on its victims, and the results may also vary in severity.

### **School Safety & School Bonding**

The school climates of focus will include school safety and school bonding. The term school safety suggests students are safe from violence, bullying, harassment, and substance abuse (National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments, 2019). The term *school bonding* has been used by researchers to address the concept of school connectedness: an academic environment in which the students believe and feel as if the adults at their school care about their wellbeing, their academic learning and everything else as an individual (Association for Supervision and Curriculum

Development, 2019). For the purpose of this study, the word *school bonding* will be used as a replacement for connectedness as they both communicate the same thing.

Recent studies suggest that an unsafe feeling at school may be an important determinant of mental health problems (i.e., emotional problems) (Nijs, Bun, Tempelaar, Wit, Burger, Plevier, Boks, 2013). Evidence tells us adolescents who feel safe in their school environment have better and overall a more positive psychological outcome (Nijs et al., 2013). Not only does school safety among adolescents create an overall positive outcome emotionally, but school safety has also demonstrated to act as a moderator of community violence exposure (Gaias et al., 2019). School safety can be alluded to violence, aggression, and victimization a student faces, or whether the student feels the presence of support from the staff/faculty when they are struggling with personal issues, bullying, harassment, etc (Wang et al., 2016). Such examples that consider the safety of students include whether students know others who drink alcohol at school, have seen weapons at school, know where to find drugs at school, overall feel safe at school or whether they can count on the adults at school to make sure they are safe in their academic setting. School bonding is illustrated when a student experiences a sense of acceptance, inclusion, and belonging (Wang et al., 2016); this reflects on the institution's ability to give the students a sense of identification among the school population to become integral members of the school (Wang et al., 2016). Students have also been found to be more likely to report unsafe situations when the school has certain traits that school bonding portrays such as a sense of belonging (Wang et al., 2016). In other words, if the students feel a sense of belonging and bond with those at



school, they are more likely to express their concerns and/or problems with adults at school due to their comfortableness in the environment.

According to a study about school climate and mental and emotional wellbeing, feeling safe, connected, and having peer support at school were all notable foreseeable factors when it came to mental wellbeing (Lester & Cross, 2015). Specifically, the most significant factor against depression and anxiety was peer support, while the most significant factor against stress was feeling safe and connected at school (Lester & Cross, 2015). Overall, safety and connectedness were significant factors for all emotional difficulties (Lester & Cross, 2015).

## **Methods**

Participants were a total of 457 (38.5% female) Latinx adolescents who were in grades 9-12 ( $M = 7.47$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ) from an urban Los Angeles high-school district. The youth in the sample are part of a larger study that was collected as part of a partnership between an urban Los Angeles high-school district and UCLA, to evaluate school climate. The data collected was part of a self-reported survey. A secondary data analysis was conducted using variable measures: community violence, emotional problems, school bonding and school safety which were taken from original survey variables in order to ask the primary research questions.

### *Community violence*

The Urban Stressful Life Events Scale (Attar, Guerra & Tolan, 1994) composes a listing of stressful life events indicating if a participant has experienced a traumatic event in the past year. A total of 5 items made up the sample items for community violence ( $\alpha: .574$ ) for traumatic exposure on adolescents. Using a dichotomous scale with options 1 (no)

and 2 (yes), adolescents were given questions (e.g., “During the last year, have you seen anyone beaten, shot or really hurt by someone?”) indicating whether they have or have not experienced a certain life event.

### *Emotional Problems*

The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire scale (SDQ; Goodman 1997) is a brief emotional and behavioral screening. Five items from the SDQ scale made up the assessment of Emotional Problems ( $\alpha$ : .688) which assessed the adolescents’ emotional and behavioral actions or experiences. Adolescents were given questions (e.g., “I am often unhappy, depressed or tearful.”) using a dichotomous scale with options 1 (no) and 2 (yes).

### *School Bonding*

School bonding ( $\alpha$ : .688) was utilizing items adapted from school tools with a total of 8 items assessing the feeling of connectedness and feeling of importance in the school environment. Using a four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree), youth reported how strongly they agreed with the statements provided (e.g., “This school is a warm and caring place”) within the present school year.

### *School Safety*

School safety ( $\alpha$ : .833) was assessed using a total of 5 items that were adapted from school tools. The items let adolescents report how safe they generally felt in their school environment (e.g., “I feel safe at school”). Participants were given a four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree), higher items indicating a higher sense of safety.

## **Results**

In running two-way analysis, CV was positively associated with emotional problems. The regression of emotional problems CV and school bonding did not yield a significant two-way interaction. However, there was a statistically significant positive association between CV and emotional problems and there was also a negative association between school bonding and emotional problems. There was a statistically significant interaction between CV and school safety. Simple slopes indicated that CV was positively associated with emotional problems for adolescents who reported low school safety, but CV was not associated with emotional problems for youth that reported high school safety.

### **Conclusions/Implications**

Results appear to be consistent with literature among Latinx adolescents stating, the higher reports of CV, the more emotional problems they reported. Findings for adolescents who reported CV and school safety were found to have a significant interaction. In addition, consistent with recent studies indicating an unsafe feeling at school may be an important determinant of emotional problems (Nijs, et al., 2013). Studies also demonstrated school safety to act as a moderator of CV exposure (Gaias et al., 2019). Other studies with ethnically different adolescents who were exposed to CV have similar findings: positive school climate (e.g., school safety) was strongly correlated with lower emotional problems (O'Donnell et al., 2009). Results show school bonding did not protect against the effect of CV on emotional problems. Research shows school bonding has a greater effect with protecting against engaging in violent behavior and substance abuse rather than emotional problems (Gaias et al., 2019). Given what we know, examining CV exposure among high-risk populations (e.g., Latinx

adolescents) is important for informing assessment and intervention strategies in academic settings that will provide school safety.

**Significance:**

The exposure of community violence has become a significant problem for the public's health; it has been significant enough to have reached epidemic proportions (Cooley-Quille et al., 1995). It has also been clear that community violence is most prevalent to adolescents compared to children and adults, specifically towards underrepresented, urban, adolescent populations (Rubens et al., 2018). As literature shows, community violence impacts the emotional health of Latinx adolescents dramatically, with some of the most common effects being depression, post-traumatic stress (PTSD), anxiety, etc (Lester and Cross, 2015). There are various studies on community violence and the impact it has on many underrepresented populations, including Latinx adolescents. In addition, there also exist studies that exhibit positive school climate having a positive correlation to adolescents' health being: psychologically and behaviorally (Wang et al., 2016). Given that Latinx youth are at risk for residing in inner-city communities with high rates of community violence (Roosa et al., 2010), highlighting the impacts of community violence towards this population is crucial and should be of priority. The purpose of this study is to connect and fill in the gap to these two variables: the emotional impacts that community violence has on Latinx adolescents and if school climate (i.e., school safety and school bonding) buffers these effects. Considering that adolescents spend an average of 7 hours in a school day, from Monday through Friday (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2018), examining violence exposure among a high-risk population such as Latinx youth is

important for informing assessment and intervention strategies in academic settings (Roosa et al., 2010).

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