Pathways to Crime: How Exposure to Violence Shapes Criminal Behavior

Maleeha Amjad
Lecturer, Department of Criminology
The University of Lahore, Lahore
Husnain Hameed Awan (Corresponding Author)
Lecturer, Department of Criminology
The University of Lahore, Lahore
husnain.hameed@siss.uol.edu.pk
Dr. Muhammad Faisal Khan
Assistant Professor, Department of Criminology
The University of Lahore, Lahore

Abstract

This study examines the role of exposure to violence in shaping criminal behavior, focusing on three primary sources: community, family and media. Using qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews, the research explores how different forms of violence contribute to criminal tendencies. The findings suggest that community violence fosters aggression through desensitization and peer influence, family violence increases the risk of criminal behavior through psychological distress and normalization of violence and media violence influences attitudes but lacks a direct causal link to criminality. Notably, individuals exposed to multiple forms of violence are significantly more likely to engage in crime due to the absence of positive role models and social support networks. These results underscores the need for targeted interventions including awareness campaigns, early prevention strategies and media literacy programs to mitigate the impact of violence on criminal behavior.

Keywords: Violence exposure, criminal behavior, community violence, family violence, media violence, desensitization, psychological distress

1. INTRODUCTION

Violence is a pervasive social issue that significantly influences human behavior. The impact of exposure to violence extends beyond immediate physical harm, shaping individuals' psychological, cognitive and behavioral responses. Violence is a well-documented risk factor for the development of criminal behavior. Research in criminology and psychology has consistently shown that those who are exposed to violence, whether in their homes, communities, or through the media, are more likely to participate in delinquent or criminal behavior later in life. This link is especially strong during childhood and adolescence, a period marked by critical social and emotional development.

This article aims to explore the role of violence in criminality by analyzing how exposure to different forms of violence namely community violence, family violence and media violence can shape the pathway to criminal behavior. By focusing on multiple types of violence rather than a single source, this article provides a more comprehensive view of how violence influences behavioral outcomes. Specifically, it examines the interplay of these various forms of violence and their cumulative effects on criminal tendencies.

This article draws on Social Learning Theory, suggests that individuals imitate observed behaviors and prolonged exposure to violence reinforces violent coping mechanisms (Bandura, 1977). Moreover, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), particularly those linked to family violence can disrupt emotional regulation, increasing susceptibility to criminal tendencies (Felitti et al., 1998). Understanding how different forms of violence contribute to criminal behavior is essential for designing effective interventions aimed at breaking the cycle of violence.

People are exposed to violence in a variety of ways, both directly and indirectly. Direct exposure refers to personally encountering violence in one's surroundings, such as physical assault, domestic abuse or criminal activities, which frequently results in trauma, fear and mental instability (Finkelhor ormrod, & Turner, 2007). In contrast, indirect exposure involves witnessing violent events or consuming violent media, which can cause emotional discomfort, desensitization and increase aggression, particularly among children and adolescents (Boxer et al., 2009; Ferguson et al., 2008).

Furthermore, some people are poly-victimized, **exposed to multiple forms of violence over time**. This cumulative exposure exacerbates psychological harm and often lead to behavioral issues, emotional dysregulation and an increased risk of engaging in criminal activity (Casas, 2022; Smith & Doe, 2023). Recognizing the various forms and intensities of violence exposure is crucial for understanding its role in shaping criminal tendencies.

The cycle of violence is perpetuated by overlapping influences from family, community and media. There is a significant association between direct exposure to violence and the intergenerational transmission of violent behaviors. Victims of violence are more likely to perpetuate similar actions in the future (Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Turner, 2007). According to Social Learning Theory, regular exposure to violence, whether direct or indirect, normalizes it as a conflict resolution strategy (Bandura, 1977). This can result in desensitization, emotional trauma and poor impulse control, all of which heighten the risk of aggression (APA, 2013). Children raised in violent environments frequently imitate these actions, **carrying them into adulthood**. Environmental pressures and a lack of positive role models promote violent behavior. Biological factors, such as impaired brain development (Perry, 2001) **further contribute to this ongoing cycle**. These elements collectively help explain how violence can **persist across generations.**

This article specifically focuses on **the context of Pakistani society**, where the effects of violence on criminality remain underexplored in criminological literature. **While there has been some research on violence in Pakistan,** the unique cultural and socio-economic dynamics often shape how individuals experience and react to violence. Given this gap in understanding, this article draws on existing literature to examine how exposure to various forms of violence—community violence, family violence and media violence can influence criminal behavior in Pakistan, particularly among youth.

While extensive research has been conducted to explore the relationship between exposure to violence and criminal behavior, significant gaps remain in understanding the nuanced dynamics of this connection. Much of the existing literature tends to focus on a single type of violence such as community or family violence without considering the potential cumulative and interactive effects of multiple forms of violence, including media violence. Furthermore, the role of media as a contributor to violent behavior remains underexplored, despite growing concern about its influence, especially among youth.

This study addresses these gaps by examining the influence of community violence, family violence and media violence on the development of criminal behavior. By doing so, this research aims to offer a more holistic and inclusive understanding of the mechanisms through which exposure to violence leads to criminal behavior.

This study adopts an interpretivist approach, aiming to explore the lived experiences of incarcerated individuals with histories of violence and how these experiences may relate to their engagement in criminal behavior. By employing a qualitative, multiple-case study design and collecting in-depth narratives through interviews and prison records, this research aims to capture the subjective meanings individuals assign to violence and criminality. Situated in Lahore Central Prison, the study draws on data from both inmates and prison officials to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the issue. This approach addresses a gap in the existing literature, particularly within the Pakistani context, where such qualitative explorations remain limited.

This article contributes to the criminological literature by providing a more holistic understanding of how multiple forms of violence influence criminal behavior, with a specific focus on the Pakistani context. The findings are intended to inform intervention strategies aimed at breaking the cycle of violence and improving rehabilitation and prevention programs within both the criminal justice system and broader society.

2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Exposure to violence, whether direct or indirect, has a significant impact on people's behavior and mental health. This review focuses on three types of violence: community violence, family violence and media violence and how these relate to criminal behavior. Individuals who are raised in chaotic and violent environment are more likely to engage in criminal behavior themselves (Fowler et al., 2009; **Farrington & Loeber, 2000).**

However, trauma is a mediating factor in the relationship between violence exposure and criminal behavior. People exposed to violence and those who also experienced violence were more likely to commit crimes than those exposed to violence but not traumatized (**Shahinfar,** Kupersmidt, & Matza**, 2001)**. However, a chronic negative atmosphere can lead to depression, which is defined by feelings of hopelessness, sadness and a loss of interest in previously enjoyable activities (Teicher, Samson, Polcari, & McGreenery, 2006). These mental health concerns can significantly affect every day functioning and quality of life, further isolating the victim and intensifying the impact of abuse (Taillieu, Brownridge, Sareen, & Afifi, 2016; Vachon, Krueger, Rogosch, & Cicchetti, 2015).

The direct and indirect exposure to violence is a major risk factor for criminal behavior. The incidence and severity of violence were associated with an increased risk of criminal behavior (Thompson, Banyard, & Bell, 2017).

Family violence, particularly domestic abuse and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), has been identified as a major risk factor for criminal activity (Herrenkohl et al., 2003; Klevens, 2001). Children who have been exposed to intimate partner violence, neglect or abuse are more prone to repeat such behaviors in adulthood (Bender, 2022). This intergenerational transfer of violence exemplifies how family circumstances might foster future delinquency (Felitti et al., 1998; Widom, 1989).

Similarly, violence in communities is a major factor contributing to criminal behavior. Youth growing up in violent neighborhoods often witness or become victims of assaults, shootings or gang activities, which can lead to the acceptance of violence as a normal part of life (Gorman-Smith & Tolan, 1998). Such exposure often causes emotional trauma and individuals become desensitized to community-level violence over time, making them more receptive of aggressiveness as a conflict resolving technique. According to research, adolescents who grow up in such surroundings are more prone to participate in criminal activity (Stein et al., 2003; Boxer et al., 2009; Golding & Fitzgerald, 2015). Repeated exposure can reduce sensitivity to violence and hinder the development of empathy and prosocial behaviors (Ng-Mak et al., 2004).

Another pathway to criminal behavior comes from **media exposure to violence** and it has become a major source of concern. While not as direct as real-life exposure, consuming violent content can increase aggressive thoughts and reactions in certain individuals, especially those who already have a predisposition toward aggression (Anderson et al., 2010). Continuous exposure to violent video games, television shows, movies and social media content might alter ideas of acceptable behavior. The impact of this exposure can vary among individuals, depending on factors such as their age, temperament and the circumstances in which they witness the violence. Individuals who are exposed to high levels of media violence are more likely to have aggressive thoughts and behaviors, both in the short-term and the long-term. They are also more likely to engage in violent behavior (Hopf, Huber, & Weib, 2008). Adolescents in particular, may adopt violent problem-solving strategies as a result of observational learning. Media exposure can serve as a sort of indirect victimization, increasing violence and decreasing empathy for victims (Ferguson et al., 2008).

Finally, the concept of poly-victimization or the cumulative experience of several forms of violence, is critical to understanding criminal behavior. Those who have experienced both direct and indirect victimization are more likely to develop mental disorders such as anxiety, depression and PTSD, which are linked to aggressive and antisocial conduct (Casas, 2022; Smith & Doe, 2023). Each type of violence play a significant role in normalizing aggression and violent conflict resolution. Individuals who witness or experience violence are often at a higher risk of developing aggressive tendencies and maladaptive coping mechanisms (Farrell & Zimmerman, 2018).

Gender also influences how individuals react to violent environments. For example, males are more likely to display outward aggression and delinquency, while females may internalize the trauma. However, in some cases, girls may resort to violence as a form of self-protection or retaliation (Schwartz & Proctor, 2000).

The literature highlights a complex link between exposure to violence and criminal behavior. Violence, whether through familial dysfunction, violent communities or media influence, creates situations that raise the likelihood of criminal activity. This process involves a mix of environmental, psychological and social elements.

3. METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study utilized in-depth interviews to explore how exposure to violence influences criminal behavior. A **purposive sampling** strategy was employed to select 15 participants, all of whom were associated with a correctional institution. Among these, three experienced police officers provided valuable case studies and expert insights into violent crimes, contributing a law enforcement perspective. The remaining participants were incarcerated individuals, interviewed face-to-face within the correctional facility. These respondents shared detailed narratives about their personal experiences with various forms of violence, including community violence, family violence and media violence.

The collected data was analyzed using a **thematic analysis** approach, which involved identifying recurring patterns and key factors that shaped participants' criminal behavior. Thematic analysis was chosen for its ability to reveal the underlying themes and connections between different forms of violence and criminal tendencies, providing an in-depth understanding of the subject matter.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The outcomes of this study demonstrate a clear link between exposure to violence and the development of criminal behavior. In-depth interviews with prisoners and insights from

police officers revealed three major themes: direct victimization, witnessing violence and normalization of aggression.

Direct Exposure to Violence

Many participants reported being victims of direct violence, including as physical abuse, interpersonal violence and community-based assaults. Several individuals **recounted experiences** of childhood physical abuse, seeing household conflicts, or confronted in violent neighborhoods. This direct exposure frequently resulted in psychological trauma, lack of trust and emotional numbness. The narratives **support the theory of intergenerational transmission of violence**, which holds that people who were victims of violence as children subsequently engage in violent or criminal conduct (Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Turner, 2007).

The testimonies further highlighted the **cyclical nature** of violence, with many participants stating that being abused led them to normalize aggression as a coping mechanism in adulthood.

As one participant shared, "My father didn't just beat my mother—he used to hit me too whenever he was angry. I grew up thinking that violence was normal. When I got older, I thought that was the way to handle problems."

Another stated, "In jail, people think I'm aggressive, but they don't know what I've been through. Beatings were normal at my home."

Witnessing Violence (Indirect Exposure)

Even if participants were not direct victims, many reported witnessing violence in their homes, communities, or through media. They frequently observed parental conflicts, neighborhood violence and gang activities. This exposure often led to **desensitization**, with participants viewing violence as normal and acceptable. This finding aligns with **Social Learning Theory** (Bandura, 1977), which suggests that repeated exposure to aggressive behavior increases the likelihood of imitating such behavior. For many participants, the violence witnessed in childhood was not perceived as deviant or problematic, but rather an everyday reality.

As one participant explained, "In my street, fights, gunshots and drug deals were common. I didn't even realize it was wrong because everyone was doing it."

Another recalled, "I saw a man get stabbed outside my house when I was 11. No one reacted. It felt normal."

Influence of Media Violence

Participants also reported that violent media, such as action films, violent video games and aggressive content on social media, influenced their ideas of strength, power and justice. While the media was not the main source, it may act as a reinforcement agent, particularly for those who had already been exposed to violence in real life. Offenders admitted to idealizing violent characters or replicating actions seen in media portrayals, supporting previous research that suggests media may enhance already present aggressive tendencies, particularly among young people. One participant explained;

"I have always been a fan of action movies and violent video games. They were an important element of my everyday routine. The characters appeared powerful and untouchable. I feel that glamorization influenced my perception that participation in criminal acts may be interesting and gratifying…. I and my friends decided to attempt a robbery, not because we needed the money, but because the movies had inspired us and we wanted to do something thrilling."

This supports prior research suggesting that media violence can **heighten aggressive tendencies**, particularly among vulnerable youth (Anderson & Dill, 2000). The media's portrayal

of violence as a means of achieving justice or power can shape attitudes toward aggression, making it seem like a legitimate means of solving problems.

The Cycle of Violence

An underlying theme concluded was the cycle of violence, in which individuals reported a never-ending cycle of being victimized and then becoming offenders. Those raised in violent houses or communities frequently lacked appropriate role models, experienced emotional neglect and acquired maladaptive coping techniques, such as hostility and criminal activities. This aligns with research suggesting that early trauma exposure, coupled with a lack of support systems, fosters a cycle where violent behavior becomes a survival mechanism.

As one of the participant said; "Growing up, violence was a normal aspect of life in my community. I saw it everywhere: on the streets, at school and even at home. After a while, it no longer seemed like a huge deal. It became normal to see people fight or hear about shootings. It desensitized me to violence. I grew to believe that being harsh and aggressive was the only way to survive."

This **cumulative exposure** to violence creates an environment in which criminal behavior is normalized and individuals may resort to violence as a coping mechanism or means of survival.

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