

Violence in South African adolescents

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Impact

This dissertation was conducted with the goal to enhance the understanding of the sociodemographic and psychosocial correlates associated with violence victimisation and violence perpetration in South African adolescents. Moreover, adolescents' strengths and resilience were explored in details to uncover the protective factors that can positively influence their development, despite living in communities where violence is prevalent. The impact of this dissertation is four-fold: 1) to address the gaps in the current literature on youth violence and resilience; 2) to provide directions for the key stakeholders in adolescents' lives and enhance their competence to support adolescents; 3) to inform the development of targeted interventions for adolescents; 4) to promote social awareness that South African adolescents are a vulnerable group for violence that deserve urgent attention from the society and policy makers.

This dissertation provided an opportunity to enhance the understanding of violence from multiple angles, including violence victimisation across major developmental contexts, indirect and direct victimisation, poly-victimisation, victim-perpetrators, and different types of victimisation and perpetration (e.g., peer victimisation, delinquent behaviours), and several measures of violence were included in each study to allow for comparisons of the negative influence of violence in different forms on adolescent development. In addition, the findings on the personal competencies and external resources (e.g., adult support) that adolescents possess in this dissertation shed light on the developmental assets that many young people have, despite living in challenging environments. This is an incredibly positive thing as there is an opportunity to further validate and enhance the strengths and skills in South African adolescents so they experience a positive developmental process. In addition, the results of the dissertation may be particularly valuable for researchers, social workers, mental health care practitioners, community leaders, and policy makers to inform the work they do in supporting adolescents who are/at risk to be affected by violence.

The results of the dissertation may also benefit the key stakeholders in adolescents' lives, such as parents/caregivers, and school teachers, as they can draw upon the empirical findings and reflect on their current practices and support structures to help adolescents adaptively cope with violence. Based on the current findings in the dissertation, tailored reports were sent to the principals of the schools who participated in the studies, to support them on their strategies to prevent violence. These reports outlined 1) the types and prevalence of violence victimisation and violence perpetration among learners of the specific school; 2) actionable recommendations for the school to develop strategies to prevent learners from exposing to violence, refrain from engaging in aggressive and delinquent behaviours, and promote healthy development. Some examples of the recommendations on the reports for the schools are listed below:

- To build an anti-bullying climate by responding quickly and consistently to incidents of violence and establish clear rules and expectations that violence is not tolerated.
- To enhance school connectedness, school staff can take part in initiating short personal interactions (30 seconds or up to 5 minutes) throughout the school day with learners. These interactions are the “resilience touch points” that aims to connect and build trust with learners and show that the teachers care.
- To build knowledge and skills in learners, such as empathy, emotion regulation, the ability to appreciate (socio-cultural) differences of others, and speak up when treated unfairly. Having extra mural activities in schools can help learners realise their interests, skills, and potential.
- To strengthen school-parent relationship by encouraging open communication with parents and understand each other's expectations with regards to adolescent development. For example, talk with parents about school's strategies in responding to violence and involve parents as stakeholders to inform the development of violence prevention protocols in school. Parents and teachers should work together to paint a positive future for adolescents.

Moreover, the results of the dissertation may inform the development of targeted interventions to reduce violence victimisation and violence perpetration in adolescents, and to enhance their resilience to the negative developmental impact of violence victimisation. The next step would be formulating specific programme outcomes and objectives with school principals, teachers, parents, policymakers, NGO's, and other relevant stakeholders. Matrices of Change can be compiled, informed by the individual and environmental determinants found in this dissertation that are associated with violence, in combination with sub-behaviours/performance objectives (e.g., walk with a group when going to school to prevent victimisation, refrain from physical bullying behaviour towards peers). Take “anger management” as an example – This was found as a determinant associated with peer violence perpetration in Chapter 3. One of the change objectives for a programme to reduce violent perpetration could be, “adolescents manage their anger in social situations with peers”. Other programme objectives may be formulated based on the programme goals, empirical evidence on the determinants of behaviour change, and theories, before designing the programme theme, scope and sequence, as well as the methods and practical applications to leverage change.

Finally, as part of the motivation to start this PhD trajectory, the results of the dissertation are aimed to enhance the empirical understanding of violence in South African adolescents and to enhance the awareness not just in academia, but also in the general society where social workers, mental health care practitioners, community leaders, youth advocates, and policy

makers join in to attend to the importance of building a safe and sustainable future for South African adolescents. It may be helpful to strengthen the partnerships, resources, and funding for youth interventions. For example, an NGO with qualified social workers can partner with South African schools, with the funding support from the Department of Education to support positive development of adolescents and enhance teachers' capacity to attend to adolescents and their own psychological health. This may elevate some stress and burdens from the teachers as they often feel unsupported due to high workload and the demand to handle violent incidents in school adequately. Community campaigns on violence reduction may also be useful to enhance social awareness and promote a culture of anti-violence and crime. According to United Nation's Sustainable Developmental Goal (SDG) 16: "Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels" is part of the global 2030 agenda to reduce violence and related death rates. Conferences and scientific publications in high impact journals have been used to disseminate the knowledge in this dissertation, to support this important international initiative on SDG, and to participate in the dialogue of creating a sustainable and safe future for adolescents.