

Violence and Aggression in the Lives of Homeless Children

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The present research examined the role of violence and aggression in the lives of children in homeless families, focusing on possible connections among family violence, children's aggression, and children's problems with social isolation and rejection. Measures were obtained from structured interviews with 93 sets of mothers and children. Consistent with past research, average estimates of specific violent incidents experienced by mothers (as adults) were quite high. Measures of this family violence were reliably correlated with children's behavior problems as well as with measures of aggression in peer relationships (victimization, ease of resolving fights with friends). Finally, results of regression analyses were most consistent with a model in which family violence and economic distress contributed to problematic aggressive behaviors among children; that aggression, in turn, appeared to lead to social isolation and avoidance. The overall results emphasized the need to address violence and aggression in any intervention programs for homeless children and families.

KEY WORDS: homelessness; violence; aggression; social relationships.

Homelessness has emerged as a long-term social problem—rather than short-term emergency crisis—that has touched the lives of many Americans. For example, Link *et al.* (1995) concluded that as many as 6.5% of American adults had experienced literal homelessness (on the streets or in shelters) at some point in their lives. Families with children are probably the least visible or recognizable subgroup of the homeless population. Yet, families with children comprise an estimated 40% of homeless individuals and represent the fastest growing subgroup of the homeless population (Shinn & Weitzman, 1996). Past researchers have documented high levels of both social isolation and violence in the lives of homeless parents and families (e.g., Bassuk *et al.*, 1996; Browne & Bassuk, 1997; Shinn *et al.*, 1991). The present research was designed to address the role of violence and aggression in the lives of the children in these families, focusing on possible connections among family violence, children's aggression, and children's problems with social rejection

and isolation. The research was guided by the general premise that violence and aggression contribute to the relationship problems and social isolation often experienced by homeless children (Anooshian, 2000; Menke, 2000). Previous research has emphasized the extent to which such relationship problems—particularly as they are reflected in peer interactions in school settings—are predictive of a diversity of negative outcomes (see Coie & Cillessen, 1993).

The first goal of the research was to establish that there were indeed connections between the levels of violence reported by homeless mothers and the behavior problems of their children. Past research has documented that violence and abuse are common in the past and present experiences of homeless women (e.g., Bassuk *et al.*, 1996). For example, Bassuk *et al.* (1996) found that 92% of homeless and 82% of low-income housed mothers—interviewed in the Worcester Family Research Project—had experienced severe abuse or assault. Shinn *et al.* (1991) also observed higher levels of domestic violence among homeless women than among a comparable sample of housed women. Abuse and troubled relationships are common themes for homeless mothers, the majority of whom have been physically or sexually abused (Styron *et al.*, 2000). Clearly, high levels of maternal violence—in

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being general indicators of violence that children might be experiencing (as victims and/or witnesses)—affect children. The living conditions associated with homelessness and/or poverty (e.g., streets, shelters, doubling up with others, crowded housing) include a lack of privacy. Hence, regardless of whether or not homeless children are themselves victims of violence, the public nature of their lives means that they will witness much of the violence experienced by their mothers. In the interviews used for the present research, mothers reported the frequency of being victims of specific violent acts (e.g., punched, threatened with a gun), both as a child and as an adult. It was predicted that the extent of violence in mothers' current lives—but not reports of violence experienced as children—would be predictive of their children's behavior problems. This prediction was consistent with past empirical reports that children who witness and/or experience violence show both internalizing and externalizing behavior problems (e.g., Eiden, 1999; McCloskey *et al.*, 1995; Osofsky, 1995). Research with homeless children has yielded observations consistent with this evidence. For example, Zima *et al.* (1999) found that both behavior problems and depressive symptoms were most common among those homeless children who had experienced violence (as witnesses or victims). Similarly, Rabideau and Toro (1997) observed that domestic violence was associated with behavior problems among homeless children.

The second major goal of this research was to provide conceptual models for understanding how the violence of homelessness influenced children and their development. The first step within this goal was to establish clear connections between levels of maternal violence and indicators that children's own violence or aggression was influencing the quality and nature of their relationships with peers. These connections were explored with two major predictions. First, in considering specific types of behavior problems, maternal reports of violence were expected to be more predictive of children's delinquent and aggressive behavior problems than problems with anxiety or depression. Clearly, children who experience frequent violence are likely to model the aggressive behaviors that they observe; they are likely to perceive that delinquency and aggressive behaviors provide some protection from the dangers and stresses of violence in their surroundings. For example, children living in dangerous neighborhoods acquire more positive attitudes about aggression than children living in safer neighborhoods (Colder *et al.*, 2000). Second, it was predicted that maternal reports of violence would be associated with measures of relationship problems that specifically reflected aggression in children's interactions with peers. This prediction was consistent with

other evidence that children of mothers who experience domestic violence are more aggressive in their interactions with peers (Graham-Bermann & Levendosky, 1997). To explore this prediction, children's responses to three specific questionnaire items were selected; those items reflected children's ability to resolve fights with friends and the extent of being involved in aggressive victimization by peers. These specific items were selected because they appeared to reflect specific ways in which high levels of aggression could lead children to suffer from maladaptive relationships with their peers. Also, these particular items were selected because of their significance in predicting social isolation and/or later problems. For example, both peer rejection and the absence of friendships are predictive of later symptoms of psychopathology (Bagwell *et al.*, 1998). Other research findings suggest that, if children have problems with friendships as well as with peer victimization, there is likely to be an escalating cycle of peer abuse and/or isolation (see Hodges *et al.*, 1999).

Of course, it is likely that there is complexity as well as multiple alternative explanations of any possible connections between homeless children's aggression and social isolation or relationship problems. Hence, the most important goal of the present research was to examine the viability of different conceptual models of the causes and consequences of violence and aggression in the lives of homeless children. Four different models were developed; each represented a plausible explanation of how violence and aggression could contribute to children's social isolation and avoidance. Measures and data analyses were designed to differentiate among these four different models of connections among family violence (maternal reports), children's aggression, and children's social withdrawal. All four models (see Fig. 1) are consistent with predictions and evidence summarized to this point—for example, evidence that excessive aggression leads to specific problems in peer interactions. They are also consistent with empirical evidence that children's aggression predicts problematic relationships, including low peer acceptance (Ladd & Burgess, 1999) as well as more negative beliefs about peers (MacKinnon-Lewis *et al.*, 1999). Hence, all of these models reflect that children with high levels of inappropriate aggression will ultimately end up withdrawing from social relationships, as reflected by such measures as the inability to resolve fights and victimization by peers (as discussed earlier), preferences for being alone, and negative attitudes about the behaviors of peers at school. These models are also consistent with theories and research by Eisenberg *et al.* (1997) addressing connections between behavioral control and peer relationships. These authors propose that the inability to regulate behavior in emotional situations leads to inappropriate behavior that, in