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Title: Adversity and Hope in a Rapidly Changing Culture: A Case Study of Violence Exposure among School-Going Youth in The Gambia, West Africa

Text:

Many African countries have large youth populations, high levels of poverty, and rapidly urbanizing societies. While research in the United States has linked poverty and urbanization to elevated levels of neighborhood violence, traumatic stress reactions, and lowered expectations for the future, little exploration of these processes in non-Western contexts has been undertaken. This study charted the self-reported levels of Gambian youth exposure to violence in their homes and neighborhoods, traumatic stress reactions, and expectations for the future. Findings are presented within an ecological-transactional framework. The nested levels of ecological context are conceptualized as consisting of the macrosystem (cultural values and beliefs), exosystem (neighborhood settings), and microsystem (family environment).

A school-based survey of youth behaviors, feelings, attitudes, and perceptions (The Social and Health Assessment) was administered to 455 students at senior secondary schools in three communities in The Gambia, West Africa. Students in all communities reported high levels of exposure to violence, with over half of students reporting having witnessed someone threatened with serious physical harm, beaten up or mugged, seriously wounded by an incident of violence, and chased or beaten by a group. While reported rates of victimization were lower, over half of students reported being beaten up or mugged during the past year, and nearly a quarter reported being threatened with serious physical harm and being involved in a group fight. Rates of violence exposure were highest in Basse, the community furthest from the urban and increasingly Westernized coastal area. Levels of traumatic stress symptoms were strikingly high in all communities. Females consistently reported higher levels of violence exposure and traumatic stress than males. Despite these high levels of adverse events, students reported high levels of future expectations.

Gambian senior secondary school students face significant challenges in multiple ecological contexts. Gambian females appear to struggle most. Exploring the meaning that Gambian youth attach to instances of violence, trauma, and hope for the future is an important next step in interpreting this epidemiological data. A potential avenue for resilience building in these youth is their high level of hope for the future in the face of adversity and strong commitment to religion and family.

Theme Groups: 1 Key social relationships

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