



When Youth Feel Unsafe: Brief Insights on the Cognitive and Academic Effects of Exposure to Violence

Recent acts of violence in America's schools are the cause of nationwide [concern](#). Yet even in the absence of school shootings, many young people do not feel safe in their schools and communities or are exposed to violence directly or indirectly.

Although youth are, on average, feeling safer¹ and are being exposed to less violence², data suggest that overall reductions are not evenly distributed across the country. Many cities are experiencing rising rates of violent crime.³ The trends in these cities make clear that violence and fear of violence remain an everyday reality for too many young people.

The safety of America's young people is essential given what we know about the negative impact of feeling unsafe and being exposed to violence have on young people's development and ability to succeed in school.

Effects on Cognitive Outcomes

The prevailing research indicates that exposure to violence in the local environment, whether direct or indirect, has harmful effects on young people's brain architecture at a critical time in their development. It also leads to a variety of mental health challenges, including posttraumatic stress and children and youth having difficulty self-regulating their behavior. Examples of these impacts include:

- Within a week of a homicide taking place in their local community, youth experience [decreased impulse control and levels of attention](#).⁴
- Youth exposed to gun violence may experience negative psychological consequences such as ["anger, withdrawal, posttraumatic stress, and desensitization to violence"](#).⁵
- Adolescent victimization is associated with [mental health problems and substance abuse problems](#), among others.⁶
- Recent victimization (community violence, peer violence, witnessing family violence, etc.) is associated with an increased risk of [suicidal ideation](#) in adolescents.⁷
- Exposure to violence in the community is associated with [engaging in violence in the future](#).⁸

Effects on Academic Outcomes

Feeling unsafe in school or being exposed to violence in school or in the community undermines academic achievement. The affected outcomes span the full range of students' experience and performance in school from feelings of connectedness to their school to classroom engagement to grades to test scores to attainment.

Notably, many of these impacts can be observed when young people themselves are not the victims of violence and even when young people have not directly witnessed violence taking place in their local environment. Examples of these academic outcomes include:

- School shootings are associated with **decreased student enrollment and decreased standardized test scores** in Math and English.⁹
- Children who report feeling safe have higher **IQ scores**, standardized school assessment outcomes, and grades, as well as higher levels of academic engagement than their peers.^{10,11}
- Fearing for personal safety is associated with **missing school activities or classes**.¹²
- Perceptions of victimization predict **lower individual engagement, reading, and math achievement, both at the student and school levels**.¹³
- Witnessing violence in the community is associated with posttraumatic stress disorder in communities, which **negatively affects standardized test scores**.¹⁴
- Exposure to violence and trauma-related distress is associated with **significant decreases in IQ and reading achievements**.¹⁵
- Community violence exposure is associated with **decreased feelings of connectedness to school**.¹⁶
- Local violence is associated with a **reduction in the likelihood of high school graduation and a reduction in college attainment**.¹⁷

Conclusion

When children and youth feel unsafe, adults need to act. The damaging effects that feeling unsafe and being exposed to violence have on young people and their ability to succeed are well-established. These scientific insights make clear the urgency with which we, as a country, must intervene in schools and communities to change the perceived and actual safety of young people for the better. When **lack of safety exists**, schools and communities need to be equipped with the human capital and capacity to identify when youth are struggling and resolve the issues that impact them. **Given the severe cognitive and academic impacts, young people cannot afford inaction in the face of violence.**

Endnotes

- ¹ Child Trends Databank (2015). *Unsafe at school*. Retrieved from: <https://www.childtrends.org/?indicators=unsafe-at-school>
- ² Child Trends Databank (2015). *Violent Crime Victimization*. Retrieved from: <https://www.childtrends.org/?indicators=violent-crime-victimization>
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- ⁵ Garbarino, J., Bradshaw, C., and Vorrasi, J. (2002). Mitigating the effects of gun violence on children and youth. *Future Child, 12*(2), 72-85.
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- ⁷ Turner, H. A., Finkelhor, D., Shattuck, A., and Hamby, S. (2012). Recent victimization exposure and suicidal ideation among adolescents. *Archives of Pediatric & Adolescent Medicine, 166*(12), 1149-1154.
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- ¹¹ Juvonen, J., Wang, Y., and Espinoza, G. (2011). Bullying experiences and compromised academic performance across middle school grades. *The Journal of Early Adolescence, 31*(1), 152-173.
- ¹² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2008). Youth risk behavior surveillance – United States, 2007. Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, 57(SS-4). <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/PDF/ss/ss5704.pdf>
- ¹³ Ripski, M., and Gregory, A. (2009). Unfair, unsafe, and unwelcome: Do high school students' perceptions of unfairness, hostility, and victimization in school predict engagement and achievement? *Journal of School Violence, 8*(4), 355-375.
- ¹⁴ Baldwin, C. (1999). The effects of witnessing violence and posttraumatic stress disorder on urban adolescents’ standardized test performance. Dissertation Abstracts International Section A: Humanities & Social Sciences, 60 (2A), 0331.
- ¹⁵ Delaney-Black, V., Covington, C., Ondersma, S., Nordstrom-Klee, B., Templin, T., and Ager, J. (2002). Violence exposure, trauma, and IQ/reading deficits among urban children. *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine, 156*, 280–285.
- ¹⁶ Schwartz, D. and Gorman, A. (2003). Community violence exposure and children’s academic functioning. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 95*(1), 163–173.
- ¹⁷ Grogger, J. (1997). Local violence, educational attainment, and teacher pay. National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper No. 6003. <http://www.nber.org/papers/w6003>

About POVs

This Point of View brief from the Center for Promise provides research insights on a particularly timely topic that is impacting young people in America. Learn more about this topic by reading the Center's [Barriers to Success](#) and [Barriers to Wellness](#) reports.

About the Center for Promise

The Center for Promise is the applied research institute for America's Promise Alliance, housed at the Boston University School of Education and dedicated to understanding what young people need to thrive and how to create the conditions of success for all young people.

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About America's Promise Alliance

America's Promise Alliance is the nation's largest network dedicated to improving the lives of children and youth. The Alliance brings together more than 450 national organizations and thousands of community leaders to focus the nation's attention on young people's lives and voices, lead bold campaigns to expand opportunity, conduct groundbreaking research on what young people need to thrive, and accelerate the adoption of strategies that help young people succeed. GradNation, a signature campaign, has helped to increase the nation's high school graduation rate to a record high.

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