



Rural Canadian Youth

Exposed to Physical Violence

Key Details

KEY WORDS

Resilience, physical violence, rural youth, disorders

POPULATION GROUP

Rural youth

STEPPING UP THEMES

Health and Wellness

RESEARCH ORIGIN

Canada

SOURCE

Academic

“Children are more likely than adults to be exposed to violence and crime whereas adolescents are more likely to be victims of violence than the general population.”

1. What is the research about?

Exposure to violence in childhood and adolescence has negative long-term outcomes, including an increased risk of delinquency, alcohol and drug-use, poor academic achievement, and mental health issues. Youth can experience violence directly or indirectly. Males are more likely to experience violence directly and females are more likely to experience indirect violence. Males tend to externalize or ‘act-out’ aggressively in response and females tend to internalize or withdraw in response to experiences with violence. There is a lack of research in the Canadian context of rural adolescent exposure to physical violence. Therefore, this study examined possible connections between rural Canadian youth’s exposure to violence, protective factors, and their associated likelihood of exhibiting disruptive behaviours, depression and PTSD symptoms.

2. Where did the research take place?

The research took place in five Canadian schools located in small communities with populations between 900 and 5,500 people.

3. Who is this research about?

This research is about Canadian youth between the ages of 16-18 years, living in rural contexts, who witness violence. Of the 162 youth who participated, 55% were male and 45% were female.

4. How was the research done?

The youth completed a number of self-administered surveys to determine their exposure to physical violence, presence of protective factors in their lives, and whether they exhibited disruptive behaviours, experienced depression, or symptoms of PTSD.

The Children’s Report of Exposure to Violence Survey was self-administered to measure the youth’s exposure to physical violence. The Resiliency Scale for Children and Adolescents survey was used to measure protective factors. The Beck Disruptive Behaviour Inventory for Youth measured disruptive behaviours. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder symptoms were measured with the Child Post Traumatic Stress Disorder Symptom Scale.

5. What are the key findings?

Nearly all (99%) of the youth had heard about at least one incidence of violence in their lives. 73% of youth had witnessed violence and 58% reported being a victim of violence. 78% had been exposed to or a victim of violence on multiple occasions.

More than 60% had witnessed a friend getting beaten up. Youth reported being threatened with violence (42%) and also being beaten up (38%).

Higher levels of relatedness, positive emotional reactivity, and sense of mastery, which are theorized to characterize resilience, were all associated with less disruptive behaviour, depression and PTSD symptoms upon witnessing violence. The impact of witnessing violence differed based on gender. Both witnessing, as well as being a victim of physical violence, was correlated with PTSD symptoms for females. For males, neither directly nor indirectly being exposed to violence predicted PTSD symptoms.

Hearing about violence, but not witnessing violence was identified as a predictor of depression. More direct experiences of physical violence were not correlated with depression. Fearing the threat of physical violence, or the perception of a likely threat of physical violence, whether or not that risk materializes, produced more depression than actual experiences of violence.

6. Why does this research matter for youth work?

Rural youth are exposed to both direct and indirect physical violence. Youth with lower emotional reactivity and a strong sense of relatedness are less likely to act out or become depressed and exhibit PTSD symptoms. The ability to recover from a negative emotional experience protects an individual from externalizing or internalizing their responses. Having a “sense of mastery” protects youth from developing depression or PTSD. The research further suggests that there are important gender differences related to how youth process exposure to violence.

This study provides insight into intervention strategies to mitigate the impacts of youth of experiencing violence. Supporting youth to build protective skills, such as emotional regulation, sense of mastery, and relatedness will decrease the negative impacts of experiencing violence.

Strategies that improve optimism, self-efficacy and adaptability will contribute to the resilience of rural youth. Increasing the youth’s trust, comfort with others, access to support and tolerance of others was all demonstrated to contribute to better coping and adapting skills, and less incidence of disruptive behaviour.



Laye, A and Mykota, D (2014). Rural Canadian Youth Exposed to Physical Violence. *Canadian Journal of School Psychology*, 29(1). 21-39.