



Exploring coping among urban youth through photovoice

“Findings suggest that despite living in resource-challenged neighbourhoods, adolescents have critical perspectives about coping resources and strategies needed to help them maximize their greatest potential” (p. 809).

1. What is the research about?

This research is about how youth define and use coping strategies in an urban area with high rates of poverty and violence, given that “[a]pproximately 25% of adolescents experience at least one traumatic event, with prolonged stressors and daily hassles experienced by greater numbers” (p. 796). Stressful experiences among youth are often intensified since they are going through a number of social transitions; how youth cope with this stress will vary depending on their social environment. Violence is one of the most common stressors among urban youth, who have either heard about, witnessed or been victims of violence. The use of different coping strategies (active, distraction, avoidance, and support seeking) for dealing with stress may impact outcomes for youth, for example, in education and mental health.

2. Where did the research take place?

This research took place in a low-income urban area in Baltimore. The area is characterized by high rates of poverty and violence, police brutality, and civil unrest. The researchers were interested in understanding how students at a public high school defined and experienced coping.

3. Who is this research about?

This research is about 12 English-speaking students from a Baltimore high school. Nine of the students were female; seven students identified as Black, which was consistent with the school’s overall demographics. Students ranged between the ages of 15 to 17.

4. How was the research done?

This research used **photovoice**, a qualitative research method that employs photography and storytelling to create meaning and knowledge.

Students participated in small group orientations, during which they were introduced to the research team, given an overview of the study and the photovoice process, and asked to discuss their understandings of the theme of **coping**. As part of the orientation, students were also trained on best practices for taking photographs in public. Once orientation and training were complete, students were provided with disposable cameras and written instructions to:

- a) Think about what coping means to you.
- b) Take pictures of places, things or people that represent coping.

Students took photos over four weeks, then met again to participate in focus groups, during which they were asked to explain how their photos represented **coping**. Students were also asked to discuss how coping, as they defined it, was linked to their own and their peers’ development, decision-making, and success at school.

5. What are the key findings?

Through discussions in focus groups, students identified “community violence, lack of community resources for adolescents (e.g., recreational centres), environmental challenges, and family and personal stress” as their main sources of stress (p. 801). The following four themes were identified through analysis of focus group findings:

a) Defining coping. Students defined coping as “how you deal with stuff” (p. 801), which involves using various strategies to remain calm and keep a positive attitude.

b) Coping resources. Students used a number of resources for handling stress, including family, community, physical spaces, and activities. Schools and community centres were places where students could find someone they trust to talk to if they were feeling sad or angry about something. Some students found that playing sports was helpful in keeping their mind off of stress in their lives. Students pointed out that resources are limited, and that there is a need for additional recreational resources through which youth can participate in extra-curricular activities.

c) Coping strategies. Students pointed out that their main goal is to take their minds off of the problem. Common strategies included listening to music, talking to a trustworthy person, doing art, playing sports, and playing video games. Most students pointed out that coping strategies can be ‘good’ or ‘bad’, depending on the impact they would have on their future.

A number of students talked about how they cope with homicidal violence in their community, which often involved community gatherings to support the family members of the victim. Some students also talked about going to places like parks, playgrounds, and gardens, where they could sit and reflect on the good memories they had with victims of homicide. These places were described as offering a sense of calm and serenity.

d) Evolution and consequences of coping. Students pointed out that coping changes as people grow and/or move into new environments. Students believe that using coping strategies helps them make better decisions, which will positively impact their futures.

6. Why does it matter for youth work?

This study illustrates the need to **include the voices of young people** in research in order to better understand their circumstances and how they perceive their experiences.

The findings of this study highlight **the importance of helping youth identify positive coping strategies** and supporting them in building on these strategies, and can be used to inform the development of youth programs that support stress management and foster relevant strategies for coping among youth in urban settings.



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