

Community Violence

What is community violence?

Community violence is a complex term that has been used to refer to a wide range of events, such as civil unrest (e.g., riots, shootings, terrorism), workplace violence (e.g., assaults), or other acts of abuse (sexual, physical, or emotional). Mental health professionals often make a distinction between studies on crime-related events in which adults are often the focus and studies on exposure to violence in which children and adolescents are often the focus.



How is community violence different from other types of trauma?

Several aspects of community violence make it different from other types of trauma. Although there are warnings for some traumas, community violence usually happens without warning and comes as a sudden and terrifying shock. Because of this, communities that suffer from violence often experience increased fear and a feeling that the world is unsafe and that harm could come at any time. Although some traumas affect only one individual or a small group of people, community violence can permanently destroy entire neighborhoods. Finally, although some types of trauma are accidental, community violence is intentional, which can lead survivors to feel an extreme sense of betrayal and distrust toward other people.

What are the effects of witnessing or experiencing community violence?

As is the case with other traumas, individuals often experience *posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)* as a result of community violence. PTSD can affect people of all ages.

Children and Families

Although some people think that young children are not psychologically affected by exposure to community violence because they are too young to understand or remember the violence, studies have found posttraumatic symptoms and disorders among infants and toddlers. Children's and adolescents' risk for developing PTSD increases with the severity of exposure, negative parental reactions to the exposure, and the child's physical proximity to the community violence.

The impact of community violence exposure is not felt by the youth alone. A child's or adolescent's exposure to community violence also affects his or her family. Extreme anxiety concerning the child's health and well being is a common parental reaction. Resources for parents may be limited, which may lead to frustration and anger. Many parents blame themselves for not protecting their child adequately. They may become overprotective or use punitive discipline in response to their child's trauma-related acting-out behavior. Relationships among family members can become strained. Parents find themselves having to face the task of reassuring their child while trying to cope with their own fears, especially if there is a chronic risk for future community violence exposure.

Adults

Adults can also experience PTSD following exposure to community violence. In addition to symptoms of PTSD, survivors of community violence often struggle with:

- How to build trust again (which includes looking at issues of power, empowerment, and victimization)
- How to find meaning in life apart from the desire for revenge
- How to find realistic ways to protect themselves, their loved ones, and their homes and community from danger
- How to deal with feelings of guilt, shame, powerlessness, and doubt

A final concern regarding the effects of community violence is whether there is a link between witnessing violence and becoming violent, especially in intimate relationships. No studies have determined whether there is a relationship between community violence and domestic violence.

What treatments are available for individuals exposed to community violence?

Rapid, timely, and sensitive care for the community and affected individuals and families is the key to preventing PTSD in the wake of violence. Such care is also the key to reducing violence itself. Mental-health professionals with expertise in community violence can contribute in several ways:

- Help community leaders develop violence-prevention and victim-assistance programs.
- Help religious, educational, and health care leaders and organizations set up relief centers and shelters.
- Work with teachers at children's schools to provide education, debriefing, and referrals for affected children.
- Provide direct psychological services near the site of violence, such as:
 - De-briefings
 - 24-hour crisis hotline
 - Identifying survivors or bereaved family members who are at high risk for developing PTSD
 - Getting individuals connected with appropriate continuing treatment

How can community violence be prevented?

Some progress has been made in developing violence-prevention programs. The focus for these programs is prevention of gangs and building conflict-resolution skills in high-risk youths. However, violence prevention programs appear to be more effective if children are engaged early (beginning before age 6) and the program includes intervention in children's home and school social environments. Programs should also continue to make specific efforts to reduce obvious high-risk behaviors among adolescents, such as gang involvement, heavy drinking, and carrying handguns.

We Can Help

If you or a family member is struggling with recent events, don't hesitate to seek support! Contact us at **800.383.1908** or through your **VITAL WorkLife App**.

VITAL WorkLife counselors can help you understand your fears and identify coping mechanisms. With your VITAL WorkLife EAP, you have access to:

- Telephonic in-the-moment support, available 24/7.
- Counseling sessions available as either face-to-face or virtual sessions.
- Nurse Peer Coaching and Educator Peer Coaching—talk with an external coach, a peer, who has had similar experiences and can help you navigate stress.

- Member Website resources for both you and your employees:
<https://www.vitalworklife.com/member-login/>
- VITAL WorkLife App—take assessments to evaluate well being, learn more about your EAP resources, read Insights, watch videos and more.

Sources:

Workplace Options

Hamblen, J., & Goguen, C. (Updated 2016, February 23). Community violence. Retrieved August 2, 2016, from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, National Center for PTSD website: <http://www.ptsd.va.gov/>