

## Mitigating Negative Consequences of Community Violence Exposure: Perspectives from African American Youth

Community violence is related to an increased risk of mental and physical health difficulties. For example, community violence can lead to depression, anxiety, sleeplessness, and obesity. Young African Americans experience higher rates of violence-related injuries and homicide, with homicide being the leading cause of death. To create sustainable programs that reduce negative consequences after violence exposure, it is important to include the lived experiences and perspectives of African American youth.

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**Correspondence:**  
 Briana Woods-Jaeger  
 bwoodsjaeger@emory.edu

**Methods:** In June 2018, five focus groups were conducted with youth in Kansas City, Missouri, that self-identified as African American, reported prior community violence exposure, and were between the ages 13-18 years old. The group questions focused on four primary areas: (1) youth experiences and perceptions of community violence, (2) barriers and facilitators to getting support after community violence exposure, (3) experiences and perceptions of resilience, and (4) strategies that could be implemented to support youth exposed to community violence. An iterative thematic approach was used to study the focus group transcripts.

**Findings:**

- Two themes related to participants' experiences of structural factors emerged from the focus-group discussions: inadequate responses to community violence (particularly by law enforcement and schools) and racial discrimination.
- Participants recommended intervention strategies to address their experience of structural factors. See table below.

**Table: Actions to promote health and well-being among African American youth exposed to community violence recommended in focus groups conducted with members of that population in Kansas City, Missouri**

Recommended action	Relevant Sector	# of focus groups
Mitigate racism and discrimination across all sectors	All sectors	5
Promote an increase in accessible mental health resources in the community	Mental health care	4
Increase schools' responsiveness to bullying and violence	Schools	5
Increase churches' capacity to respond to mental health needs	Churches	1
Invest in neighborhoods and build community infrastructure	Community	5
Hold police and law enforcement accountable	Law enforcement	5

**Discussion:** A key theme that resonated throughout the focus groups was the need for a more proactive response from adults and community sectors to support the health and well-being of African American youth exposed to community violence. The study findings demonstrate youth concerns regarding unmet mental health needs in the aftermath of experiencing community violence and recognized their community was missing critical resources to address coping with community violence.

Additionally, participants recounted numerous experiences of racial discrimination in both community and school settings and how these acts were painful, especially as participants tried to cope with trauma from violence exposure. The youth provided several recommendations to promote well-being after community violence exposure with direct policy implications.