

Adolescent Coping and Neighborhood Violence: Perceptions, Exposure, and Urban Youths' Efforts to Deal With Danger

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Neighborhood violence is a persistent source of danger, stress, and other adverse outcomes for urban youth. We examined how 140 African American and Latino adolescents coped with neighborhood danger in low, medium, and high crime neighborhoods throughout Chicago. Participants reported using a range of coping strategies (measured via a modified version of the Ways of Coping Scale; R. S. Lazarus & S. Folkman, 1984). In low and medium crime rate areas, using confrontive strategies was significantly correlated with increased exposure to violence, and no strategies were associated with perceptions of safety. Coping strategies were associated with perceived safety to a substantial degree only in high crime neighborhoods, and none were associated with exposure to violence. A *k* means cluster analysis identified groups that differed in coping profiles and varied in rates of exposure to violence. Moderating effects of gender, ethnicity, and neighborhood were found for both person level and variable level analyses.

KEY WORDS: adolescent coping; ethnic minorities; neighborhood; perceived safety; exposure to violence; resilience.

Despite widely publicized decreases in violent crime in the past decade, many neighborhoods remain unsafe for teenagers. Adolescence is still the age of highest risk for victimization (Tolan & Guerra, 1998), and surveys of urban youth indicate that by early adolescence many have had encounters with shootings, stabbings, and other acts of violence in their communities (Bell & Jenkins, 1993; Martinez & Richters, 1993; Newman, Lohman, Newman, Myers, & Smith, 2000; Osofsky, Wewers, Hann, & Fick, 1993). Both direct victimization and witnessing a violent act have been associated with a number of psychological and social problems. Researchers have reported links between both victimization and witnessing violence and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD; American Psychiatric Association [APA], 1994; Berman, Kurtines,

Silverman, & Serafini, 1996; Berton & Stabb, 1996; Garbarino, Kostelny, & Dubrow, 1991; Jenkins & Bell, 1997; Pynoos, 1993), anxiety and depression (Garbarino & Kostelny, 1997; Lynch & Chicchetti, 1998; Martinez & Richters, 1993; Richters & Martinez, 1993), pronounced grief (Osofsky et al., 1993), aggressive and delinquent behavior (Attar, Guerra, & Tolan, 1994; Osofsky et al., 1993; Schwartz & Proctor, 2000), a decrease in grade point average (Dubois, Felner, Brand, Adan, & Evans, 1992), and social withdrawal (Rutter, 1983). But just as it is clear that neighborhood violence is related to dysfunction, it is equally clear that not all adolescents suffer the effects of violence to the same degree (Tolan, 2001). This may be the result of differential exposure to violence, differential perceptions of safety, differential coping styles, or some interaction of these three.

The psychosocial sequelae of exposure to violence may be mitigated by coping's effect on perceptions of safety. Objective threat alone does not lead to dysfunction—it is the individual's interpretation of that threat that is the precursor to how that individual reacts. Exposure to violence leads to adverse

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outcomes if the violence is seen as uncontrollable (Blechman, Dumas, & Prinz, 1994). One mechanism that appears to link negative outcomes to the perceived lack of control in youth is fear (Chorpita & Barlow, 1998). Exposure to violence that is perceived as uncontrollable induces more fear than violence that is seen as controllable. Fear has been found to relate to elevated rates of aggressive behavior (Colder, Mott, Levy, & Flay, 2000), is central to theories of maladjustment in violent settings (e.g., Garbarino et al., 1991), and is implicit in key criteria of several of the anxiety disorders previously mentioned (APA, 1994).

The demands of coping with chronic community violence differ from those associated with coping with acute trauma (Garbarino & Kostelny, 1997). Children exposed repeatedly to neighborhood violence must adjust developmentally, taking on a new reality with new approaches to safety (Garbarino et al., 1991). Safety concerns act as organizing forces in the lives of many urban youth. There is some evidence to suggest that urban youth cope to make themselves feel safer (Kozol, 1995; Newman et al., 2000; Reese, Vera, Thompson, & Reyes, 2001), but little systematic research that relates the use of specific coping strategies to feeling safer or reducing exposure to violence.

Youth Coping With Neighborhood Violence

We adopt Lazarus' transactional theory of stress and coping that defines coping as "constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 141). Although there is a substantial literature on child and adolescent coping in pediatric situations, there is surprisingly little regarding youth coping in response to neighborhood violence and danger. Most of the youth coping literature concerns White, middle-class populations (Howard, 1996; Jose et al., 1998; Rosella, 1994). Thus, how the literature applies to the experiences of most of the teenagers affected by chronic community violence in the United States, most of who are not White and middle-class, remains largely unknown. Work that has focused on youth coping with neighborhood violence is mostly theoretical, drawing on the literature of children's coping with war (e.g., Duncan, 1996; Garbarino & Dubrow, 1989). Coping successfully with community violence has been described as involving a strong sense of self-efficacy and a planful and optimistic attitude toward the future (Duncan, 1996). High-risk youths' coping has been charac-

terized by a mixture of aggressive and withdrawn behavior, whereas competent youth rely on a repertoire that includes exchanging information, solving goal-directed and interpersonal problems, and non-violently managing behavior (Blechman et al., 1994).

Although there have been several quantitative studies that investigate how support systems might mitigate the impact of exposure to violence (e.g., family social support; White, Bruce, Farrell, & Kliever, 1998), Berman et al. (1996) represents one of the few studies that explores how individual coping styles affect outcomes among youth exposed to community violence. Berman et al. (1996) surveyed a high school sample in which there were high rates of exposure to neighborhood violence, and found that "negative coping styles"—distraction, withdrawal, criticizing self, blaming others, wishful thinking, and resignation—were positively associated with PTSD symptomatology, and that "positive coping styles"—cognitive restructuring, problem solving, emotional regulation, and social support—were not associated with PTSD. Unfortunately, PTSD is characterized by a number of the behaviors comprising Berman et al.'s "negative coping" and therefore raises the issue of confounding psychopathology with coping (Berman et al., 1996). For instance, the Berman et al.'s "withdrawal" is practically indistinguishable from PTSD sufferers' persistent avoidance, and "distraction," their recurrent and intrusive thoughts (APA, 1994). In addition, the study asked teenagers to identify the most personally traumatic violent event in their life and use that as the stimulus when answering the coping items, raising questions about generalizing the link between coping and PTSD outcomes to more general exposure to violence. It may be that given the severity of the violent event, no coping could be beneficial, but that if asked to respond to violent incidents in general, coping would be linked to positive outcomes.

A theoretical issue raised in the Berman et al. (1996) study is the a priori division of coping styles into "positive" and "negative" categories, a dichotomy used frequently in the coping literature (e.g., Blechman et al., 1994; Duncan, 1996). "Positive" or "effective" coping strategies are usually defined as being associated with a decrease in deviant outcomes, and "negative" or "ineffective," an increase (Rutter, 1983). But several researchers have made the point that there is no coping strategy that is helpful in all situations (Boekaerts, 1996; Hanson Frieze & Bookwala, 1996; Houston, 1987; Rutter, 1983). For situations involving multiple stressors (like most involving adolescents), distinguishing between effective and

ineffective coping becomes more complicated. Coping with one stressor might have profound consequences for coping with another (Lepore & Evans, 1996). For instance, some delinquent behaviors have been found to be effective problem-solving strategies (Brezina, 2000), but also carry the risk of isolating youth through incarceration. Ultimately it is “nearly impossible to determine unequivocally when a coping strategy is effective or adaptive and when it is not” (Boekaerts, 1996, p. 471). It follows that for a person to be ready to respond effectively to stressors they must have a variety of coping resources. “[H]aving a particular weapon in one’s arsenal is less important than having a variety of weapons... The single coping response, regardless of its efficacy, may be less effective than bringing to bear a range of responses to life strains” (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978, cited in Rutter, 1983, p. 29).

Effects of Neighborhood, Gender, and Ethnicity

Potential stressors are experienced within context, and individuals cope accordingly (Houston, 1987). Given that neighborhoods differ in rates of violence, one might expect how youth deal with those rates to vary across neighborhoods. Evidence suggests that neighborhoods have differential influences on several psychosocial outcomes (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000), providing further support for this hypothesis. Several qualitative observations support this notion. In one study of popular culture among African American youth, teenagers used seeking social support to show potential aggressors in the neighborhood that they had allies who would support them in a confrontation and cognitively process dangers so that they were not as threatening (Dimitriadis, 2000). In a study of neighborhood violence in Chicago, youth used different speech and behavior styles in violent neighborhoods depending on the whether they were in public or private settings. Norms for dealing with danger in public were decidedly more confrontive than norms in private (Anderson, 1994).

Coping differs across gender. Gender differences among adolescent coping styles mirror adult differences. Aggressive responses to stressors are more common among boys than among girls (Rutter, 1983). Although there is recent evidence that violence among girls increased in the 1990s (H. N. Snyder, personal communication, June 25, 2002), boys are still much more likely to act violently than girls. Qualitative evidence from a study of youth coping with neighborhood violence suggests that this may be to “save

face” in order to prevent social isolation and future victimization (Reese et al., 2001). One study reported that girls responded to increased exposure to violence with greater depressive symptomatology and boys with increased protective measures (Jenkins & Bell, 1994). Girls seek social support more frequently and effectively than do boys (Boekaerts, 1996). In violent neighborhoods this translates into girls associating with gangs for protection from sexual victimization by dangerous individuals in the community, and boys for protection from victimization by the gangs themselves (Reese et al., 2001). Girls are more likely to address problems immediately and talk about them with friends, whereas boys usually do not address problems until they are imminent, and try to manage them alone (for a review, see Boekaerts, 1996). Gender differences may also result from differences in types of violence exposure, with girls reporting more frequent sexual victimization and boys other types of interpersonal conflict (for a review, see Jenkins & Bell, 1997).

Little has been written about racial and ethnic differences in coping among youth. This is largely due to the fact that the vast majority of research has been done on U.S. and European White youth (Compas, Connor-Smith, Saltzman, Harding Thomsen, & Wadsworth, 2001; Rosella, 1994). In one review, only 53% of the studies included race as a variable; among these, non-White adolescents were underrepresented (Rosella, 1994). What research has been done on non-White populations has largely left out comparisons across culture. Hill, Hawkins, Raposo, and Carr (1995) and Howard (1996) have suggested that attending church is an effective form of social support that is prevalent in the African American community. Howard (1996) adds that ethnic awareness and bicultural perspective may also be “coping orientations” (p. 258) that serve as protective factors. One of the few comparative studies found that Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans are more family-oriented and thus cope using more social support than Whites (Prelow, Tein, Roosa, & Wood, 2000). With regards to coping with neighborhood violence, after controlling for neighborhood, there is little reason to expect racial and ethnic differences. Given widespread segregation throughout U.S. cities, neighborhood and ethnicity effects are typically confounded.

Patterns of Youth Coping

Adolescence has been characterized as a period marked by impoverished coping skills (Hamburg, 1974), but also a period in which individuals display

a wide variety of coping skills (Kagan, 1983). Given that it is a time of experimentation, adolescents may use more types of coping strategies than do adults while their skills are less well developed. It may be that what is effective coping is best answered by looking at patterns of coping styles rather than between-participant rates of use within a particular coping style. Person-level techniques such as cluster analysis and discriminant function analysis can provide insight into “the configural patterns of adaptation that naturally occur” (Masten, 2001, p. 232), as well as corroborate evidence to variable-level findings. Although published investigations of patterns of coping in individual youth are scarce, several researchers have examined multidomain models of adaptation. Luthar (1991) used risk level cutoff criteria for competence data and found that externally competent youth suffer internal stress. Masten et al. (1999) used a similar methodology and cluster analysis to study psychosocial resources among four groups defined by their competence profiles, and found that resilient youth do experience more positive well-being than others. Siedman, Pedersen, and Rivera (2001) used *k* means cluster analysis to group youth on the basis of patterns of academic, social, and religious involvement, and found nine distinct clusters that differed on outcomes such as delinquency rate and psychological health. Person-level analyses can present rich profiles of how people behave across domains, profiles that may be associated with different outcomes.

Current Study

In the current study we examined the relationships between adolescent coping, perceptions of safety, and self-reported experiences of neighborhood violence in a sample of African American and Latino adolescents from central city neighborhoods. The primary research question was, “What coping strategies are associated with elevated perceived safety and decreased exposure to violence?” Given the contextual dependency of effective versus ineffective coping, we defined effective coping consistent with our research question: effective coping is coping that is positively associated with perceived safety and/or negatively associated with exposure to violence. Three contexts of coping were explored: gender, ethnicity, and neighborhood crime level. In each context the relations between coping strategy and perceived safety and exposure to violence were investigated. In addition, we explored the possibility at the person level that

there might be different types of teenage copers distinguished by their “coping profiles” and differences in perceived safety and exposure to violence.

We predicted that girls would cope by using more social support than boys, and boys would use more confrontive strategies; there would be few ethnic differences and there would be more confrontive coping and escape avoidance in more violent neighborhoods than in less violent neighborhoods. We expected that confrontive, social support, and problem-solving strategies would be positively correlated with perceptions of safety but that only social support and problem-solving strategies would be negatively associated with exposure to violence; in other words, the latter two styles would constitute “effective coping.” We expected that sample teenagers could be reasonably grouped according to their responses to neighborhood danger—their coping profiles—and that these groups of adolescents would differ in their perceptions of safety and rates of exposure to violence.

METHODS

Sample

Data were taken from a larger study conducted at a Catholic high school in Chicago in the early 1990s. One hundred and forty⁴ eleventh- and twelfth-grade students (ages 16–19, mean = 16.91) completed relevant surveys. These youths came from 80 different census tracts across the city and were 58% male and 60% Latino (primarily Mexican American). Over 40% of the students were employed more than 10 hr a week. Most students’ families paid the entire \$1,500+ tuition; over one third of the students paid part of this tuition themselves, 13% paid \$500 or more, and 5% paid the entire tuition on their own. These efforts seemed to pay off: 60% planned to attend a 4-year college, 21% planned to attend a 2-year college, and most of the rest planned to attend a trade school or technical college (6%) or enter the military (5%).

Participants were recruited at the beginning of the larger project. Students were informed of the study, ensured of confidentiality, and given an informed consent packet (written in English and Spanish) to take home. Only data from those giving

⁴Our original sample consisted of 178 youth of various ethnic backgrounds. At the suggestion of an anonymous reviewer, we limited our sample to African American and Latino youth for reasons of parsimony.

written consent were used. Two research staff persons administered surveys in classrooms on 2 consecutive days. One researcher read each question aloud while the other responded to students' individual questions and spot-checked measures when directions became complicated. All participants had complete coping, perceived safety, and violence exposure data. Only 130 participants had complete neighborhood information.

Measures

Survey information was drawn from responses to three measures: a demographic questionnaire (for age, gender, ethnicity, family, and employment information), a Danger Questionnaire, and a coping measure based on the Ways of Coping (Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986).

The Danger Questionnaire was developed for this study. Researchers held focus groups with students from various schools to hear first hand about their experiences and concerns. Students reported activities and behaviors they employed when faced with danger in their neighborhoods, including gang attacks, being approached by someone selling drugs, and getting into fights. For females, additional danger concerned sexual attacks. Information gathered from focus group sessions formed the basis of generating items to assess this dimension. School officials objected to the research team's inclusion of sexual assault items in the victimization component of the measure, so these were not included in the questionnaire (with the exception of one item asking about knowing a rape victim).

Initial test items were divided into three theoretical components: (1) adolescents' perceptions of their own personal safety in their neighborhood; (2) adolescents' perceptions of how safe their neighborhood is for others; and (3) adolescents' exposure to violence in their neighborhoods. Pilot testing to evaluate difficulty level, clarity of instructions, and relevance was done. The final measure had three subscales. Both perceived safety measures utilized a 4-point response format: *almost never*, *sometimes*, *often*, and *almost always*. The personal safety measure (14 items, $\alpha = .88$) asked respondents to rate items with the stem "I feel safe," which was followed by an item presenting a situation in their neighborhood. The general safety measure (13 items, $\alpha = .88$) asked respondents to rate items with the stem "It's safe for most people," which was followed by an item similar to those

on the personal safety measure. Examples of items include "to be at school," "when there are fights in my neighborhood," and "to walk alone in the neighborhood during the day." The exposure to violence measure used a yes-no format. Responses were the types of violence youth had been exposed to in the past year. Responses were divided into witnessed violence (8 items, $\alpha = .75$), and victimization (7 items, $\alpha = .64$). These subscales were then summed to attain a total exposure to violence score (15 items, $\alpha = .81$).

The coping scale was a modified version of Lazarus's Ways of Coping Scale (Folkman et al., 1986). It comprised 49 items reflecting cognitive and behavioral strategies to deal with demands in specific stressful experiences, and utilized a 4-point response scale: *not at all*, *sometimes*, *a few times*, and *most of the time*. Given that this study explored a relatively undeveloped area of inquiry and that other studies of coping with neighborhood violence used self-report (e.g., Berman et al., 1996), we felt that the use of a self-report measure was justified. Individual adolescents have the most complete access to their own coping behaviors, particularly internal strategies that would not be noticed by parents or peers. To overcome previously identified limitations of the Ways of Coping (Coyne & Gottlieb, 1996), the questionnaire was altered to address a specific set of stressors relevant to adolescents in urban neighborhoods. In focus groups researchers reviewed items for clarity and relevance to the situations teenagers faced in their neighborhoods. One item that was not understood by many respondents was dropped ("Tried not to burn my bridges, but leave things open somewhat"), and five new items were suggested and added ("I hang with people who have a tough reputation in my neighborhood because no one will mess with me then," "I hang out in places away from my own neighborhood," "I take the same route home every day," "I speak with my school counselor," and "I carry a weapon to protect myself"). The altered Ways of Coping measure asked participants what they "think, feel and do when faced with situations that are dangerous or threatening in your neighborhood." Participants' responses thus reflected the proportion of times each coping strategy was used when the youth faced dangerous situations in the neighborhood. To connect this to respondents' actual exposure to violence, the exposure to violence measure was presented immediately prior to the coping measure, increasing the likelihood that respondents would consider the stressors presented in the exposure measure when responding to the coping items.

Information about the neighborhoods from which the sample was drawn came from census tract homicide rates from the Chicago Homicide 1965–1994 Dataset (compiled by the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority, downloaded from the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research archive). The Chicago Homicide Dataset is one of the largest and most comprehensive datasets in the United States, and includes detailed information on nearly 23,000 homicides between 1965 and 1994. Annual murder rate within census tract was averaged over the years 1988–92. An analysis of the data showed that murder rate was highly correlated with other violent crime. Census tracts were combined into three groups based on murder rate. Cutoffs were based on theoretical assumptions of what would be discernible differences in the level of crime across neighborhoods. These levels were low crime (0–2 murders per year), medium crime (3–9 murders per year), and high crime (10+ murders per year, with a maximum of 43). In central city areas, census tracts are often only a few square blocks in area. Although this definition of neighborhood has been criticized for being irrelevant to residents (Elliot & Huizinga, 1990), it is not far from sample teenagers' own conceptions of their neighborhoods. In another part of the larger study, youth were asked to define the limits of their neighborhoods, and the most frequent limits reported were the block on which they live and the few square blocks around their home. Another study of urban residents' perception of home neighborhood found that most conceptions were very close in area to local census tracts, if not congruent with census tract boundaries (Coulton, Korbin, & Su, 2001). School records were available to the researchers, allowing them to identify addresses and to match specific census tracts to each participant's responses.

Using socioeconomic indicators drawn from 1990 U.S. Census data, we found that these three neighborhood groups were qualitatively different with regards to ethnicity, poverty rate, employment, and family composition. As murder rate increased, most economic well-being indicators declined. The high crime group qualified for the label "concentrated poverty" (neighborhoods above a 40% poverty rate; Wilson, 1996), and this was further supported by 36% male unemployment, 11% executive/professional employment, and 70% of neighborhood residents living on a household income of less than \$30,000. Social demographic measures enrich the profile. Although the ratio of children to families with children was stable across neighborhood groups (2.4, 2.6, and 2.8 for low,

medium, and high crime areas, respectively), the ratio of two-parent families to children steadily declined (0.55, 0.37, and 0.25) and the percent of subfamilies with children increased (6, 8, and 13%) as murder rate rose. African American residents were dominant (75%) in the high crime areas, Latino residents were the largest ethnic group in low and medium crime areas (48% in each), and the percentage of White residents steadily declined across low, medium, and high crime rate areas (30, 16, and 1%, respectively).

Male and female participants were evenly distributed across neighborhood groups, $\chi^2(1, N = 130) = 0.85, p = .64$. Ethnic groups were unevenly distributed across neighborhood, $\chi^2(1, N = 130) = 15.40, p < .01$, with African American participants overrepresented in high murder rate neighborhoods (69%) and Latino participants overrepresented in low (78%) and medium (66%) murder rate neighborhoods. These ethnic differences were consistent with trends observed across census tracts.

RESULTS

Revised Coping Measure

Efforts were made to replicate Folkman et al.'s factor structure (Folkman et al., 1986). However, distancing, self-controlling, and accepting responsibility attained low reliability scores. Items in these scales were reassigned to other scales through rational restructuring.⁵ The resulting measure assessed confrontive coping (9 items, $\alpha = .69$), seeking social support (6 items, $\alpha = .72$), positive reappraisal (11 items, $\alpha = .71$), planful problem solving (7 items, $\alpha = .73$), and escape avoidance (13 items, $\alpha = .72$). The following are Folkman et al.'s descriptions of these subscales: "Confrontive coping" describes aggressive tactics to alter a situation; "seeking social support," efforts to gain informational and emotional support; "planful problem-solving," deliberate problem-focused efforts at resolving a situation; "positive reappraisal," reframing of a problem so as to create positive meaning for personal growth; and

⁵Our sample size provided insufficient power to factor analyze 49 items. A factor model allowing for item uniquenesses would require estimating more than 90 parameters; this is fewer than two participants per parameter, well below the norm of 5–10. We therefore restructured the coping measure to achieve empirically reliable and conceptually coherent subscales. Future studies with larger samples are needed to approximate a more precise factor structure of coping with violence in this population.

“escape-avoidance,” wishful thinking. Correlation between coping domains ranged from .09 to .59, (.36–.59 between seeking social support, positive reappraisal, and planful problem solving).

Exposure to Violence and Perceptions of Safety

Victimization in the sample (with percentages in parentheses) over the previous year was reported as follows: offered drugs (32%), threatened (28%), robbed (14%), home broken into (11%), beaten up (10%), shot (8%), and stabbed (3%). Witnessed exposure was as follows: heard gunshots (90%), seen a beating (79%), witnessed a threat (70%), seen a robbery (57%), known a robbery victim (53%), seen a shooting (46%), seen a stabbing (26%), and known a rape victim (15%).

Given that the components of perceptions of safety in the neighborhood (personal and general safety) were highly correlated (.68), the decision was made to use perceived personal safety only in analyses. Total exposure to violence was used, as witnessed violence and victimization were also correlated (.43) and the pattern of results was the same for each variable when analyzed separately. There was no correlation between perceived personal safety and total exposure to violence (–.06). Although it might seem that these two variables should be strongly negatively associated, clearly that was not the case.

Gender, Ethnicity, and Neighborhood Differences

To test for different experiences of violence and perceptions of safety by gender, ethnicity, and neighborhood murder rate we used MANOVA. Effect sizes (Cohen's d , with $d < 0.3$ being small, $0.3 \geq d < 0.7$ medium, and $d \geq 0.7$ large) were calculated, following Cohen's suggestion (Cohen, 1988). The overall mean score for perceived safety was 2.75 ($SD = 0.59$), reflecting feeling safe “sometimes” to “often,” and for exposure to violence, 20.27 ($SD = 2.89$), reflecting about 21 types of direct and witnessed violence. There were no main effects or interactions at the multivariate level. The only statistically significant difference for personal safety was that males ($M = 2.84$, $SD = 0.58$) reported greater perceptions of safety than females ($M = 2.64$, $SD = 0.59$), $F(1, 139) = 6.47$, $p = .01$, although this difference was small ($d = 0.17$). No main effects were found for exposure to violence, but the two-way interaction between ethnicity and

neighborhood and the three-way interaction between gender, ethnicity and neighborhood were statistically significant, $F(2, 137) = 3.73$, $p = .03$ and $F(2, 138) = 4.25$, $p = .02$, respectively. Interactions are reported graphically in Fig. 1. For the two-way interaction, African Americans reported less exposure to violence in high crime neighborhoods ($M = 19.74$, $SD = 2.59$) than did their Latino counterparts ($M = 22.93$, $SD = 4.41$; $d = 0.40$). No ethnic differences were found in low and medium neighborhood groups. The three-way interaction helped clarify the results of the two-way interaction by showing that reports from females drove ethnic differences: among youth from high crime neighborhoods, African American females reported the lowest exposure rates ($M = 19.14$, $SD = 2.54$), and Latinas the highest ($M = 24.00$, $SD = 1$; $d = 0.78$). Differences were also observed between African American males ($M = 20.12$, $SD = 2.66$) and Latinas ($d = 0.69$), and African American females and Latino males ($M = 22.13$, $SD = 6.01$; $d = 0.31$). In addition, in the low crime rate neighborhood, Latinas reported lower exposure rates ($M = 20.34$, $SD = 2.91$) than African American males ($M = 22.20$, $SD = 2.59$, $d = 0.32$). Within ethnicity differences across neighborhood and gender were evident only for Latinos, between medium ($M = 19.79$, $SD = 2.94$) and high ($M = 22.93$, $SD = 4.41$) neighborhood groups only, $F(2, 76) = 3.47$, $p = .03$, $d = 0.37$.

Coping subscale means were calculated for each participant. Full sample mean coping scores indicated that participants used all strategies “sometimes” when faced with danger in the neighborhood: positive reappraisal = 2.41 ($SD = 0.52$); planful problem solving = 2.33 ($SD = 0.66$), escape avoidance = 2.25 ($SD = 0.46$), seeking social support = 2.24 ($SD = 0.68$), and confrontive coping = 2.14 ($SD = 0.57$). Positive reappraisal was reported more frequently than confrontive coping, $T(1, 139) = -4.43$, $p \leq .01$. When faced with neighborhood danger, males reported using confrontive coping ($M = 2.27$, $SD = 0.57$) more often than did females, $M = 1.98$, $SD = 0.52$, $F(4, 136) = 10.23$, $p \leq .01$; $d = 0.26$, and planful problem solving ($M = 2.49$, $SD = 0.50$) more often than did females, $M = 2.10$, $SD = 0.62$, $F(4, 136) = 11.17$, $p \leq .01$; $d = 0.39$. Latino and African Americans differed in their reports of seeking social support, $F(4, 136) = 7.16$, $p = .01$; $d = 0.46$, positive reappraisal, $F(4, 136) = 12.90$, $p = .01$; $d = 0.60$, and planful problem solving, $F(4, 136) = 5.24$, $p = .02$; $d = 0.39$, with African Americans (M s = 2.43, 2.59, 2.48; SD s = 0.60, 0.43, 0.61, respectively) reporting using each coping strategy more often than

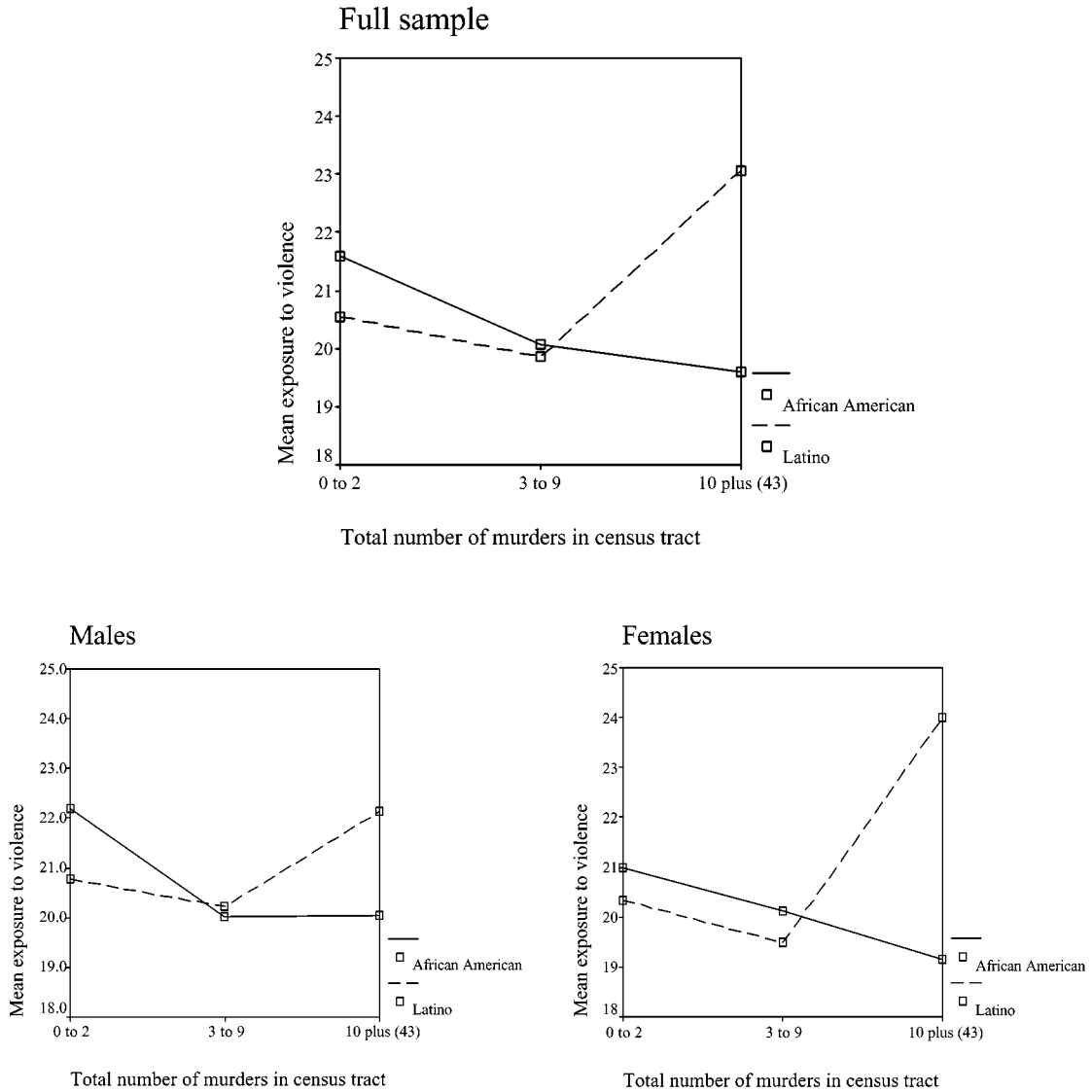


Fig. 1. Two- and three-way interactions for exposure to violence.

Latinos ($M_s = 2.12, 2.28, 2.22, SD_s = 0.71, 0.55, 0.68$, respectively). Neighborhood murder rate had no effect on overall mean coping indices.

Correlations Between Coping, Perceived Safety, and Exposure to Violence

To examine the relationships between coping, perceived safety, and experiences of violence, coping subscale means were correlated with personal perceptions of safety and total exposure to violence. We looked at full sample correlations first, then correlations by gender, ethnicity, and neighborhood

murder rate to examine moderating effects of these variables. Because of the large number of correlations explored, correlations were accepted as significant if they attained a $p \leq .01$, with some flexibility if there seemed to be a trend toward significance that fit into a larger pattern. In the full sample, confrontive coping was positively associated with perceptions of personal safety (.24) and exposure to violence (.38). No other correlations were statistically significant at $p \leq .01$. Confrontive coping correlations for were partially moderated by gender and ethnicity. Confrontive coping was positively associated with perceived safety only for females (.34), and exposure

Table I. Coping Clusters

Coping strategy	F	Confrontive copers (n = 19)		Average copers (n = 53)		Low copers (n = 27)		Resourceful copers (n = 41)	
		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Confrontive coping	57.58	2.78	0.40	1.94	0.33	1.55	0.29	2.51	0.47
Seeking social support	94.54	1.48	0.28	2.35	0.37	1.55	0.42	2.92	0.44
Positive reappraisal	43.60	1.91	0.42	2.56	0.34	1.90	0.34	2.78	0.42
Planful problem solving	54.30	2.22	0.66	2.23	0.39	1.58	0.41	2.98	0.44
Escape avoidance	10.75	2.02	0.56	2.25	0.42	2.00	0.33	2.51	0.37

to violence only for males (.47). For Latinos, only the correlation between confrontive coping and total exposure to violence attained significance (.44). This association was also found for African Americans (.29, at $p \leq .05$). For African Americans, confrontive coping and planful problem solving were associated with increased perceptions of personal safety as well (.32 and .30, respectively, both at $p \leq .05$). There were no apparent effects of gender within ethnicity on these correlations.

Neighborhood murder rate also moderated coping's effects on perceived safety and exposure to violence. For low and medium murder rate neighborhoods confrontive coping was the only strategy with any effect, and it was associated with higher rates of exposure to violence only (.48 and .36, respectively). For students from high murder rate areas, however, no coping strategy was associated with exposure to violence, and all five were associated with increased perceived safety (although confrontive coping and positive reappraisal only at $p \leq .05$): confrontive coping, .43; seeking social support, .54; positive reappraisal, .43; planful problem solving, .65; and escape avoidance, .60.

Types of Teenage Copers

To examine the notion that urban adolescents fall into categories based on their coping profile, cases

were clustered using *k* means clustering of coping subscale means. Three-, four-, and five-cluster solutions were explored. Clusters were compared to each other and judged to differ if at least two pairs of subscale means were significantly different and if the overall pattern of means for each was different. The four-cluster solution was chosen because the three-cluster solution did not provide nuances evident in the four-cluster model, and two clusters in the five-cluster model had similar patterns and differed only slightly on two subscale means.

Coping cluster results are presented in Table I and presented graphically in Fig. 2. *F* statistics indicate that seeking social support was the coping style contributing the most to cluster membership, with confrontive coping, planful problem solving, and positive reappraisal contributing as well. Demographic differences were observed across gender, $\chi^2(3, N = 140) = 9.58, p = .02$, and ethnicity, $\chi^2(3, N = 140) = 10.49, p = .02$. No differences were observed across neighborhood, $\chi^2(6, N = 130) = 9.42, p = .15$.

One cluster was dominated by confrontive coping. The score of 2.78 for this subscale was about a standard deviation above the sample mean. Planful problem solving was not significantly different from the sample mean whereas seeking social support and positive reappraisal were lower. This cluster seemed to identify adolescents who relied primarily on confrontive coping when faced with danger.

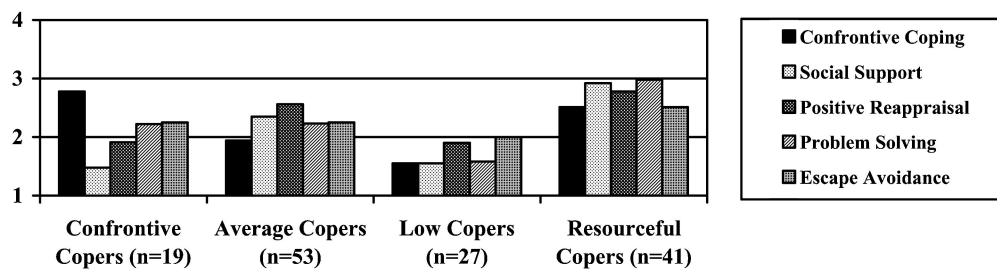


Fig. 2. Clusters of adolescent copers. Y-axis values (frequency of use when faced with danger in home neighborhood): 1 = not at all, 2 = sometimes, 3 = a few times, 4 = most of the time.

Members of this cluster were labeled Confrontive Copers: “tough kids” who were independent, put little value in trying to see the bright side of negative situations, but did spend some time thinking about their problems. The Confrontive Copers were the smallest cluster of students, with a total of 19 adolescents (or, 15% of the full sample). Boys were overrepresented among Confrontive Copers ($n = 15$), as were Latinos ($n = 14$).

A second cluster was labeled Average Copers. Seeking social support, planful problem solving, and escape avoidance scores were all within the 95% confidence interval for the sample mean, and although positive reappraisal was slightly higher and confrontive coping was lower than sample means, both were within a standard deviation of the means. Students in this cluster were the “average kids” of the sample: nonconfrontive, social, and tending to find positive aspects of negative situations. This was the largest cluster, with 53 members (38% of the full sample). Boys ($n = 26$) and girls ($n = 27$) were evenly represented, as were African Americans ($n = 24$) and Latinos ($n = 29$).

A third cluster’s means were low. Seeking social support, positive reappraisal, and planful problem solving means were all more than a standard deviation below sample means. Escape avoidance and confrontive coping means were also considerably lower than their sample means. Although clearly confrontive coping scores were drastically different, some comparison can be made between these Low Copers and Confrontive Copers. Positive reappraisal and escape-avoidance scores were statistically the same as those among Confrontive Copers. But unlike Confrontive Copers, these adolescents reported using other strategies rarely. They used escape avoidance most frequently when faced with danger. This cluster was small, with only 27 members (19% of the full sample). Girls were over-represented in this cluster ($n = 16$), as were Latinos ($n = 22$).

In contrast to Low Copers were Resourceful Copers. Mean coping scores for these adolescents were all well above sample means and seeking social support and planful problem solving were more than a standard deviation above sample means. The only cluster with a higher coping score (on confrontive coping) were Confrontive Copers. Multiple options were available to Resourceful Copers in dealing with danger. These adolescents used many types of strategies and used more strategies more frequently when faced with danger than others. This cluster had 41 members (28%), most of them boys ($n = 28$).

African Americans ($n = 22$) and Latinos ($n = 19$) were evenly represented.

No significant differences were found between clusters regarding perceptions of personal safety, $F(3, 137) = 0.31, p = .46$. All effect size differences were small, further supporting the finding that participants across clusters reported feeling “often” safe in their neighborhoods (cluster M s range = 2.59–2.82). MANOVA results did show statistically significant differences between clusters for exposure to violence, $F(1, 137) = 5.51, p \leq .01$. Confrontive Copers were exposed to significantly more violence than Average Copers ($p \leq .01, d = .52$), Low Copers ($p \leq .01, d = .46$), and (with a trend towards statistical significance) Resourceful Copers ($p = .06, d = .35$). Other differences did not reach statistical significance and had small effect sizes.

DISCUSSION

Exposure to Violence and Perceptions of Safety

This study examined self-reported exposure to violence and perceptions of safety among youth across neighborhoods that vary in objective levels of violence. Although previous research has found that neighborhoods can affect psychological functioning (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Osofsky, 1995), we found that neighborhood homicide rates were associated with neither exposure to violence nor perceptions of safety. This finding demands attention, and is discussed below. Rates of exposure to violence in this sample were comparable to those reported in previous studies (Jenkins & Bell, 1997).

Similar rates of exposure to violence and perceptions of safety were reported across gender and ethnicity as well. That boys and girls reported similar rates is contrary to the findings of several previous studies in which boys reported higher rates of victimization than did girls (Jenkins & Bell, 1994; Richters & Martinez, 1993). Our findings suggest that gender differences may vary by context. The parochial school setting, through selection and school policy, might account for the lack of gender differences reported here. Although several studies have argued that adolescents of different ethnicities are differentially exposed to violence (e.g., Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1994), the effect of ethnicity is often confounded with that of socioeconomic status and neighborhood, which have also been found to affect exposure (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). Ethnicity per

se does not seem to be a primary factor in determining perceptions of safety or exposure to violence in this sample.

African Americans reported lower rates of exposure to violence than Latinos in those neighborhoods where they were (on average) the dominant ethnicity, which were also those neighborhoods with the highest murder rates. Although ethnic minority status within neighborhoods is thought to be associated with higher rates of exposure to violence (e.g., Humes, 1996), few studies have explored how this might differ across area crime rates. This finding further points to the confounding of ethnicity and neighborhood effects. Interestingly, gender differences within ethnicity and neighborhoods seemed to suggest that females are more susceptible to cross-neighborhood and cross-ethnicity differences, with African American girls reporting the lowest rates of exposure in high crime areas, and Latinas reporting the highest in high crime areas and the lowest in low crime areas. Given the small cell sizes, we think it best to consider this three-way interaction preliminary. Still, it does point to an interesting hypothesis in which dominant group females are protected more (through self-protection or protection by others) than males, and much more than minority group females.

Coping With Neighborhood Violence

We interpret our coping data from the theoretical perspective that coping is best understood as a process that unfolds over time. Our measure of coping asked participants to describe how they generally manage dangerous situations. We expect that their responses reflect previous experience with neighborhood dangers. In other words, our measure of coping can be seen both as an outcome of past exposure to violence, as well as an effort to manage future exposure. The relationship between coping and stress is transactional (as posited by Lazarus and his colleagues; Folkman & Lazarus, 1985; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Lazarus & Launier, 1978), and the following discussion of coping should be interpreted within this framework.

Most youth in our sample reported employing a variety of coping strategies. Positive reappraisal was the most commonly reported coping strategy, and confrontive coping the least. Although gender and ethnicity moderated the rates of use of different strategies, neighborhood context did not. Consistent with previous findings that males use more aggressive tactics in other coping contexts (Rutter, 1983), boys

engaged in more confrontive coping than did girls. Unlike previous research in pediatric and academic settings that has reported higher rates of seeking social support among females (Boekaerts, 1996), use of this strategy in response to violence did not vary by gender. African Americans reported higher levels of seeking social support, positive reappraisal, and planful problem solving than Latinos did, but lack of a solid research literature comparing African American and Latino youth impedes interpretations of ethnic differences *per se*. This issue deserves further research.

This study examined whether teenagers cope with neighborhood danger differently if they are exposed to that danger in high crime versus low crime areas. No differences in the type of coping behavior were found across neighborhood, suggesting that there is a common repertoire of “things to do if faced with danger” among teenagers from very different neighborhoods. Moreover, no differences in the amount of coping behavior were found across neighborhood. On the basis of the neighborhood literature (for a review, see Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn, 2000), we expected differences. Below, we view these coping findings in relation to our findings that youth reported comparable levels of exposure to violence and perceived safety across neighborhoods.

Effective coping was conceptualized as coping associated with elevated perceptions of safety and reduced exposure to violence. None of the coping strategies examined here were systematically associated with both exposure to violence and perceived safety. Although in the full sample, confrontive coping was associated with both of these outcome variables, it was associated only with perceived safety in the desired direction. The same pattern emerged for both African Americans and Latinos. A slightly more complicated picture emerged when results were disaggregated by gender. Confrontive coping was positively correlated with perceived safety for girls, but only with exposure to violence for boys. These findings suggest the risks associated with confronting danger may differ for boys and girls. Roles and meanings afforded to girls and boys in confrontive behavior do seem to differ (Reese et al., 2001). For girls, the strategy “I make friends with gangbangers” may imply protection without the costs associated for boys (e.g., the risk of fighting). Thus, girls may feel safer when they engage in such behavior whereas boys do not. Consistent with a transactional view, it may also be that girls who feel relatively safe are confident to engage in confrontive behavior whereas boys who feel safe are

not—again as a function of differences in perceived risks associated with confrontive behavior.

Coping strategies that appeared to be effective varied across neighborhoods. Although low and medium murder rate neighborhoods looked much like the full sample in that no strategies appeared effective, in high murder rate neighborhoods *all* coping strategies were positively associated with perceived safety. None, however, was associated with reduced exposure to violence. This pattern suggests these strategies are effective for coping with danger in high crime neighborhoods, but their effect is limited to safety perceptions. They do not seem effective in lower crime areas. This may partly explain why perceptions of safety are similar across neighborhood. Effective coping in high crime areas may increase perceptions of safety to levels similar to those in other areas. The effect likely goes in the opposite direction as well: in high crime areas, where the potential costs of failing to deal with danger are quite high, youth who feel relatively safe may be psychologically able to engage in more varied coping than their peers who feel less safe. In areas where the crime rate is lower, the costs of inaction are lower, and so perceptions of safety are less influential.

The effectiveness of confrontive coping varied as a function of context. The positive association of confrontive coping with elevated safety *and* elevated exposure to violence for the full sample and African Americans raises questions about the value of this strategy. Confrontive coping may be best characterized as “pseudo-effective” coping in that it is simultaneously associated with elevated perceived safety and exposure to violence. Adolescent perceptions of safety may not always be realistic. In the context of high crime neighborhoods, however, confrontive coping was associated with perceived safety but not with exposure to violence. This pattern challenges adults who counsel against confrontive behavior for such youth. Confrontive behavior perceived by adults to be inappropriate may be exactly what makes youth feel more secure in these areas. Standing one’s ground when faced with violence may be effective in promoting perceived safety in some neighborhoods—despite many adults’ negative reaction to such behavior.

Effective Patterns of Coping

Our results support the contention that person-level strategies may help to identify groups of youth who are particularly effective at dealing with adversity (Masten, 2001; Tolan, 2001). “Low Copers” relied on

all five coping strategies infrequently, “Average Copers” relied on all five coping strategies sometimes, “Resourceful Copers” relied on all five frequently, and “Confrontive Copers” relied primarily on confrontive coping strategies. Although there were no perceived safety differences between clusters, Confrontive Copers experienced higher rates of violence than did others. Differences were greatest between Confrontive Copers and Average Copers, but still substantial between Confrontive Copers and all other groups. Confrontive Copers thus provide a person-level parallel to “pseudo-effective” coping: “pseudo-effective copers.” It is likely that youths who regularly confront violence believe in the efficacy of their actions. Fighting a threatening peer may result in neighborhood respect or physical removal of that peer, and thus in an environment that is perceived as safer for the individual (Reese et al., 2001). It may also be that Confrontive Copers overreported safety perceptions to present themselves as particularly tough. Being tough involves presenting oneself as immune to danger, while at the same time being prone to violence. In turn, as mentioned above in relation to the variable-level findings, high perceived safety may increase the likelihood of engaging in confrontive tactics.

Given the agreement in the literature that using a rich variety of coping strategies is optimal (Boekaerts, 1996; Houston, 1987; Rutter, 1983), we expected that Resourceful Copers would report the lowest exposure and highest perceived safety and thus be judged most effective. The finding that there were no differences in exposure rates and safety perceptions between Average, Resourceful, and Low Copers indicates otherwise. We find it intriguing that the “average” and “low-functioning” youth were as well off with regards to our outcome measures as those who report more frequent use of coping strategies when faced with danger. It may be that the high frequency of coping strategy use among Resourceful Copers is simply an indication that they were less confident and therefore less selective in determining which strategy is most effective in a given situation. Less frequent but varied coping, observed among Average and Low Copers, would then indicate that some youth may carefully select among coping strategies because they know what works in response to specific dangers.

Future Directions

It should be emphasized that this study was exploratory in nature, and thus the findings should be considered preliminary observations in a largely un-

explored area of research. In addition, due to the nature of the sample, the results should not be viewed as entirely generalizable to African American and Latino adolescents. This sample was drawn from a Catholic school in an urban setting in which going to Catholic school probably implies an above-average commitment to academic achievement and some protection from exposure to violence. The high-functioning status of the sample was indicated by a high incidence of postgraduation plans, a high employment rate, and the number of students paying at least part of their own way through high school. Moreover, both the high employment rate and attending school outside of the neighborhood may have had “inoculative value” (Cowen, 1996, p. 247) for exposure to violence in that these activities reduced the number of opportunities for exposure. This is also consistent with an intriguing finding from Perez-Smith, Albus, and Weist (2001) that exposure to violence is positively associated with the strength of neighborhood affiliation. This research should be replicated with public school samples from a similar range of neighborhoods to explore these issues with adolescents who better represent their neighborhoods socioeconomically, academically, and in terms of their neighborhood affiliations. Because adolescents’ psychosocial adaptation is fluid and their contexts change over time (Werner & Smith, 1992), longitudinal data are also needed.

Future research should examine the nature of youths’ exposure to violence. Unresolved issues include the implications of relying on self- versus other-report, subjective versus objective measures, and exposure type versus number of exposure events. Our measure obtained self-report information about how many different types of violence youth were exposed to.

This study found that all coping strategies were associated with increased perceptions of safety in high crime neighborhoods, but few were in this way effective in other contexts. In spite of our hopes for urban youth, we found little evidence that engaging in coping behaviors more often is associated with reduced exposure to violence. At the person level, those teenagers who used confrontive strategies frequently also had the greatest exposure to violence, and that there were few differences between other types of copers. These findings suggest that investigating how youth cope with neighborhood violence demands we explore multiple contexts and acknowledge there may be multiple pathways to successful adaptation.

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