COMMUNITY VIOLENCE

Violence and Depreciating Resources in Communities

THE EXPECTATIONS PROJECT

BY LENA ANGLIN

PRESIDENT'S NOTE

At The Expectations Project (TEP), we aim to understand systems and the dynamics within them that impede children thriving. As our President, I have seen, heard and lived the consequences of adults wielding power and privilege irresponsibly as pertains to these systems; systems that have the power to harm children and their families and the potential to nurture them. Thankfully, there are many individuals and institutions reaching for a world in which children are cherished and flourishing in their schools and communities. TEP supports those working to realize a world of abundance for all children. Our team curates data points in white papers to support narrative shifts and political actions needed for the systems we all deserve.

Please use our white papers as a resource, to spark creativity and conversation, and as a tool of engagement.

With power, peace and determination,

Zakiya Jackson

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

The United States of America is internally consumed with violence and inaction while positioning itself as the global authority on leadership and morality. Violence, both political and interpersonal, is forcing whole communities to grapple with failing institutions, instability, and depreciating resources. Increasing militarization has emboldened people to dispense punishment as judge, jury, and executioner. These events are symptomatic of a broader culture of violence. At the center of this culture of violence is America's obsession with guns, a vestige of American exceptionalism, and an individualism that will haunt our future unless we reckon with the economic, political, and social forces that worship firearms and profits.

The leading cause of death in American children and teens are firearms. Black children and teens are 17x more likely than white children and teens of the same age to die by gun homicide. More Americans have died from gunshot wounds in the last 50 years than in all of the wars in American history. Violence is tightly wound around American life, permanently altering the lives of far too many children, families, and communities. The American sociopolitical landscape is uninterested in investing in the material change necessary to dismantle failing systems that replicate violence. Decisions of the state impact each other and leave communities with a desolate landscape.

Instead of diverting resources towards sustaining and nourishing communities, the American government has made no real progress in abating the gun violence epidemic.

Children, especially Black and Brown children, experience state violence when they are criminalized and turned over to a carceral system that dehumanizes and reinforces violent behavior. What would it mean to meaningfully examine the narrative and legislation on violence, and its impact on children and communities?

Naming America's culture of violence means interrogating how that seeps into the lives of children, depreciates resources in communities, and holds us all in collective trauma. TEP is striving to create the world we want and need, especially for children. This world, which already holds the resources needed for everyone to thrive, would ensure that the needs of children are met in abundance. It is impossible to realize this dream when violence, in its many forms, is wielded against Black and Brown families and communities. The American culture of violence restricts humanity and opportunities for loving communities.

"Black children and teens are 17x more likely than white children and teens of the same age to die by gun homicide."
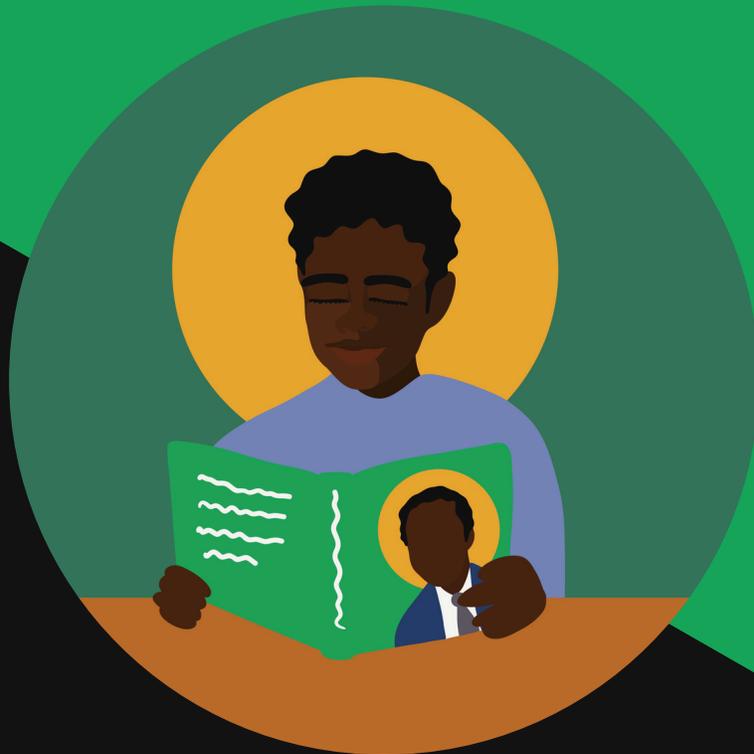
"American schools are being codified into a carceral state, with 14 million students attending a school with police in buildings."

CULTURE OF VIOLENCE

America's relationship with violence is traceable. The country's beginnings as a colonial occupation and subsequent development into a sovereign state taught Americans to use violence as a means for grasping independence and control over indigenous people, African nations, and the land. During the colonial period, Americans combined developing attitudes on masculinity, freedom, and liberty, and saddled them to white supremacy. Guns were legalized as a means of protecting oneself, family, and community during America's militia history. These laws did not afford this legal protection to anyone who was not white or male. Slavery, mass incarceration, and the consequences of both, perpetuated a racialized perception of violence that endures still. By 1883, as Fredrick Douglass wrote, the South had a proclivity to "impute crime to color", a sentiment which would migrate north in time. Today's Americans think of this country as far removed from its militant and violent past. That is ahistorical. Violence has been currency in the United States since its inception and remains so today.

Even in peacetime, America looks to war. Attempts to abate policy failures are framed as, "War on X", such as the "War on Poverty" or the "War on Drugs". America spent $877 billion on defense in 2022, the most in the world, and more than the next ten countries combined. Violence is mystified and upheld as the sole and sacred means of achieving results. It is also perceived as isolated aberrations, rather than symptoms of failed systems that target struggling individuals and communities. This broader culture of violence has debilitated public life, and violence must be understood as a detriment to our collective public health. The American tradition of pursuing individualism has fueled a false perception of the "greatest country in the world" and makes us ill with violence. The profits of firearm companies (which reached $285 billion in 2020) are privileged over social and political efforts to protect this country from violence.

There is an organized political effort to restrict teaching history and truth. This is intended to instigate a mass amnesia of how we arrived at a culture that feeds on authoritarianism and stunts Americans from imagining a world in which these horrors do not exist. It will erode our ability to be inventive, hopeful, and resistant. People are understandably fearful of violence. But authoritarianism brought us here. It cannot lead us out.

CHILD CRIMINALIZATION

Violence is often inaccurately characterized as isolated incidents. This "singular event" framing conceals commonalities between all types of violence, which are the economic, political, and cultural failures that allow it to fester. Effective analysis of the ideological and structural conditions of violence reveals how it is, "a process or ongoing social condition embedded in our everyday lives". This type of encompassing analysis reveals how violence harms some of the most vulnerable members of our world: Black children.

73% of all students arrested are Black. And yet, research confirms Black students are not misbehaving more than their peers. This is the result of embedded and pervasive anti-Black bias. Black children are perceived as older and more guilty than their white counterparts, a perception born out of dehumanization and racism. Such dangerous judgment often subjects Black children to punitive school punishments in response to typical childhood behavior. The adultification of Black children impedes their right to be children, to grow, to learn, to make mistakes.

Anti-Black racial bias, implicit and explicit, conditions adults to believe Black children are less deserving of protection than their white peers. A 2014 study indicated Black children are decreasingly seen as an essential group, while children are seen increasingly as an essential group. The study contends Black children are perceived as possessing less essential human qualities than white children. So when a Black child is believed to be deserving of discipline, their punishments are dehumanizing and harsh.

Black children represent 19% of preschool enrollment, but 47% of all preschoolers suspended once or more are Black. This suggests something has gone catastrophically wrong. Equally alarming is a child who is suspended once has a 25% less likelihood of graduating high school. At the onset of their academic journey, Black children are being pushed out of schools at unnerving rates.

The result of such violent and inhumane disciplinary practices are environments that mimic correctional facilities instead of schools. Eighty American schools are being codified into a carceral state, with 14 million students attending a school with police in the buildings, but no key support staff like counselors, nurses, psychologists, or social workers.

Police in schools are linked with exacerbating the school-to-prison pipeline by increasing arrests for noncriminal behavior, like disturbing class. These zero-tolerance policies disproportionately target Black students, who are arrested at alarming rates.

This is structural violence at work. Pushing Black children out of school is violent. Perceiving Black children as adults is violent. Arresting Black children is violent. It is vital to understand violence, particularly state and structural violence, as a process rather than an event. From there, it is easier to conceptualize how structural and state decisions, like the depreciation of resources in communities, begets violence.

DEPRECIATION OF RESOURCES

The CDC characterized the time between 2019 and 2020 as the largest single year increase in murders the United States experienced in a century. This 30% increase in violence was mostly concentrated in disinvested neighborhoods that were struggling with higher rates of gun violence before the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated conditions that permit violence to flourish. These conditions, high economic distress, low employment, and poor infrastructure are concentrated in neighborhoods with particularly high levels of gun violence.

Within cities with high levels of violence, there are some neighborhoods that experience high rates of violence and some that experience none at all. This describes the longstanding tension between violence and place, and indicates that interventions should be tailored micro geographically street by street.

The health of a neighborhood, how much economic and social power is present, is intrinsically linked to how safe it is for residents. Neighborhoods that experience long term disinvestment, due to race based policy decisions like red-lining, overt policing, and economic segregation undermine the capacity of many neighborhood residents to achieve physical and economic prosperity, and cultivate a link between poverty, race, and violence in cities. Families do not exist in isolation, but are embedded in communities that either foster or inhibit access to safety. In particular, the lives of children are disrupted by community violence and economic disempowerment.

There are characteristics within neighborhoods, quality of infrastructure, access to economic empowerment, strength of social cohesion, that work in tandem with schools to affect the physical and economic safety of children.

The trauma of community violence has devastating effects on children. Trauma interrupts healthy brain development, warping a young brain by diminishing concentration, memory, decision-making skills, and mental health. Children with trauma are trapped in a fight or flight state, which influences how they form relationships and learn.

The pervasiveness of violence in American neighborhoods indicates many educators will encounter students with trauma during their tenure. In other words, healthy communities support and nurture healthy children.

The United States has often relied on over-policing and mass incarceration to alleviate violent crime, and yet we still experience cycles in which violent crime rises devastatingly high. Transforming the neighborhood conditions that create violence would push us towards thriving and safe communities for all. We are striving to create the world we want and need, especially for students.

This world, which already holds the resources needed for everyone to thrive, would ensure that the needs of children are met in abundance. It is impossible to realize this dream when Black and Brown communities are barred from resources and interventions that would help them thrive.

TRAUMA

Childhood is one of the most consequential stages of a human life. During this period, the brain is rapidly learning and adapting to the world around them. It is a time of constantly developing and using core life skills like decision making, retaining information, and forming relationships. As a child's brain is deeply shaped by the environment they grow up in, childhood exposure to trauma can result in high levels of chronic stress, which changes how the brain develops.

Unfortunately, the prevalence of violence in communities exposes far too many children to the detriments of prolonged toxic stress. Recent brain science research helps us understand why and how brain circuitry changes as a result of early life adversity.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) describe various forms of traumatic experiences such as abuse, homelessness, poverty, and household dysfunction. They result in toxic stress, or the "prolonged activation of stress response systems in the absence of protective relationships". ACEs typically describe individual experiences, but exposure to community violence and gun violence induces toxic stress as well. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network characterizes community violence as one of 13 categories of trauma that contributes to unhealthy development. Exposure is directly related to altered neural development and learning. The brain floods the body with substances like adrenaline and cortisol, which strains the brain and disrupts the development of brain circuitry.

Prolonged exposure to trauma and toxic stress interrupts healthy brain development, warping a young brain by diminishing concentration, memory, decision-making skills, and mental health.

Researchers who conducted a study of trauma on childhood development discovered that exposure to a singular traumatic event or chronic events, "activates the body's biological stress response systems." The body's stress response system is a network of interacting systems that affect the whole body. These responses are intended to protect an individual against negative environmental threats, shifting the body away from homeostasis or equilibrium in the process. When a child's response system is constantly engaged, their brains may become trapped in a fight, flight, or freeze state, which influences how they form relationships and learn. This strain on the brain and body disrupts the development of the part of the brain responsible for executive functions like making and following plans, focusing, decision making, and inhibiting impulsivity.

Some families experience prolonged toxic stress, not because of their ability to raise children, but because of the intensity of trauma imposed on them as a result of structural inequalities in our society. Black children, in particular, are recorded to have more ACE's than any other group. The issue of community violence is multi-dimensional and impacts children and families in such an unrelenting fashion that preventative measures in their truest sense would be a collection of large and small scale interventions that promote the development of healthy communities.

CONCLUSION

James Baldwin once wrote, "in order to survive as a human, moving, moral weight in the world, America and Western nations will be forced to reexamine themselves and release themselves from many things that are now taken to be sacred, and to discard nearly all the assumptions that have been used to justify their lives and their anguish and their crimes so long". Baldwin understood that massive violence in the United States would continue unless Americans came to terms with our shared violent past.

There are tangible recommendations to accomplishing this:
- Fund and support community-based violence intervention programs. Funding must extend far enough to prioritize the current needs of Black and Brown communities.
- Nationwide assault weapons ban. The nationwide assault weapons ban ended in 2004. We must prioritize the needs and safety of American communities over the profits of firearm companies.
- Expanding our scope of research to include and center the stories of the communities we are studying.

Families do not exist in isolation, but are embedded in communities that either foster or inhibit access to safety. The health of a neighborhood, how much economic and social power is present, and is intrinsically linked to how safe it is for residents. Neighborhoods that experience long term violence and disinvestment, due to race based policy decisions like red-lining, over policing, and economic segregation, undermine the capacity of residents to achieve physical and economic prosperity, and cultivate a link between poverty, race, and violence.

REFERENCE LIST

1. NPR: https://www.npr.org/2023/05/05/1174192713/jordan-neely-death-homeless-nyc
2. The New England Journal of Medicine: https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/nejmc2201761
3. Center for Disease Control: https://everytownresearch.org/stat/black-children-and-teens-are-14-times-more-likely-than-white-children-and-teens-of-the-same-age-to-die-by-gun-homicide/
4. Center for Disease Control: https://everytownresearch.org/stat/black-children-and-teens-are-14-times-more-likely-than-white-children-and-teens-of-the-same-age-to-die-by-gun-homicide/
5. Hopkins Bloomberg Public Health: https://magazine.jhsph.edu/2021/brief-history-guns-us
6. Angela Davis https://www.feministes-radicales.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/Angela-Davis-Are_Prisons_Obsolete.pdf
7. Peter G Peterson Foundation: https://www.pgpf.org/chart-archive/0053_defense-comparison
8. Aljazeera: https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/12/6/weapons-trade-booms-as-profit-hits-record-531bn
9. The Problem of State Violence: https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/48638127.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3Af5df94ceec97190ddb882b33bb43bb8b&ab_segments=&origin=&initiator=
10. The Education Justice Research and Organizing Collective: https://steinhardt.nyu.edu/metrocenter/ejroc/ending-student-criminalization-and-school-prison-pipeline
11. https://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/releases/psp-a0035663.pdf
12. National Prevention Science Coalition: https://www.npscoalition.org/post/racially-disproportionate-discipline-in-early-childhood-educational-settings
13. Roslyn Z. Wolf Lecture in Urban Education: Dr. Tyrone Howard: https://csuohio.zoom.us/rec/play/j_VoqwpJYOelFUScmM15aArZjzJJjNsXmN1O2jRUH7fz4-qyJ4-6w15S2VD-wnWtnwh8IywItf0zUA7I.0_y2JzP0DxEhbZYY?startTime=1634044271000
14. ACLU: https://www.aclu.org/issues/juvenile-justice/school-prison-pipeline/cops-and-no-counselors
15. Pew Research: https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/10/27/what-we-know-about-the-increase-in-u-s-murders-in-2020/
16. https://www.brookings.edu/research/want-to-reduce-violence-invest-in-place/#footnote-3
17. Gotham Magazine: https://www.gothamgazette.com/130-opinion/11143-relationship-between-violence-urban-inequality#:~:text=Violence%20disrupts%20learning%2C%20leads%20people,and%20actors%20within%20a%20neighborhood.
18. NEA Center for Great Public Schools: https://www.nea.org/sites/default/files/2020-09/Addressing%20the%20Epidemic%20of%20Trauma%20in%20Schools%20-%20NCSEA%20and%20NEA%20Report.pdf
19. https://vpc.org/studies/trauma17.pdf
20. https://vpc.org/studies/trauma17.pdf
21. NEA Center for Great Public Schools: https://www.nea.org/sites/default/files/2020-09/Addressing%20the%20Epidemic%20of%20Trauma%20in%20Schools%20-%20NCSEA%20and%20NEA%20Report.pdf
22. https://vpc.org/studies/trauma17.pdf
23. James Baldwin: https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1962/11/17/letter-from-a-region-in-my-mind