CHAPTER 4
CORE SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS

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Core social institutions can have a critical impact on the occurrence of violence in society.* In particular, the family and school are key because of their primary role in socializing the young and in developing prosocial behaviors. Research undertaken to date has produced much knowledge about these settings and has also added to our understanding of the complex interactions and reciprocal relationships between these and other contexts, particularly as they affect violence among youths.[21]

FAMILIES

The significance of the family has been observed with respect to patterns of violence outside and inside of the family unit. The Reports of the NAS Panels on Violence, High Risk Youth, and Child Abuse and Neglect stressed the influence of family structure and family life on violent behavior. Also, these Reports emphasized that community life has an enormous effect on the structure and organization of the family and the life chances of individual family members, both youths and adults. From a wealth of research on families and the development of children (e.g., relating to social behaviors, cognitive skills, or coping with stress), we know that family dynamics are key to shaping the next generation of adults.

Effects of Family Disruption on Violence Patterns

Family factors that are antecedents of violence include prior exposure to physical punishment, alcoholic or criminal parents, and "disharmonious parents who are likely to

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*Richard O. Lempert and Colin Loftin led the 1993 ASA Violence Workshop in identifying research opportunities regarding institutional settings in relation to violence.

separate or divorce" (Reiss and Roth 1993, p. 368).[22] Other features of the family like episodes of abuse or neglect, lack of nurturance, absence of adult supervision, and extreme parental stress or conflict are also broadly cited as risk factors for violence (Reiss and Roth 1993, p. 105). Indeed, holding neighborhood and social class constant, these risk factors are more compelling for individuals than whether or not a family is headed by one or more parents (McCord 1990).

Factors associated with family disruption also have an impact on communities. Research at the community level shows that increased family disorganization is related to neighborhood levels of crime. Environments with high densities of disorganized families—where quantity and quality of parenting is minimal, where family conflict and disruption is high, and where abandonment of children is more common than not, crime and violence are more likely to occur (Skogan 1989b, pp. 244-45).

The effect of disruption on families is not uniform across demographic groups. Studies indicate that the impact of changes in family structure is more pronounced in Black families than in White families. There is a mounting body of research indicating that family disruption has had the most adverse impact on Black females (Sampson 1986, p. 305; see also Sampson 1987). More than any other group, a higher proportion of Black women suffer the effects of limited economic opportunities, poverty, racial discrimination, male joblessness, and higher rates of out-of-wedlock births. As Hawkins (1987, pp. 199-200) concluded, the devaluation of Blacks in society may result in providing less protection and serious attention to Black women and their children. Therefore, while we know that, in general, family disruption has a strong independent relationship to violence, we need to further study the causal linkages among black poverty, economic discrimination, family disruption, and black criminality (see also Sampson 1986, p. 305).

Linking Neighborhood and Family Factors

Research has also added knowledge about the effects of community characteristics on families. The breakdown of communities discussed earlier takes its toll on families and creates the conditions ripe for family disruption and violence. Community factors like crowded housing, abandoned buildings and littered streets, the absence of adequate schools or community services, racial discrimination, and a lack of job opportunities contribute to family disruption, poverty, and stress. So too, neighborhoods with a high proportion of family "disruption" are more likely to undergo deterioration when residents are preoccupied by their own abject circumstances and are without the resources and networks to sustain community life (see Sampson and Lauritsen 1994, p. 56).

Nature and Extent of Family Violence

Scientific studies show that family violence is widely prevalent in American society. Much of the research to date has focused on spouses and children. In contrast, there has been little attention to parents (especially the elderly), siblings, and other family members.

While only rough estimates of the full scope of family violence can be derived[23] because of underreporting and conceptual (e.g., changing notions of family) and methodological (e.g., variations in definition, data collection, measurement) problems, there is no doubt that "the incidence of intrafamily violence remains extremely high" (Straus and Gelles 1990, p. 111). The Uniform Crime Reports indicate that in 1992 intrafamily homicides accounted for approximately 12 percent of all homicides (UCR 1994, p. 285).[24] Moreover, women and children are the most vulnerable to this most violent of family crimes: About 32 percent of these victims are wives; 21 percent, children; and 13 percent, husbands (UCR 1995, p. 19).

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Browne 1994) that the National Crime Victimization Survey provides conservative estimates of family violence in contrast to other surveys (e.g., Straus and Gelles 1990),[25] the data from the NCVS (1994, pp. 149-153) offer a consistent picture: Based on the crime categories measured by the NCVS in 1992 (crimes of rape, robbery, or assault), family violence accounted for seven percent of all violent crimes, and the vast majority of these were assaults (86 percent). Furthermore, the rate of victimization for women was substantially higher than for men (3.8 per 1,000 women compared to .8 per 1,000 men).[26]

The NAS Violence Report (Reiss and Roth 1993, pp. 223-224) highlighted distinctive features of family violence: Its dynamic quality resulting from a continuing and ongoing relationship between the victim and perpetrator, greater opportunity for its occurrence due to typically sharing the same living arrangements, a higher probability that such violence will be repeated, the relative powerlessness of one or more family members, and the very real possibility that family violence will go undetected or unreported to the police. All of these attributes are important in understanding the scope and nature of violence in the family.

Factors Associated with Family Violence

While family violence is not confined to low-income households, studies have consistently shown that it is related to such stress factors as poverty, unemployment or part-time employment of males, pregnancy in the case of wife abuse, or single-parent family status in the case of child abuse (Gelles 1990, pp. 115-116; Fagan and Browne 1994, pp. 201-206; UCAN 1993, p. 83). Other factors that shape the likelihood of family violence toward children and adults include social isolation, excessive drinking, the presence of children with special needs, and a large number of children in the household (Gelles 1990, pp. 115-

116). As these findings suggest, the same elements of family structure and disruption that link to family violence were those considered earlier as significant factors linking to violence levels more generally.

RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Important directions for research on families and violence should include the following:

❑ **Changing nature and dynamics of the family.** Studies are especially needed on the changing demography and structure of the family (e.g., increases in single, female-headed households; divorce; teenage mothers; female employment; proportion of children living in households below poverty) as they relate to violence. An agenda of research should go beyond what might appear to be associations of such factors to violence and identify spurious relationships as well as real and interaction effects. Also, special attention should be directed to understanding how family interaction and dynamics may inhibit or promote the expression of violence within the family and external to it. It is important to examine systematically the links between parenting skills, family coping mechanisms, and dispute resolution strategies (e.g., between adults in the family unit, between parent and child) in order to understand better the factors that promote violence and those that protect or insulate people from such acts.

❑ **The causes of violence in families.** No issue within the family is a higher public policy concern or more ripe for continued scientific study than family violence. We need to undertake longitudinal and multi-method prospective studies to illuminate what triggers violence under circumstances that appear to be similar on their face. Sustained study of the intergenerational heritability of violence from a sociological rather than a biological perspective has much to offer. For example, future research should examine whether violent parents and siblings teach children that vio-

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lence is an appropriate response, and whether the stresses caused by growing up in an abusive family trigger tendencies to abuse others. While extant data suggest the answers are "yes," much more rigorous research is required to determine the circumstances and high- and low-risk conditions within the family that lead to violence (UCAN 1993, p. 140-141; Reiss and Roth 1993, p. 239; HRY 1993, p. 249-250). Without more refined measurements, we cannot adequately design intervention strategies for dealing with family violence, whether between adults or between adults and children.

❑ **The family as a social context.** Since families do not stand alone, research energy must be directed to examining families in their social context. The next round of research should unravel whether violence is a function of internal family dynamics or part of a larger picture of family deterioration and disruption brought on by such factors as the erosion of family networks (to other families and social groups), isolation from community organizations, or the loss of employment. It is also crucial to track the impact of intervention and prevention efforts by undertaking systematic evaluations of family support programs and other ongoing efforts to keep "dysfunctional" families together. Both the NAS High Risk Youth (HRY 1993) and the NAS Child Abuse and Neglect (UCAN 1993, p. 9) Reports emphasized the need to examine the impact of social factors on family life: "The influence of family ties and organizational affiliations (including employment and education) are poorly understood but increasingly recognized as powerful forces in shaping parenting styles and family functioning." Investigating the interaction of these and other contextual conditions must be a high priority for future research.

SCHOOLS

Because of the salience of youth violence, the school is an important context for study. It is the single social institu-

tion where large groups of youths are located and where predatory violence, aggressive behaviors, or conflicts with the potential to escalate into violence can occur. Even though research on school violence is limited, we know enough to recognize that what happens in schools can either increase the risk of violence or buffer children from it.

Beyond the family, no setting is more relevant to the socialization of youths than the school. The process of instruction, the operating rules and procedures, and even the organization and administration of the school comprise the informal curricula that teaches children about the nature of permissible and impermissible behavior, the dynamics of authority and peer relationships, and the meaning of just and unjust practices. Furthermore, specific situational conditions (e.g., an aggregation of youths; students with low self-esteem or low motivation; an absence of institutional resources; a curriculum that does not engage students; gang activity on school premises) may make schools ripe for the expression of violence.

Scope of School Violence

Over thirty years ago, there was awareness of the need to know more about violence, disruption, and safety in schools (e.g., see Stinchcombe 1964). In 1976, the National Institute of Education (NIE) undertook a massive survey of students (31,373) and teachers (23,895) in junior and senior high schools in rural areas, suburban communities, and small and large cities (NIE 1978). Based on these data, Toby (1983, 1990, 1993/1994) and G. Gottfredson and D. Gottfredson (1985) have identified the appreciable levels of everyday violence occurring in schools. Zahn similarly concluded that "about 2.4 million secondary school students have something stolen from them in a given month at school and about 282,000 are attacked in a given month. Among secondary school teachers, some 5,200 are physically attacked, with 1,000

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needing medical attention as a result, another 6,000 have something taken from them by force, weapons or threats" (1993, p. 4).

As noted in the Introduction to this Report, recent studies show that violence in schools is increasing, both in rural and urban centers. The 1993 National School Boards Association survey of school districts reported not just an increase in the incidence of school violence but also a dramatic increase in the seriousness of these events (NSBA 1993, p. 4). In addition, a 1993 survey conducted by the Harris Poll for the Harvard School of Public Health reported that some 135,000 guns are brought into school each day and, even in elementary school, one-fourth of the suspensions are for violent incidents (Metropolitan Life Survey of the American Teacher 1994).

Factors Associated with School Violence

Using primarily the NIE data, researchers have examined what accounts for violence among those attending schools or among intruders who see the school as a vulnerable site. For example, Toby found greater stranger violence in big-city schools, where more individuals may be unknown to each other or where there may be more intruders on the premises or loiterers in the vicinity (1983, pp. 18-20). Also, the NAS Violence Panel concluded that higher rates of violence may occur in schools where social control is ineffective (e.g., poor discipline in the classroom, weak administration, arbitrary enforcement of rules) and where in the aggregate students demonstrate low levels of commitment and attachment to dominant values evident in schools (Reiss and Roth 1993, p. 156). Such a situation may be brought on by the school environment itself or may reflect the self-selection that occurs when students of the best academic talent have greater options to gravitate to schools where there are fewer behavior problems and fewer demoralized teachers and administrators (Toby 1983, pp. 36-38).

School Violence in its Social Context

In focusing on the potential impact of the school environment in producing violence, it is important to recognize that, like other social institutions of society, the school is not freestanding. That the rate of in-school violence is higher in districts with higher crime rates and with a greater number of gangs is an indicator that schools in large measure reflect their communities (Toby 1993/1994, pp. 7-8). Given that schools are embedded in communities, and youth behavior is linked to family functioning, it is very difficult to disentangle interaction effects among these social environments. Just as youths' experiences and conflicts in school affect their functioning in other domains, so too do their lives within the family and community spillover onto how they function within the school context. (See, e.g., Gottfredson 1995.)

RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Important directions for research on schools and violence should include the following:

❑ **Schools as a social setting.** Much more research is needed about how youths interact in school or school-related functions. As the NAS Violence Report (Reiss and Roth 1993, p. 341) emphasized, there is a "dearth of information on the frequencies, causes, and special consequences of violent events in [schools]." Studies should address why and under what circumstances violence breaks out in certain school situations and what factors within the classroom, climate, or organizational structure of educational settings lead to, or away from, violence. It is also important to determine whether observed violence in school activities is related only to young people assembling in the same place, potentially without supervision, or whether it is a direct effect of the activity itself (e.g., sporting events may heighten competitiveness and aggression, or the dynamics emerging out of strong in/out group

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identification). In addition, research should focus on strategies or features of school life that support constructive conflict resolution and prosocial behavior.

❑ **Schools as a context for study of high-risk youth.** The school is an excellent context for long-term study of young people at high risk for violence—both as perpetrators and victims. The school environment can serve as a microcosm for insights about violence both inside and outside of the school setting. The accessibility of a broad youth population, required attendance, and the cost effectiveness of research in an institutional context commend the school as an important site for research (UCAN 1993, p. 184). Essentially more research is needed about youth behavior and interaction in schools because, by focusing on schools, we can learn more about how to engender safer educational environments more conducive to learning and learn more about youth violence generally.

❑ **Schools as a site for violence prevention.** Schools are an important intervention point for violence prevention. The next round of research should examine how educational programs affect the general quality of schools (e.g., intensive programs to build reading or leadership skills) and influence the expression of violence. In addition, evaluation studies of policies such as school uniform requirements, staggered closing times, presence of police, metal detectors, and campus confinement rules should be done. So too incentive programs, such as promises of college education for those who stay in school, must be examined, ideally prospectively and with matched controls. Similarly, there is a need and an opportunity to compare schools that have successful violence-reduction programs with those that are less effective. Whatever the intent of the intervention or policy for reducing the incidence of violence, without rigorous evaluation, it is impossible to determine what does and does *not* work.

OTHER INSTITUTIONAL SECTORS

Other societal institutions require examination in their own terms and, most importantly, in interaction with others. For example, the church, voluntary and social organizations, the workplace, and the welfare system all affect the lives of people and shape their understandings of the norms of appropriate behavior. Important directions for research in other institutional contexts should include the following:

RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

❑ **The workplace as an illustrative sector.** More attention should be paid to the increasing incidence of violence in the workplace. Isolating the factors that account for the manifestation of violence among employees and between employers and employees is important. Also, because of the time people spend at work, research must address spillover effects of violence from other contexts into the work setting (e.g., a violent spouse who stalks an employee at work) and vice versa (see also UCAN 1993, p. 13). Further, it is essential to investigate occupation-specific issues such as why some jobs have higher rates of worker violence than others, what features of job sites may make them vulnerable to violence, and even whether certain occupations attract violence-prone people.[27] So too, research is needed on the consequences of violence beyond injury to victims (e.g., lost wages, impact of fear on productivity, staff turnover), and on workplace interventions that can be effective in prevention.

❑ **Interactions across institutional sectors.** To date, research on violence has tended to focus on specific social processes and settings without sufficient attention to the links and interactions across social institutions. Prior studies demonstrate that individuals are influenced simultaneously by multiple social roles, institutions, and contexts. The next round of research should be devoted to how precisely these contexts interact to produce or inhibit violence.

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