Youth Violence: Questions for a broader Perspective

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Researchers in the criminal justice field have long observed and studied the causes of and contributions to youth violence in the United States. Young people are overrepresented as both victims and perpetrators of violence. The increase in violence in the United States during the 1980's and early 1990's was due primarily to an increase in violent acts committed by people under age 20 (Blumstein, 2002). The causes of and contributions to youth violence have been similar throughout the research including increased use of handguns, illicit drug market, increase in divorce and female headed households, poor family structure, and increased gang activity (Blumstein, 2002; Browne, 2010; Massey & Denton, 1993; Sampson, 1987). While this view on youth violence in America has been accumulated through research, youth violence within the United States continues to be an issue in many different areas. The problem is focused around researchers not looking at youth violence in a broader perspective: a sociological perspective.

Society has focused too much on the person, meaning the youth, rather than the situation that the youth is in and how that affects behavior (Ross and Nisbett, 2011). It is important that society begins to look out how our culture itself continues to contribute to this violence. People within society must begin to ask themselves questions around why the youth behave the way they do. Society should not focus on the use of handguns but why are the youth even gaining access to

them and why they feel they need guns. Society should not ask why the youth selling drugs are but why drugs are seem necessary in this nation. Let society not just focus on the increase of divorce and female headed households but also on why divorce is as high as it's ever been and why can't female headed households be seen just as successful as a two parent household. And lastly, society should not focus on how gang activity increased but why gangs are necessary in our communities. Each of these societal problems should be looked at from a perspective where the youth is not the focus but the situation/society is the focus. This article will focus on what are the cultural underpinnings conducive to youth violence in American today and what society does to contribute to the violence as a whole: how the situation creates the potential for youth violence or how the situation itself is the violence.

The Person versus the Situation

"We see things that aren't there and we make predictions that we ought not to make" we privilege the "person" and we discount the influence of the "situation". It speaks, in short, to the very broadest questions of human perceptions" (Ross and Nisbett, 2011). In our society, we often focus heavily on the bad or good a human being partakes in and forget to look deeper into the situation that person is in and how that may affect their behavior. This is also connected to the youth violence we see here in the United States. The data collected around youth violence makes it apparent that there are factors within society that may contribute to this violence. This data does not always mention the situations in which the youth may be surrounded that lead to this violence. For example, if a child is struggling for food to eat because his/her parents can not afford to buy groceries and decides to steal food from a convenient store but gets caught. We

blame the child when the real violence however is the situation that requires the child to steal food. In this situation, society automatically says "This child is a thief and they should be punished for this". But take a step back and look at the situation at hand. It is typical for us as a society to blame the child for his/her wrongdoing but doesn't focus on blaming situation. It is important to look at why in a nation with so much opportunity; our nation still has families who do not have hot meals to eat for dinner. It is a question for the broader perspective of our society. This child who has stolen food to feed his/her family has only done what is necessary to survive. The situation itself called for the child to seek other ways to get this food because the parents were unable to. With lack of resources being one of the many causes of youth violence in the United States, it is now an issue in society to recognize what is necessary to increase the resources needed for the family to survive. According to the Social Learning Theory, behavior is often patterned after the observed habits of others. As individuals, we observe when others are successful or unsuccessful in meeting their needs and desires. We tent to copy the modeled successful strategies while ignoring the poor choices (Bandura, 1976). Youth often follow the behaviors they may have seen from other youth or parents when they find themselves in situations without resources they can afford. If America as a whole would focus on what its people are lacking and what strategies we could possibly come up with to tackle some of these situations, it may then become easier to reduce things such as youth violence.

Society and Regulations

America is viewed by many as a competitive society that focuses much on the success of the individual rather than the success of the collective. This means that we often do not pay attention

to the different issues surrounding us if it does not impact us individually. Youth violence is the result of situational factors in the collapse of our society. Imagine living in a society where each man and woman had the same opportunities and resources needed to succeed, where racism and sexism was eliminated and people were provided the resources individuals to grow as members of society. As much as we would love a nation like this, it unfortunately isn't how the United States is. The competition to succeed hampered by situational inequality is violent itself and increases the likelihood of youth violence as a result. Why is this important to the topic of this article? Youth violence should be looked at from a multilevel perspective. We have formal sanctions for any person who may commit a crime but not the situation. Society should focus on how situations are regulated prior to youth coming to the attention of some authority figure. Formal sanctions often regulate what is seen by the public. Even after the youth is punished for a violent act, it is hard to recognize whether the sanction had a negative or positive effect. Will it help change the behavior? In a society where not enough focus is centered on the youth's situation, the regulation of unwanted situations is not recognized and youth violence becomes more extreme. It is up to us as a society to recognize signs or potential issues that will cause this youth violence and stop it in its tracks. This is not to say that all activities that youth participate in can be regulated at all times. There are far too many youth within this society alone to keep track of 24 hours a day. But it is our responsibility to focus on society as a whole. When looking at the broader perspective, we don't focus only on why youth are committing violence after we focus on how society can regulate productive social interventions to keep this violence from escalating.

Culture and Youth Violence

Within each state there are different communities and different subcultures with that community. Sometimes a state itself may have its own culture that includes specific rituals that everyone within that state conforms to. A culture and its patterns, beliefs, and behaviors often need to be managed, regulated and changed. Often time's troubled youth are surrounded by a culture that isn't the best for their development and causes them to act in violent ways. Looking at culture in a broader perspective, we would ask ourselves what does culture and society allow that causes this youth violence. For example, research has shown the black male joblessness predicted variation in rates of black family disruption, which was significantly related to rates of black murder and robbery, particularly by juveniles (Hawkins, 2000). While this information isn't newly found, we need to look deeper. The culture within the United States allows for these statistics to continue rather than fix what the deeper issues are: creating more jobs and opportunities for all people. Youth violence in the United States has become its own culture and this is more violent than the youth violence itself. This is simply because of our capitalistic and competitive society which is a situation leading to youthful violence. Society continues to add more youth into our juvenile justice system when in fact we could avoid that process if we as a society would just focus on the culture we are building and changing it for the better. General statistics, for example that violence correlates with absent fathers for male youth must be looked at from a broader perspective. If our culture teaches our young male's culture leaves young males at greater risk for violence. Culture itself has a large influence on what we consider to be right or wrong. If a culture has issues within it that can potentially cause youth violence to escalate, that culture is in need of change. Whether it be connected to the previous example of removing certain stereotypes of what can happen if a parent is missing or if it connected to how

much we believe our culture has an influence on us, we must work to change what the culture in these communities are built upon.

What's next: Solutions for a better tomorrow?

Societal Changes

Society is a very important component to the youth violence that occurs within the United States. These situations in which the youth live will eventually be responsible for what is occurring between youth in our nation. Society must begin to worry not only on the individual but the collective. It is important that society does not worry more about the issues in other nations before focusing on the issues within the United States. The research recognizes the situations that many of the youth who commit violent acts are placed in. Some youth are lacking the resources necessary to survive and thrive. Others are being exposed to different people, places and things that our nation itself should not be exposed to. Once the situations in which the youth live in are changed then the society as a whole begins to change automatically. It will become a cycle where youth and adults will then understand that the situations they are currently in can be fixed. If the access to handguns, drugs, and gang activity was limited, then it would be easier for the youth to avoid violence. If lack of resources such a food mentioned earlier in this essay was not as big of an issue as it is, a child would not have to worry about stealing food because it would already be provided for them. That would be one less worry for the youth in our nation. Societal changes to the situations around us can be one of the solutions for a better tomorrow for our youth.

Fixing Our Education System

Education is the key to what will help people succeed in life. If there is one thing that cannot be taken away from you, it is knowledge. Because education is such an important component to moving forward in life, society should focus more on keeping our children in school and connecting with the youth to help them better understand why education is so important. Many of our youth find ways not to attend school or do the bare minimum while they are attending. This is not helpful and will not allow the youth to show their true potential to excel within the school building. It is important for society to make policies and other intense interventions that will include real-world hands on learning. The education system in the United States must begin to include not only academic testing to measure the learning of their students but also group discussions, weekly internships, volunteering opportunities, and interactive nature activities throughout the school year that will prepare the students for the real world. This has already been implemented in some schools but not all. If this becomes a national ritual, students will begin to feel like they are getting the most out of their education rather than a teacher who talks at them for most of the day. Once education is restored and rethought, society will see improvement in testing skcores, interactions between students, and also the amount of students who will focus on continuing education in college and other places. It is important that society works together to create these changes within our education system and then implement these changes. Working towards a better tomorrow for the youth starts with education.

Conclusion

The current research has found to be what they believe is the causes of youth violence in our nation. What the research seems to be missing are the societal responses to the situations in

which the youth is forced into being in. By society continuing to focus on one person, broad societal conditions are missed meaning our individual responses will not be enough. There are many different programs specific to helping the youth be productive citizens but unfortunately until the broader societal issues are fixed, the other interventions will not help the current situation of crime around us. People's inflated belief in the importance of personality traits and dispositions, together with their failure to recognize the importance of situational factors in affecting behavior, has been termed the "fundamental attribution error" (Ross, 1977; Nisbett & Ross, 1980). What we fail to realize as a society is exactly what brings our youth down even more. We must begin to fix the situations in order to reduce the amount of violence we see around us. Society should focus on the conditions in which the youth live in which means removing the harmful conditions and building helpful ones. This on-going cycle of violence can be broken by changing the cultural situations that make violence an option for the individual. It is up to us, SOCIETY, to make these changes.

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