

# Exposure to Community Violence and Protective and Risky Contexts Among Low Income Urban African American Adolescents: A Prospective Study

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**Abstract** This study examined protective and risky companionship and locations for exposure to community violence among African American young adolescents living in high crime, urban areas. The Experience Sampling Method (ESM), an in vivo data collection method, was employed to gather information from 233 students (62% female) over 3 years, beginning in the 6th grade. Questionnaire variables of exposure to community violence were regressed onto ESM companionship and location variables, cross-sectionally and longitudinally, separately for boys and girls. At different points, time spent with parents, in school, and outside in private space was associated with less exposure to violence for boys and girls, while time spent with girls was protective for boys. In addition, time spent outside in public and with older peers was associated with increased risk for boys and girls. These findings are discussed in relation to previous and potential future research, and to strategies to prevent exposure to community violence.

**Keywords** Time sampling technique · Exposure to community violence · African American · Urban low income

## Introduction

Children's exposure to community violence has become a substantial public health concern over the past several decades (Glodich 1998; Pynoos 1993). Its negative psychological ramifications have been well documented over this period (Fowler et al. 2009). Exposure to community violence has been shown to increase young people's risk for anxiety (Cooley-Quille et al. 2001; Finkelhor 1995), depressive symptoms (DuRant et al. 1995; Kliewer et al. 1998), posttraumatic stress disorder (Margolin and Gordis 2000), aggression (Bell and Jenkins 1993), and academic failure (Schwartz and Gorman 2003). In addition to the psychological sequelae of exposure to community violence, researchers have examined demographic predictors of exposure to community violence in young people. This body of work indicates that African Americans are more often exposed to violence than European Americans (Bell and Jenkins 1993). Males tend to endorse higher levels of exposure to community violence than females (Ceballos et al. 2001; Weist et al. 2001), while older youth report higher levels than younger (Klaus and Rennison 2002). Overall, exposure to community violence has been found to exist among different racial, cultural and socioeconomic groups; however, African American youth in urban, low-income communities have been shown to be more at risk for being exposed to community violence than any other population in the United States (Gladstein 1992; Stein et al. 2003). Thus, research has both established a host of harmful consequences of exposure to community violence and identified demographic groups most at risk for this exposure. However, it remains unclear how the locations in which youth spend their time and the people with whom they spend time are related to their amount of exposure to community violence. This paper aims to begin to answer

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which locations and companionship serve as protective and risky factors for exposure to community violence among urban African American young adolescents.

### Adolescence

Adolescence is considered by many to be a time for youth to individuate from their parents and find their own identity (Havinghurst 1984). During this period, adolescents perceive themselves to be separating from their parents both psychologically and behaviorally (Steinberg and Silverberg 1986). As young people begin to spend more time away from their parents and in unstructured and unsupervised activities, they may be at greater risk for engaging in delinquent activities. This is especially the case since adolescents are already prone to engage in risky behavior. During this period the frontal lobe of the brain (responsible for planning and controlling impulsivity) is not yet fully formed (Sowell et al. 2001) and adolescents' cognition is thought to be marked by beliefs of invulnerability (Feldman 2007). In tandem with these biological and cognitive risk factors, early adolescence also marks the beginning of a period of greater influence of peers as young people endeavor to seek approval from agemates in different social circles (Steinberg 2007). Steinberg and Silverberg (1986) found that, although autonomy increased in relation to parents, it actually decreased in relation to peers, during early adolescence, indicating growing susceptibility to peers. These peer groups are thought to exert more influence in the late childhood and early adolescent years as young people attempt to assert their own identities away from their families (Hartup and Stevens 1997; Larson and Richards 1991). As adolescents in dangerous environments attempt to navigate this transitional period with greater autonomy, the decisions that they make regarding companionship and locations may play a crucial role in determining the extent to which they witness or are victimized by community violence.

### Risk Factors for Exposure to Community Violence

Consistent with both social disorganization theory and routine activities theory, research suggests that low-income urban communities are beset by a number of problems that make youth's exposure to violence more likely. Public areas such as parks and playgrounds are often associated with unstructured time in which young people "hang out" unsupervised (Richards et al. 2004). Social disorganization theory, espoused by Sampson and Groves (1989), holds that this unstructured time may be particularly problematic in communities in which resources are scarce. In addition to a lack of participation in community organizations and smaller friendship networks, Sampson and Groves maintain

that parental control in low income communities may be less available and effective than in areas with greater resources (Sampson and Groves 1989). Thus, adults in neighborhoods with scarce resources will be less likely to supervise and monitor the youth in their community (Brody et al. 2001). This lack of collective control over young people has been associated with higher rates of youth crime and delinquency (Sampson and Groves 1989; Sampson and Raudenbush 1999).

Similarly, routine activities theory examines the situations in which violent crime might arise from everyday interactions in environments such as the ones faced by these young people. Routine activities theory originated as a general theory of crime that posited that three factors lead to criminal behavior: probable offenders, a possible target, and the absence of authority figures to prevent it (Cohen and Felson 1979). A number of studies have supported how this theory holds true across a variety of normal activities, places, and types of crime (Sasse 2005). Routine activities theory has been tested as a mediator in a link between gang membership and victimization by community violence (Taylor et al. 2008). Other researchers have shown the contextual effect of parental monitoring on unstructured socializing to explain rates of delinquency, integrating routine activities theory with social disorganization theory (Osgood and Anderson 2004).

Researchers have found that violence often occurs during idle times when youth are unsupervised (Stiffman et al. 1996). Richards et al. (2004), by employing the Experience Sampling Method (ESM) in a cross-sectional study of African American urban young adolescents, found that adolescents are exposed to greater levels of community violence when they spend more time in unstructured and unsupervised activities. Urban low income adolescents are particularly at risk for spending more time on the street because they lack access to sports, out-of-school activities, and programs that are structured and monitored (Carnegie Council on Adolescence 1992). As a result, when children enter adolescence in urban American areas, they begin to spend more time on the "streets" and "wandering" (Stoolmiller 1994). Jarrett's (1998) qualitative work describes a "street system" into which young people in impoverished communities can be socialized. This system values the exploitation of others to obtain whatever limited resources are available. When not redirected, Jarrett posits, these young people move down a pathway that places them at significantly heightened risk to perpetrate and be victimized by violence. Some empirical work appears to demonstrate this trajectory in a sample of 667 Hispanic and African American 6th grade students. Statistical analyses revealed that negative parenting (defined as abuse of the child, poor attachment, or lack of involvement with the child) was associated with peer delinquency, which, in

turn, was linked to an increase in levels of exposure to community violence over 1 year (Salzinger et al. 2006). Richards et al. (2004) also determined cross-sectionally that more time spent with friends was associated with more exposure to community violence. The current article examines specific aspects of young people's daily experiences, where and with whom they spend time, that could place them at risk for exposure to community violence in a high crime, low-income urban area.

### Protective Factors for Exposure to Community Violence

While a number of potential pitfalls exist for youth living in dangerous communities, research indicates that communities and families can reduce the risk of exposure to the occurrence of community violence. Studies have demonstrated that parental supervision and support in urban communities can mitigate the psychological consequences of being exposed to violence (Burton and Jarrett 2000; Hammack et al. 2004). In a qualitative examination of low-income African American youth and their families, Jarrett (1997) found that some parents control their children's activities and associations within the community by drastically curtailing their ability to spend time in the community. These efforts are taken to minimize their children's opportunities to become involved in delinquent activities, as well as to limit exposure to community violence in dangerous communities. In line with these results, time spent with family was negatively associated cross-sectionally with exposure to community violence (Richards et al. 2004).

Parents often attempt to involve their children in structured activities that can both build skill sets and shelter them from negative influences. Research indicates that participation in structured activities during adolescence helps young people negotiate the development of autonomy with parents' approval (Larson et al. 2007). Within urban under-resourced communities, Floyd (1996) found that a select group of connected adults were able to provide organization and support for important institutions that made a difference in a number of young people's lives. Often local schools provide some of this opportunity for structured activity after the official school day has ended. Young people who are able to take advantage of these opportunities and take part in structured extracurricular activities, homework, and games have been shown to be exposed to less community violence (Luthar et al. 2000; Richards et al. 2004).

### Gender and Exposure to Community Violence

Although a number of studies have been amassed to indicate that males are more often exposed to community violence than females (Buka et al. 2001; Selner-O'Hagan

et al. 1998; Weist et al. 2001), few articles have examined gender when analyzing risk and protective factors for that exposure. When gender has been studied, results have been mixed. One study of urban African American early adolescents found no gender differences in risky and protective contexts for exposure to community violence (Richards et al. 2004). Salzinger et al. (2006) found gender differences in what predicted exposure to community violence. They discovered that girls' individual behavior, as well as the delinquent behavior of their friends, directly increased their risk for exposure; however, among boys, the influence of delinquent friends determined subsequent risk for exposure relatively more than their own deviant behavior. In a large sample of urban, African American early adolescents, Lambert et al. (2005) found "limited" significant results for females when examining the genders separately; however, they determined that when males were more aggressive and less anxious they showed increases in witnessing violence. Weist et al. (2001) determined that repetition of grade was a risk factor for community violence victimization for males but not females, while life stress predicted such victimization for females alone. Thus, no clear picture emerges of gender differences in risk and protective factors for exposure to community violence and virtually no literature has explored possible differential associations between adolescents' daily experiences and exposure to community violence.

### Current Study

This study aims to fill in gaps in the current literature regarding risk and protective factors for exposure to community violence. Only very recently have studies emerged examining several different potential precursors to exposure to community violence. These studies tend to focus upon questionnaire reports of associations of internal states (e.g., aggression or anxiety) or relationships with significant others (e.g., association with delinquent peers and parental monitoring). This study uses the ESM technique to obtain an in vivo account of adolescents' companionship and location and then relates these contexts to their report of the witnessing of and victimization by community violence. This study is also the first of its kind to use this ecologically valid data to examine these relations both longitudinally and in a cross-sectional manner over 3 years to gain a better understanding of what might cause exposure to community violence. In addition, the literature remains unclear on the extent to which risk and protective factors exist for males and females. In contrast to an earlier study with a cross-sectional data set of 5–8th grade students (Richards et al. 2004), this study examines potential protective and risky contexts cross-sectionally and

longitudinally for each gender separately using the Experience Sampling Method within a population of low-income, urban African American early adolescents.

Since the extant literature does not provide sufficient guidance with regard to gender differences, the following hypotheses are expected to hold true for both males and females both cross-sectionally and longitudinally. First, more time spent in risky locations (i.e., outdoors-public, outdoors-private, and in transition) and with risky companions (i.e., older peers, opposite sex peers, and same sex peers) will be linked to higher levels of exposure to community violence. Second, time spent in protective locations (i.e., home and school) or with protective companions (i.e., parents and extended family) will predict less exposure to community violence. Finally, this paper will examine the predictors separately by gender to understand the risky and protective profile for boys and girls.

## Methods

### Participants

Data were collected from 233 African American students over three successive years beginning in 6th grade. The sample was drawn from six low-income urban Chicago public schools chosen because of their location in high crime neighborhoods (as determined by Chicago Police Department statistics derived from the year prior to the study's inception). Of all the students asked to be included in this study, 58% agreed to participate. In order for the child to participate, signatures on both the parent consent form and the child assent form were required. At the end of data collection, students were rewarded with games, sports equipment, and gift certificates.

The majority of the sample came from lower-income households, with the median family income ranging between \$10,000 and \$20,000, as reported by the parent or guardian. Nearly half (48%) of all participants lived in single-parent households; and the median household size was five people. At Time 1, the average age of participants was 12 and 59% of the sample was female.

### Procedure

Longitudinal data were collected over 3 years for 1 week each year beginning when students were in the 6th grade (Time 1) and continuing through 7th grade (Time 2) and 8th grade (Time 3). The Experience Sampling Method (ESM) was used to collect in vivo information from the participants regarding their location, activities, companionship, thoughts, and emotions. Participants were required to carry watches and notebooks with them for 1 week.

When school was not in session, watches would signal participants every 90 min. During school hours, students received only two signals. This method of signaling was created in order to increase the likelihood of capturing a child's exposure to community violence and minimize school disruption. When signaled, students were asked to complete a brief self-report form including information such as where they were, what they were doing, and whom they were with, in addition to what they were thinking and feeling. Participants were carefully trained by research assistants as to how to properly complete the forms. In addition, research staff members were made available each day at school in order to answer questions and make sure that ESM standards were being upheld by participants. During the week, students received a total of 51 signals. Any participant who responded to fewer than 15 of these signals was not included in the analyses. There was an 82% compliance rate for responses to signals, with a median of 42. During the week of ESM responding, the students and parents were also asked to complete questionnaires. The same children were asked to participate during all 3 years of this study; and the same procedures were carried out during these 3 years.

### Measures

#### *Exposure to Community Violence*

Participants completed a self-report questionnaire that included witnessing and victimization subscales that were derived from the "My Exposure to Community Violence Interview," an interview created and validated by Buka et al. (1997). A community violence scale was created based on the person who committed the crime, with witnessing and victimization subscales. Perpetrators who were family members were not included in this study to focus on violence outside of the home in the community. Based on a 5-point scale ranging from 0 (never) to 4 (four or more times), the youth participants rated how much they had been exposed to violent acts in the past year, both as a witness and as a victim. Thirteen items asked about witnessing (e.g. "Have you seen someone being killed by another person?" and "Have you heard or seen a fight that made you feel afraid?") with Cronbach's alphas of .69 at Time 1, .73 at Time 2, and .57 at Time 3. Thirteen items inquired about victimization (e.g., "Have you been threatened with a knife or a gun?" and "Have you been hit, kicked, or beat up by someone?") with Cronbach's alphas of .67 at Time 1, .59 at Time 2, and .60 at Time 3. When examined separately, few differences emerged between witnessing and victimization in their relation to the independent variables. The two scales correlated at .64 across all 3 years. Thus, in order to obtain the overall level of

exposure to community violence, the score for these 25 responses was averaged.

### Companionship

Each time participants were signaled to complete the ESM questionnaire, they were asked, “Who were you with?” Participants then chose from a detailed list of possibilities. For the purpose of this study, protective companionship was the overall percentage of time spent with *parents* and *extended family*. The time spent with *same sex peers*, *opposite sex peers*, and *older peers* was also calculated to comprise risky companionship. Good inter-rater reliability was demonstrated for this coding process, which ranged from .96 to .98.

### Location

When signaled using ESM, participants reported their location. Specific settings (e.g., math class) were then coded into broader categories (e.g., in school). The protective location categories used in these analyses were *home* and *school*, while the risky locations were *outdoor public*, *outdoor private*, and *in transition*. *Home* included the specific rooms within the house, while the *school* setting included rooms both in class (e.g., science or music class) and out of class (e.g., library, bathroom). The *outdoor public* setting entailed outdoor public environments, parks, playgrounds, etc., while *outdoor private* incorporated areas outside but on the premises of the home (e.g., front porch, backyard). Time spent *in transition* included time out walking, on buses, in cars and other means of transportation. Good inter-rater reliability was demonstrated for this coding process, and ranged from .91 to .97.

## Results

### Data Analyses

Means, standard deviations and bivariate correlations of survey and ESM variables are shown in Tables 1 and 2. At each year (Times 1–3) regression analyses were performed with the elements of each context (i.e., protective and risky companionship, and protective and risky location were computed into four different regressions) added simultaneously into regression equations to predict exposure to community violence. For longitudinal analyses, the elements of each context predicted the next year’s exposure to community violence, after the previous year’s exposure to community violence was controlled. Given the literature suggesting gender differences, these analyses were computed separately by gender.

### Cross-Sectional Results

Among 6th grade students, significant predictors of exposure to community violence were found only for boys. As hypothesized, for young adolescent males in 6th grade, more time in their home ( $\beta = -.38, p < .01$ ) and at school ( $\beta = -.32, p < .05$ ) was associated with less exposure to community violence (see Table 3). Similarly, the more time that the boys spent in outdoors-public, the more they were exposed to violence ( $\beta = .73, p < .001$ ). However, contrary to hypotheses, the more time spent outdoors-private, the less exposed boys were to violence ( $\beta = -.44, p < .05$ ). Among sixth grade girls, contrary to expectations, none of the contexts (i.e., risky or protective) for company or setting were significant predictors of exposure to community violence.

Among 7th grade boys, two contexts were found to be significant predictors of exposure to community violence (see Table 4): time in public was associated with higher levels of exposure to community violence ( $\beta = .39, p < .05$ ), while time with parents was associated with lower levels of exposure to community violence ( $\beta = -.26, p < .05$ ). Contrary to expectation, none of the contexts was related to exposure to community violence among girls.

Among 8th grade students, fewer contexts were found to be associated with exposure to community violence for boys than girls (see Table 5). Among both boys ( $\beta = -.30, p < .01$ ) and girls ( $\beta = -.33, p < .01$ ), more time in school was associated with less exposure to community violence. No other significant predictor of exposure to community violence was found for boys. Among girls, more time spent outdoors-public ( $\beta = .36, p < .05$ ) was associated with more exposure to community violence, while more time spent outside-private ( $\beta = -.31, p < .01$ ) was associated with less. Additionally, among 8th grade girls, more time spent with parents was linked to less exposure to community violence ( $\beta = -.20, p < .05$ ).

### Longitudinal Results

Among 6th grade students, one significant predictor of exposure to community violence in 7th grade was found (see Table 6). Among boys, more time spent with opposite sex peers predicted a decrease in exposure to community violence ( $\beta = -.33, p < .05$ ). Among 6th grade girls, no context variables were associated with exposure to community violence increases from 6th to 7th grade.

Among 7th grade students, several contexts were found to be associated with increases in exposure to community violence from 7th to 8th grade, as hypothesized (see Tables 7, 8). The more time males and females spent associating with older peers, the greater the increase of their exposure to community violence ( $\beta = .33, p < .01$ ;

**Table 1** Male and female gender correlations years 1, 2, 3

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. T1 At home	–	–.45**	–.37**	–.75**	–.06	–.04	.29**	.06	.04	–.08	.21*
2. T1 In school	.44**	–	–.19*	–.22*	–.11	–.26**	–.31**	–.04	–.07	.06	.01
3. T1 Outdoors private	–.62**	–.14	–	.55**	.35**	.09	–.14	–.08	–.00	–.06	–.21*
4. T1 Outdoors public	–.78**	–.22	.79**	–	.10	.22*	–.10	–.05	.01	.01	–.23*
5. T1 In transit	–.14	–.05	.22	.22	–	.17	.03	–.03	.03	–.02	.01
6. T1 With extended family	–.05	–.15	.10	.18	.09	–	.25**	.05	.08	.03	–.07
7. T1 With parents	.30*	–.37**	–.12	–.07	.15	.12	–	–.02	.14	–.06	.10
8. T1 With same sex peers	–.19	.04	.11	.19	.14	–.00	.04	–	–.15	.16	–.18
9. T1 With opposite sex peers	–.01	–.25*	–.00	.19	–.05	–.09	.14	–.15	–	–.05	.13
10. T1 With older peers	.07	–.11	–.05	–.01	–.04	–.12	.16	.12	.07	–	.12
11. T2 At home	.38**	–.07	–.42**	–.38**	–.14	–.03	.08	.04	–.02	.04	–
12. T2 In school	.06	.00	.04	–.03	–.00	.04	.05	–.06	–.03	.14	–.58**
13. T2 Outdoors private	–.47**	.04	.63**	.50**	.17	–.09	–.23	.04	–.01	–.09	–.55**
14. T2 Outdoors public	–.50**	.09	.49**	.48**	.17	–.00	–.13	.02	.04	–.15	–.67**
15. T2 In transit	–.15	.05	.13	.16	.12	–.22	–.20	.14	.11	–.09	–.15
16. T2 With extended family	–.03	.03	–.10	.00	.17	.56**	–.05	.05	–.24	.01	.13
17. T2 With parents	.10	–.04	–.12	–.12	.10	–.21	.20	.10	–.03	.09	.27*
18. T2 With same sex peers	–.28*	.11	.28*	.21	.30*	.09	–.22	.18	–.15	–.21	–.14
19. T2 With opposite sex peers	.01	.10	–.05	–.04	–.10	–.20	.00	–.01	.25	–.03	–.08
20. T2 With older peers	–.06	.21	–.11	–.05	.16	.09	.01	.13	–.10	.31*	–.15
21. T3 At home	.37**	–.12	–.20	–.34**	.10	–.17	.09	.14	–.19	.13	.56**
22. T3 In school	.03	–.12	.01	.05	–.06	–.01	.01	–.29*	.27*	–.02	–.46**
23. T3 Outdoors private	–.33**	.10	.28*	.31*	–.02	.22	–.07	.09	–.14	–.08	–.13
24. T3 Outdoors public	–.43**	.25*	.19	.32**	–.02	.20	–.08	.14	–.04	–.13	–.15
25. T3 In transit	–.28*	.11	.25*	.24	.23	.05	.03	.02	.15	.03	–.14
26. T3 With extended family	–.24	.25*	.15	.06	.15	.40**	–.12	.21	–.29*	–.08	–.04
27. T3 With parents	.23	–.31*	.02	–.04	.20	–.26*	.43**	.12	.04	.06	.30*
28. T3 With same sex peers	.03	–.18	–.02	.10	–.08	.28*	–.11	–.09	–.06	–.08	.01
29. T3 With opposite sex peers	.11	.13	–.17	–.22	–.07	–.12	.09	.16	.09	.10	.03
30. T3 With older peers	–.11	.18	–.08	–.02	–.03	.03	–.16	–.12	–.08	.22	.00
31. T1 ETV	–.24*	–.15	.15	.39**	.08	.09	.07	.09	.22	.14	–.05
32. T2 ETV	–.08	–.01	.09	.09	.00	.19	–.04	–.04	–.29*	–.20	–.16
33. T3 ETV	–.02	.12	–.06	–.06	.02	.11	.06	.09	–.19	–.03	–.02

  

	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22
1. T1 At home	.04	–.16	–.24**	–.10	–.07	.08	–.11	.05	–.01	.17	–.08
2. T1 In school	–.03	–.06	–.00	.06	.01	–.05	.06	–.06	–.03	–.05	–.03
3. T1 Outdoors private	.03	.43**	.26**	.21*	–.03	–.07	.06	.07	.03	–.20*	.12
4. T1 Outdoors public	–.04	.21*	.28**	.05	.08	–.05	.09	.01	–.02	–.17	.12
5. T1 In transit	–.07	.19*	.02	.38**	.21*	.13	.02	.22*	.06	.15	–.20*
6. T1 With extended family	–.01	.03	.03	.13	.44**	–.02	–.18	.02	.09	.04	.03
7. T1 With parents	.05	–.09	–.11	.02	–.02	.48**	–.24*	.02	–.17	–.10	.15
8. T1 With same sex peers	–.05	–.03	.05	.02	.09	–.04	.08	–.21*	.19*	–.08	–.08
9. T1 With opposite sex peers	–.10	–.01	–.04	.10	.07	.10	–.14	.51**	.02	.25*	–.15
10. T1 With older peers	–.03	.05	–.07	–.02	–.03	–.02	.01	–.11	.30**	.01	–.04
11. T2 At home	–.47**	–.43**	–.67**	–.24**	.02	.35**	.01	.20*	.05	.31**	–.15
12. T2 In school	–	–.02	–.09	.04	–.15	–.07	.03	–.09	.03	–.14	.27**
13. T2 Outdoors private	–.15	–	.61**	.32**	–.16	–.35**	.07	–.06	.08	–.28**	.00

Table 1 continued

	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22
14. T2 Outdoors public	-.21	.80**	-	.14	.05	-.34**	.01	-.14	-.04	-.21*	-.06
15. T2 In transit	.04	.14	.14	-	-.05	-.04	.09	.04	-.06	-.13	-.08
16. T2 With extended family	-.06	-.26*	-.11	-.22	-	.12	-.11	-.05	-.10	.17	-.08
17. T2 With parents	-.07	-.30**	-.27*	.09	.27*	-	-.18*	.23**	-.18*	.00	.09
18. T2 With same sex peers	-.12	.30**	.26*	-.12	-.10	-.21	-	-.14	.21*	.15	-.11
19. T2 With opposite sex peers	.06	-.03	.05	.28*	-.10	-.02	-.19	-	.01	.16	-.25**
20. T2 With older peers	.13	-.05	.06	.16	.12	-.09	-.03	.25*	-	.13	-.11
21. T3 At home	-.17	-.47**	-.59**	-.15	-.01	.08	-.16	.04	.04	-	-.55**
22. T3 In school	.37**	.12	.27*	.03	-.05	.12	.06	.06	-.05	-.56**	-
23. T3 Outdoors private	-.10	.46**	.27*	.07	-.05	-.23	.16	-.19	-.01	-.38**	-.39**
24. T3 Outdoors public	-.19	.40**	.38**	.15	.06	-.22	.12	-.11	-.00	-.51**	-.43**
25. T3 In transit	-.05	.26*	.26*	.18	-.14	-.11	.06	.07	.13	-.26*	-.11
26. T3 With extended family	.03	.03	.03	-.03	.39**	.02	.07	-.13	.20	.04	-.24*
27. T3 With parents	-.25*	-.13	-.16	-.07	.10	.34**	-.14	-.09	-.16	.31**	-.14
28. T3 With same sex peers	-.08	.04	.03	-.12	.07	-.23	.31*	-.09	.05	-.10	-.27*
29. T3 With opposite sex peers	-.02	.07	-.02	.08	-.11	-.14	-.11	.43**	.11	.19	-.14
30. T3 With older peers	.10	-.14	-.12	.11	-.10	.06	.00	-.09	.37**	.10	-.03
31. T1 ETV	-.07	.07	.12	.26*	-.07	.06	-.02	.13	.29*	-.10	.09
32. T2 ETV	.03	.05	.18	-.11	.10	-.18	.10	-.03	-.02	-.16	.15
33. T3 ETV	-.23	.14	.23	.06	.12	.06	.29*	-.01	.12	-.09	-.18
	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33
1. T1 At home	.02	-.11	.08	-.04	-.14	.15	-.07	.23*	-.05	.06	.02
2. T1 In school	.08	.09	.15	.18	-.06	-.02	-.10	-.14	.17	.08	.11
3. T1 Outdoors private	.20*	.09	.04	-.14	.03	-.14	.04	-.08	.05	-.09	-.03
4. T1 Outdoors public	-.07	.07	-.20*	-.09	.19*	-.13	.18	-.15	-.07	-.09	-.12
5. T1 In transit	.04	.04	.12	-.00	.06	.01	.04	-.14	.04	-.03	.19
6. T1 With extended family	-.14	-.06	-.20*	.23*	-.02	-.03	.08	.09	-.04	-.03	-.12
7. T1 With parents	-.13	-.04	-.11	.01	.35**	-.03	.06	.03	-.08	-.01	-.11
8. T1 With same sex peers	.01	.16	.03	.12	.14	.36**	-.11	.06	.06	-.06	.09
9. T1 With opposite sex peers	-.13	-.11	-.08	.16	.11	-.07	.43**	.00	-.02	-.04	-.04
10. T1 With older peers	.12	.03	-.01	.06	-.05	-.00	-.04	.23*	.02	-.04	.08
11. T2 At home	-.20*	-.18	-.05	-.02	.00	-.16	.07	.05	-.16	.03	.13
12. T2 In school	.10	-.14	-.05	.02	-.06	-.01	.03	.04	.08	-.08	-.27**
13. T2 Outdoors private	.41**	.31**	.24*	-.15	-.18	-.05	-.01	.03	.11	.10	.07
14. T2 Outdoors public	.17	.30**	.12	-.04	.01	.06	-.07	-.02	.18	.05	.09
15. T2 In transit	.14	.26**	.36**	.02	.01	.04	.01	-.12	-.03	.16	.13
16. T2 With extended family	-.17	-.11	-.11	.44**	.05	.15	-.05	.16	.01	-.18	-.08
17. T2 With parents	-.13	-.09	-.05	.03	.51**	-.10	.14	-.01	-.19*	-.17	-.16
18. T2 With same sex peers	.01	-.04	.08	.09	-.04	.47**	-.07	-.13	-.05	.13	.10
19. T2 With opposite sex peers	.07	.08	-.00	-.07	-.03	-.13	.36**	-.12	.00	-.06	.05
20. T2 With older peers	.00	-.06	-.05	.08	-.08	.26**	.04	.40**	-.01	.02	.29**
21. T3 At home	-.41**	-.52**	-.27**	.29**	.08	.23**	.03	-.10	-.14	-.03	.08
22. T3 In school	-.22*	-.41**	-.25**	-.32**	-.11	-.22*	-.02	.13	.04	.08	-.27**
23. T3 Outdoors private	-	.66**	.61**	-.02	-.09	-.08	.04	.05	.05	-.08	-.02
24. T3 Outdoors public	.82**	-	.54**	-.00	.01	-.04	-.02	-.04	.08	-.04	.20*
25. T3 In transit	.45**	.41**	-	.01	.00	-.06	-.08	-.12	.05	-.07	.07
26. T3 With extended family	.12	.20	.14	-	.13	.27**	.04	.12	.01	-.09	.02

**Table 1** continued

	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33
27. T3 With parents	-.12	-.18	-.11	.05	-	.02	.15	-.21*	-.15	-.15	-.18
28. T3 With same sex peers	.40**	.36**	-.09	.10	-.28*	-	-.16	.22*	-.09	-.00	.03
29. T3 With opposite sex peers	-.08	-.06	.07	.14	.05	-.13	-	-.06	-.08	.02	-.00
30. T3 With older peers	.01	-.07	-.11	.09	-.12	.18	-.08	-	.09	.08	-.09
31. T1 ETV	-.02	.01	.05	.05	-.03	.06	-.16	.20	-	.09	.32**
32. T2 ETV	.07	.04	-.12	.13	-.13	.18	-.21	.03	.02	-	.20*
33. T3 ETV	.22	.27*	.26*	.17	.04	.09	-.05	.06	.07	.28*	-

T1 = percent time, year one

T2 = percent time, year two

T3 = percent time, year three

Female correlations in upper-right corner

Male correlations in lower-left corner

**Table 2** Male and female means and standard deviations for years 1, 2, and 3

Measure	M (SD) for male			M (SD) for female		
	Time 1	Time 2	Time 3	Time 1	Time 2	Time 3
At home	51.2 (12.9)	53.8 (15.6)	49.0 (16.9)	50 (13.5)	50.4 (17.0)	52.1 (15.5)
In school	32.7 (8.6)	26.3 (12.0)	24.3 (15.7)	29.1 (9.1)	25.5 (11.0)	21.9 (14.3)
Outdoors private	8.0 (8.2)	10.3 (10.6)	16.8 (13.9)	8.1 (6.6)	11.1 (9.4)	12.8 (10.7)
Outdoors public	15.1 (11.8)	19.3 (13.2)	26.2 (15.7)	19.8 (12.7)	22.8 (13.9)	25.8 (14.1)
In transit	3.1 (3.4)	3.8 (4.2)	4.9 (4.6)	4.5 (4.6)	5.2 (5.4)	6.8 (5.8)
With extended family	23.6 (20.1)	24.7 (21.9)	21.0 (20.6)	27.6 (22.8)	27.2 (22.7)	26.7 (24.0)
With parents	30.7 (23.3)	29.0 (23.9)	22.6 (22.1)	27.0 (23.9)	27.2 (22.2)	23.9 (19.8)
With same sex peers	10.2 (14.7)	13.1 (16.0)	12.6 (15.3)	16.8 (19.1)	13.9 (16.5)	17.2 (19.6)
With opposite sex peers	4.5 (8.5)	4.5 (10.4)	5.1 (11.4)	5.4 (11.2)	6.9 (14.8)	4.0 (9.2)
With older peers	10.8 (17.7)	8.6 (12.3)	7.6 (12.6)	11.7 (15.2)	12.5 (17.5)	12.3 (15.4)
ETV	5.4 (9.6)	2.7 (3.8)	2.7 (3.9)	4.4 (5.3)	3.3 (4.6)	3.9 (6.6)

**Table 3** Regression of protective and risky contexts on exposure to community violence among 6th grade students (separated by gender)

Boys	$\beta$	B	SE	$R^2$
Protective location predictors				
Percent time at home	-.38**	-.29	.10	
Percent time at school	-.32*	-.37	.14	
Adjusted $R^2$ total				.12*
Risky location predictors				
Percent time in outdoor private	-.44*	-.53	.21	
Percent time in outdoor public	.73***	.61	.15	
Percent time in transition	.02	.04	.32	
Adjusted $R^2$ total				.19**

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

**Table 4** Regression of protective and risky contexts on exposure to community violence among 7th grade students (separated by gender)

Boys	$\beta$	B	SE	$R^2$
Protective companionship predictors				
Percent time with parents	-.26*	-.04	.01	
Percent time with extended family	.16	.02	.02	
Adjusted $R^2$ total				.05*
Risky location predictors				
Percent time in outdoor private	-.25	-.09	.07	
Percent time in outdoor public	.39*	.11	.06	
Percent time in transition	-.12	-.11	.10	
Adjusted $R^2$ total				.03

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

$\beta = .32$ ,  $p < .001$ , respectively). Among 7th grade female students, more time spent in school was associated with decreases in exposure to community violence ( $\beta = -.26$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

**Discussion**

A significant body of research has examined the harmful effects of exposure to community violence, while a smaller



**Table 5** Regression of protective contexts on exposure to community violence among 8th grade students (separated by gender)

	$\beta$	<i>B</i>	SE	$R^2$
<i>Boys</i>				
Protective location predictors				
Percent time at home	-.24	-.06	.03	
Percent time at school	-.30*	-.08	.04	
Adjusted $R^2$ total				.05
<i>Girls</i>				
Protective location predictors				
Percent time at home	-.11	-.05	.05	
Percent time at school	-.33**	-.16	.05	
Adjusted $R^2$ total				.07*
Protective companionship predictors				
Percent time with parents	-.20*	-.07	.03	
Percent time with extended family	.03	.01	.03	
Adjusted $R^2$ total				.03
Risky location predictors				
Percent time in outdoor private	-.31**	-.19	.08	
Percent time in outdoor public	.36*	.17	.06	
Percent time in transition	.08	.09	.14	
Adjusted $R^2$ total				.06*

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ **Table 6** Longitudinal regression of risky contexts in 6th grade on exposure to community violence in 7th grade among boys (controlling for 6th grade exposure to community violence)

Risky companionship predictors	$\beta$	<i>B</i>	SE	$R^2$
Step 1				
Exposure to community violence 6th	.02	.00	.04	.00
Step 2				
Percent time with same sex peers	-.09	-.02	.03	
Percent time with opposite sex peers	-.33*	-.12	.05	
Percent time with older peers	-.18	-.03	.02	
Adjusted $R^2$ total				.07

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ **Table 7** Longitudinal regression of risky companionship in 7th grade on exposure to community violence in 8th grade among boys (controlling for 7th grade exposure to community violence)

Risky companionship predictors	$\beta$	<i>B</i>	SE	$R^2$
Step 1				
Exposure to community violence 7th	.27	.23	.11	.02
Step 2				
Percent time with same sex peers	.13	.04	.04	
Percent time with opposite sex peers	-.02	.00	.04	
Percent time with older peers	.33**	.08	.03	
Adjusted $R^2$ total				.12*

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ **Table 8** Longitudinal regression of protective and risky contexts in 7th grade on exposure to community violence in 8th grade among girls (controlling for 7th grade exposure to community violence)

	$\beta$	<i>B</i>	SE	$R^2$
<i>Protective location predictors</i>				
Step 1				
Exposure to community violence 7th	.21*	.24	.11	.05*
Step 2				
Percent time at home	.04	.02	.04	
Percent time in school	-.26*	-.14	.06	
Adjusted $R^2$ total				.13**
<i>Risky companionship predictors</i>				
Step 1				
Exposure to community violence 7th	.21**	.24	.11	.06**
Step 2				
Same sex peers	.03	.01	.03	
Opposite sex peers	.09	.03	.04	
Older peers	.32***	.10	.03	
Adjusted $R^2$ total				.12**

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ 

body of research has examined some of the demographic predictors of this exposure. This study attempted to fill a void in the literature regarding what locations and companionship place young adolescents at greater or lower risk for exposure to community violence. Further, it utilized the Experience Sampling Method to obtain an in vivo account of these contexts. Regression analyses supported hypotheses regarding the relationship between several risky contexts (companionship with older peers and located outdoors in public) and more exposure to community violence, as well as the relation between protective contexts (being at school and home) and less exposure to community violence. Contrary to our hypotheses, the time that boys spent with girls, as well as the time that boys and girls spent outside but in private areas (e.g., porch, front yard), was associated with less exposure to community violence, rather than more. Although the effect sizes found were not large, as Meyer et al. (2001) note, smaller results can still be quite salient when trying to account for complex human behavior and interactions, such as predicting exposure to community violence. The current results form a unique foundation for future research into micro-level contexts that place young people at risk for exposure to community violence and give insights into possible ways to protect young people from such exposure.

Companionship emerged as an important component in our study. We found that, at different points in time, parents provided both boys and girls with protection from exposure to community violence. Although early adolescence is a period in which youth are beginning to become more independent from parents, parents still play an

important role in keeping their children safe. This falls in line with a small body of literature that has examined the role that parents play in protecting their children from being victimized by and witnessing violence. In one of the earliest examinations of predictors of victimization, Esbensen and Huizinga (1991) found that adolescents from single parent homes reported higher levels of victimization than those from two parent homes. Jarrett (1999) observed, in her qualitative research, that many “successful” parents kept extremely close watch over their children in response to the danger they perceived in urban, high crime communities. Horowitz et al. (2005), employing qualitative methods that included focus groups, determined that rigorous monitoring and use of social support were valuable in protecting adolescents from exposure to community violence. Importantly, Horowitz et al. (2005) also found that parents employed a variety of means to keep their children safe. These coping strategies included counseling the child to be open with them, protecting the child from potential problem peers or peers’ parents who could be dangerous, being mindful of how long the child should take getting to and from frequently visited places, restricting the child to the home, and keeping the child from being outside by him or herself. Finally, Salzinger et al. (2006) demonstrated empirically that when parents were uninvolved in their children’s lives, their children were more susceptible to involvement with deviant peers which, in turn, was linked to an increase in exposure to community violence.

In addition to the protection parents provided their children, time spent with certain types of peers was a risk factor, while time spent with other types of peers was a protective factor, for exposure to community violence. Both boys and girls who spent more time with older peers in 7th grade showed an increase in exposure to community violence over 1 year. Salzinger et al. (2006) found that time spent with deviant peers was linked to an increase in exposure to community violence over 1 year. It may be that as young people spend more time with older peers, they are more likely to engage in riskier activities in order to impress these peers and show that they can “act older” than they are. This then could establish a context in which the adolescents are exposed to community violence. Theoretical debate still exists on the direction of deviant peer influence, though (Gifford-Smith et al. 2005). It may also be that young people who are more prone to acting out may be drawn to the older students who exhibit more problem behavior in order to find a more exciting setting in which to spend their time. On a positive note, though, the current study’s results indicated that when sixth grade boys spent more time with girls, their exposure to community violence actually decreased over the course of the following year. It appears that girls have a protective effect on boys as mixed gender groups seem to take place in settings and contexts

that are less dangerous than male-only groups. Thus, in order to reduce adolescents’ risk for exposure to community violence, not only is it important for parents and caretakers to monitor the character of the individual peers with whom their children spend time, but also to keep a watch on the age and gender of peers with whom their children come into contact.

Turning to location as a context, public outdoor space served as a risky context for exposure to community violence. This study defined “outdoor public” as environments such as parks and playgrounds. Such locations are often associated with unstructured time in which young people “hang out” unsupervised (Richards et al. 2004). This study found that the more time boys in 6th and 7th grade, as well as girls in 8th grade, spent outside in public the more exposure to community violence they reported. These results fall in line with what would be expected in both social disorganization theory and routine activities theory. Social disorganization theory notes that free time in low income communities is problematic because parental monitoring is less prevalent in areas with fewer resources (Sampson and Groves 1989). Further, in low income communities formal and informal social networks are smaller and therefore cannot make up for the deficits in individual level control. Without this oversight, one key element of routine activities theory, the absence of responsible authority figures, is made manifest (Cohen and Felson 1979). Cohen and Felson held that this is one of the three primary factors, along with likely perpetrators and potential victims, in generating crime in people’s everyday lives. The parks, playgrounds, streets, public busses, and other areas that comprised the outdoors in our public category are the spaces in which young people spend much of their everyday lives. Sadly, it is also where they are forced to be victimized by, and to witness, violence. The current research is consistent with past literature that found greater exposure to community violence for youth who spent more time in unstructured and unsupervised locations and activities (Richards et al. 2004; Stoolmiller 1994). As these young people have few safe alternatives for spending time in local outdoor public spaces, they are condemned to a life in which they are at high risk of being exposed to violence in their communities.

Not all time spent outside was associated with risk for exposure to community violence. While originally conceptualized as a risk factor due to the danger present in the neighborhoods from which the sample was comprised, time spent in private locations outside was actually associated with less exposure to community violence for boys in 6th grade and girls in 8th grade. Our study defined “outdoor private” to be more of an extension of the home, such as the front porch or the backyard. The authors hypothesized that, in such high crime communities, violence might occur

on the corner of students' blocks or in a building next door and, thus, even private space would not be safe. These results suggest that even when crime is prevalent in the community there are areas outside that young people can inhabit that are linked to less exposure to community violence. No known prior research has examined time outside in private as a construct to determine whether it served as a protective context. However, in a sense, this finding does remain consistent with routine activities theory in that it hypothesizes that more time spent at home would be linked to less criminal activity (Cohen and Felson 1979). Cohen and Felson postulated that, as people spend more time outside the home (as more nuclear families split apart, more women work outside of the home, more people travel, etc.), more opportunities arise for crime to take place in everyday activities. Time spent around the home is more likely to be monitored by friends and neighbors to help prevent the problem behavior that could escalate into violence. Also, it may be that the time adolescents spend on the premises of their home is time not spent out in public and this avoidance of a risky context for recreation, in and of itself, actually provides protection.

Like private outdoors, schools were another location context found to be protective. School contexts were associated with less exposure to community violence cross-sectionally for boys in 6th grade and both boys and girls in 8th grade. Our study also found that, when girls spent more time in school in seventh grade, they showed a decrease in exposure to violence over the course of a year. School absenteeism has already been linked to substance use, risky sexual behavior, and aggressive behavior in adolescents (for a review, see Kearney 2008). Given these outcomes, it is perhaps not surprising that young people who spend more time in school can avoid risky activities that place them at risk for exposure to community violence. Interestingly, feelings of being supported within the school setting have been shown to be protective among urban adolescents who were already exposed to community violence (O'Donnell et al. 2002). O'Donnell and colleagues also found that this support from school actually became more influential over time, promoting resilience to substance abuse and misconduct in school. Part of the protective value of school in the current study's sample may also have been derived from these young people engaging in activities after school in the afternoons—a period of time that can be particularly dangerous in urban communities.

### Strengths and Limitations

This study is strengthened by its longitudinal design and its in vivo method of data collection (ESM). The limitations of this study included sampling and reporting. The sample of low income urban African American adolescents limits

these data's findings from generalization to other demographic populations, including rural areas or middle or working class adolescents. Furthermore, this study relied on adolescents' report of both their exposure to community violence and their time use. However, the time sampling technique used here captured time use better than most paper-and-pencil questionnaires. In addition, the demands of the ESM method of data collection may have selected out very low functioning students, leaving a sample of students who were higher functioning than might be representative of this population. Finally, this paper does not take into account potentially important individual characteristics of the youth exposed to violence, such as their own involvement in violent activities or in prosocial activities. These may play a role in terms of both the extent to which contexts protect young people or place them at risk for exposure to community violence and the extent to which they are affected by any such exposure.

The findings from this study could help improve efforts to prevent young people from witnessing and being victimized by community violence. Some research to date has examined possible interventions for those already exposed to community violence (Cooley et al. 2004; Osofsky et al. 2004). This paper offers a unique contribution to the literature on exposure to community violence by suggesting several contexts that may prevent youth from the occurrence of exposure to community violence. These data allow for parents and teachers to be aware of the types of peers that put their youth at risk for exposure to community violence. It is important to keep adolescents in high crime areas off of the streets and out of public areas that are not formally supervised and to encourage them to spend their time in more protective locations, such as at home and at school. To this end, the findings revealed here add weight to calls for policies aimed at increasing the opportunities that young people in under-resourced, urban communities have to quality after-school programming (Garbarino et al. 2004). These activities not only have the opportunity to enhance these young peoples' competencies academically, athletically, socially and in other ways, but also the opportunity to enhance youth safety by providing protection from exposure to community violence and its harmful effects.

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**Maryse H. Richards** received her Ph.D. in Human Development from the University of Chicago and is currently a full professor at Loyola University Chicago. Her research interest is the developmental stage of adolescence with a focus on the daily experience of urban low-income African American young adolescents and how this relates to their psychosocial well being. Her current research is on health-related concerns with urban African American youth who are exposed to violence, have asthma and/or are challenged by obesity.

**Steven Pearce** received his B.S. in Psychology from Loyola University Chicago and assisted two research labs in developmental psychology, including that of Maryse Richards, Ph.D. and Amy Bohnert, Ph.D. He was awarded a Provost research fellowship for an interdisciplinary study with Barbara Velsor-Friedrich, Ph.D., a faculty member in the Neihoff School of Nursing, and Dr. Richards, with the focus on quality of life and coping in low-income urban African American youth with asthma.