Crime and violence is pervasive in South African societies and has come to be perceived by the general populace as one of the primary challenges facing contemporary South Africa. This perception is not unfounded since South Africa’s levels of violence (as reflected in the official murder statistics) are unquestionably among the highest in the world.\(^1\)

The crime statistics released by the South African Police Service revealed that for the period 2004–2005 South Africa had a murder rate of 40.3 per 100,000 people.\(^2\) Data obtained from the National Injury Mortality Surveillance System\(^3\) (2003) showed that the primary cause of non-natural death for individuals in the 15–45 year age cohort was homicide.\(^4\)

In South Africa, as in other countries, young people – and particularly those between the ages of 12 and 22 years – are generally at the receiving end of this escalating violence.\(^5\) The National Youth Victimisation study – the first of its kind in South Africa – found that two out of five (41.4\%) young people in South Africa had been the victim of some crime in the 12 months preceding the study, which was conducted from October to December 2005 – a rate almost double that of adults.\(^6\)

Theft of personal property, assaults and robberies were the personal crimes most commonly experienced by these youth (see Figure 1). On the whole, the study found that for certain individual crimes youth are victimised at rates three to four times that experienced by their adult counterparts.

International and local studies have attributed the youth’s vulnerability to victimisation to a number of factors,
including their lack of physical strength, limited options concerning the people they associate with and the environments in which they live, as well as their lack of access to a number of resources required to manage or remove them from threatening situations.\textsuperscript{7}

Additionally, researchers have shown that children and youth who live in social environments characterised by crime and violence are more susceptible to criminal victimisations. These factors coalesce to limit their ability to protect themselves from assaults and increase their exposure to would-be offenders.\textsuperscript{8}

The alarming prevalence of violent crimes such as assault and robbery among young people in South Africa necessitates an exploration of the factors that heighten their susceptibility to such victimisation. This paper attempts to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the correlates influencing the victimisation experiences of youth by exploring the relationship between exposure to violence within the home and broader community, and criminal victimisation in a South African context.

To this end, this paper draws on the research findings of the first National Youth Victimisation Study conducted in 2005\textsuperscript{7} by the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention. Earlier victimisation studies conducted here have not been specifically designed to capture the victimisation experiences of youth and young children since they have largely included individuals 16 years and older as their study sample.\textsuperscript{10}

The particular crimes explored in this study included both:

- violent crimes such as robbery, assault, rape/sexual assault and car hijackings; and
- property crimes such as theft of personal property and house-breakings.

The National Youth Victimisation Study

For the victimisation survey, the final sample comprised 4,409 young people between the ages of 12 and 22 years recruited from all nine provinces in South Africa. Only youth between the ages of 12 and 22 years were identified for participation in the study since earlier researchers have identified this age cohort as the peak years for youth victimisation.

In order to make the study as representative of the South African population as possible, the sample was designed to be proportionately representative. The sample frame was provided by Statistics South Africa 2001 Census data, and the sample was stratified by province and race. The total population between the ages of 12 and 22 years was identified. Based on this, a sample of 333 enumerator areas was randomly selected, with 13 households identified to be interviewed in each.

The final data was weighted by province, race and gender using the marginal totals drawn from the 2001 Census data. This was done to ensure the most accurate representation of the experiences of young people throughout South Africa.

Participants responded to a survey questionnaire exploring their exposure to, and experiences of, crime and violence in their homes, schools, and the broader communities in which they live.

Demographic profile of the sample

Of those surveyed, the majority were recruited from KwaZulu-Natal (22.5%), Gauteng (16.2%), Eastern Cape (15.7%) and Limpopo (13.7%). Since the sample was drawn from the total number of young people in South Africa between the ages of 12 and 22 years, the provincial profile obtained in this study is very similar to that of the overall population of the country.

Female youth (50.8%) and those between the ages of 15 and 20 years (67.4%) constituted the greater part of the study sample. Black youth accounted for more than three-quarters (82.6%) of the respondents. The sample consisted primarily of young people from rural areas (51.9%) while fewer respondents were recruited from urban (39.1%) and metropolitan areas (9.1%). The demographic profile of the study sample reflects the general population of youth within South Africa between the ages of 12 and 22 years. (See Table 1, side panel.)

At the time of the study, three-quarters of the youth (75.5%) were still attending school. Those who indicated that they were no longer at school were asked whether they had left for any particular reason and,
if so, why. Of these, the majority had completed their high school education (41.8%), while one in five (20%) participants surveyed were unable to afford their school fees.

Other reasons for failing to complete their schooling included the commencement of employment (9.8%) and a dislike of school (8.1%). These factors – although not overtly explored in the study – reveal the poverty-stricken conditions characterising the social environments in which many South African youth live, since many of them are often compelled to seek employment prematurely as a means of providing for their families.

Violence exposure is the norm

Jewkes, Levin and Penn-Kekana describe South African society as ‘very violent’. Moreover, crime and violence appears to have become a part of the daily routine of many youth living in South African communities. One in five (21.8%) youth had witnessed family members intentionally hurting one another (see Figure 2). In two-fifths (39.8%) of these incidences weapons had reportedly been used in the attacks, with more than a quarter (27.6%) resulting in physical injuries. While family violence exposure was common among youth from all provinces, it was found to be highest among those from the Northern Cape (33.4%), North West (27.1%), and Mpumalanga (26.2%).

Violence in the home occurs in many forms and ranges from arguments to physical attacks (see Figure 2). Arguments themselves, however, are not limited to an exchange of words but often result in physical altercations between family members. Reflecting this, one in ten (11.9%) respondents indicated that their family members often hit each other when they were angry. These findings are indicative of the volatile nature of many South African homes.

Exposure to family violence initially occurs at an early age. When participants were asked at what age they first witnessed family members intentionally hurting each other, nearly one in four (24.3%) had first been a witness to such violence between the ages of 6 and 10 years, while more than two-fifths (45.9%) were between the ages of 11 and 15 years at their initial exposure (see Figure 3).
Of particular concern is that violence exposure generally occurs during the formative years of these youth – a time when these experiences are most likely to impact negatively on their development.

On the whole, early exposure to violence has a negative effect on children's understanding of how the social world works. Children who live in homes where their parents and caregivers model violent and aggressive behaviour patterns are more likely than those not exposed to such a scenario to emulate similar violence and aggression later in their lives since they come to perceive it as an effective and socially appropriate means of conflict resolution. Furthermore, continual exposure to violence may desensitise youth to violence and may lead to aggressive behaviour on their part.

Exposure to violence also commonly results in feelings of anxiety, depression and fear – feelings that erode an individual's sense of self efficacy and impede the normal development of trust, sense of safety and the ability to develop healthy interpersonal relationships.

Additionally, these emotions have a negative effect on children's academic performance – an issue of grave concern in South Africa given the already high drop-out rate among school-going youth in this country. This ultimately contributes to a lack of skills and subsequent employability of young people in South Africa; and in this way impacts negatively on the economy of this country since the young people of today constitute the future skills base and tax payers of South Africa.

Childhood exposure to violence has also consistently been linked to subsequent delinquency and involvement with delinquent peers – an issue increasing the susceptibility of youth to both criminal victimisation and offending.

Clearly, the exposure of children and youth to violence has serious repercussions not only for the individual but for society at large. In short, violence exposure may thwart the psychological and physical development of children and youth and may disturb their (already difficult) transition from adolescence to adulthood. (See side panel for additional consequences of violence exposure.)

Youth in South Africa do not only witness violent acts in their homes but are also the direct victims of such violence. More than a quarter (27.7%) of the young people surveyed reported that they had been caned, spanked or hit by their parents or caregivers for their wrongdoings.

Corporal punishment in schools is in fact a crime in South Africa, and constitutes assault. Nonetheless, this study lends support to previous research studies that have found that even though corporal punishment has been abolished in educational institutions, it continues to be a socially sanctioned means of effecting discipline within South African homes. Interestingly, female youth (28.6%) reported slightly higher rates of physical punishment than their male counterparts (25.5%).

On the whole, these findings speak to the violent nature of the home environments in which many children and young people live. It becomes apparent that for many South African youth their family environments constitute a source of apprehension rather than providing the youth with a sense of safety and security.

The family is also the primary socialising agent where children are taught about the behaviours considered acceptable and unacceptable in the societies in which they live. Children who are raised in antagonistic households – as is the case with the young people surveyed in this study – come to perceive violence as an appropriate and effective means of conflict resolution. These maladaptive notions are only reinforced when youth are exposed to similar violence outside of their homes.

The National Youth Victimisation data revealed that incidences of crime and violence were also endemic to the communities in which these young participants lived. Close to half of all those surveyed, described their communities as being characterised by frequent fights (49.2%) and criminal activities (43.3%). It was therefore not surprising that more than two-
thirds (68.6%) had witnessed someone in their community being intentionally hurt.\textsuperscript{18}

Males (71.8%) and black (70.3%) and coloured (76.6%) youth reported the highest rates of community violence exposure. There were slight variations within the different age groups and their levels of community violence exposure. More than two-thirds of all the youth within the various age cohorts had reported witnessing violent behaviour in the communities in which they lived (see Figure 4).

As with family violence exposure, youth were exposed to violence within their communities from a very young age. Close to half (48%) of those who had been exposed to violence within their communities had first witnessed violence at the age of 11–15 years. More than a quarter (29%) had first witnessed this between the ages of 16 and 20 years (see Figure 5).

These findings suggest that youth live in close proximity to individuals in their families and communities who engage in violent behaviour. Young people between the ages of 12 and 22 years are in the process of developing their unique identities. Subsequently, they look to a range of sources for guidance in this process. Family members, peers, school mates and other known individuals who live in their communities typically constitute significant role models for children and youth.\textsuperscript{19}

When the role models available to young people consistently model violent and aggressive behaviours, it becomes difficult

Youth in South Africa are continually exposed to community violence, as witnesses to violence perpetrated against their family members, friends and neighbours – individuals who are known to these youth. The perpetrators were also largely known to these youth (74.2%) and were most likely to be known members in the community (47.5%), friends/family members (14.8%) and other family members not living in the same household as the youth (14.3%).

Additionally:

- Youth may come to perceive violence as an effective and socially acceptable means of problem solving.
- Continual exposure to violence may desensitise youth to violence and may in turn lead to aggressive behaviours on their part.
- Violence exposure may impede the normal development of trust, a sense of safety and security, and secure interpersonal relationships.
for the youth to envision that conflicts can be resolved any other way. This contributes to the validation of violence as a socially approved conflict-resolution technique and also normalises aggression within South African communities.

Violence exposure is often not a single occurrence but tends to be of a repetitive nature. Therefore, youth who are exposed to violence in their families and communities at an early age are likely to be subjected to ongoing exposure throughout their lives – an issue of grave concern given the negative implications of violence exposure described earlier in this paper.

**Easy targets for crime**

One of the many legacies of apartheid is that it appears to have given rise to a situation in which many South African families consider physical violence as an effective and primary means of problem solving within the home. The National Youth Victimisation study found that in addition to the deleterious psychological effects experienced by youth who were exposed to violence in their social locales, violence exposure also put youth at increased risk for criminal victimisations.

Evident in the data was a significant relationship between youth who had seen someone being hurt in their family and their community, and those who had experienced the direct crimes explored in the study. In other words, youth who had observed violence in their homes and communities were significantly more likely than those who were not exposed to such a scenario to have been assaulted, robbed, sexually assaulted and to have had their property stolen (see Table 2, side panel).

Respondents who reported that their families argued a lot, often lost their tempers, and became physical with one another when they were angry reported significantly higher rates for most of the victimisations explored in this study than those who were not exposed to such violence in their homes (p<0.001). Those who witnessed family members intentionally hurting one another were also significantly more likely to have been criminally victimised (see Table 3, side panel).
Table 3 illustrates that being exposed to incidents of violence within the household was significantly likely to increase the likelihood of becoming the victims of various crimes, including violent crimes such as assaults and robberies. Even youth who are raised in homes where family members often argue are also at increased risk of being victimised outside of the home.

Family violence exposure not only makes youth more vulnerable to criminal victimisations but also impacts on the number of victimisations that youth are likely to experience. Young people who had experienced repeat victimisations were more likely to report exposure to violence within their families. These participants were more likely to report that their families argued a lot (19.9%), often lost their tempers (15.7%), and sometimes hit each other when they became angry (22.4%).

There was also a strong relationship between physical punishment and repeat victimisations. The youth who reported that they were caned or spanked at home for their wrongdoings were more likely than those who were not spanked to report multiple victimisations. Even those who reported that they were only occasionally caned for their wrongdoings were more likely than those who were not caned to report multiple victimisations. These findings were statistically very significant (p=0.000).

The findings discussed herein suggest that many of the young people surveyed in this study are being raised in homes and community environments fraught with the risk factors that have consistently been found to influence the vulnerability of youth to experiences of victimisation.

Communities and homes where crime and violence are the order of the day have been found to heighten the susceptibility of young people to both victimisation and offending. This is often exacerbated by the lack of social and recreational opportunities that epitomise many contemporary South African communities. Given the presence of these risk factors in the lives of the young people surveyed in this study, one can conclude that youth in South Africa are at significant risk for victimisation and subsequent involvement in criminal activities. This is even more pertinent when young people are exposed to crime not only in their communities, but in their homes and families.

One way to explain the relationship between violence exposure and victimisation is the familiarity with individuals involved in criminal activities in the communities in which these youth live. The study found that many youth in South Africa live in close proximity to criminal offenders (see Figure 6). Close to half (49.2%) of the respondents were personally acquainted with individuals in their communities who had committed criminal activities. Communities and homes where crime and violence are the order of the day have been found to heighten the susceptibility of young people to both victimisation and offending.

This is often exacerbated by the lack of social and recreational opportunities that epitomise many contemporary South African communities.
The study found that many youth in South Africa live in close proximity to criminal offenders.

Close to half (49.2%) of the respondents were personally acquainted with individuals in their communities who had committed criminal acts including stealing, selling stolen property and mugging or assaulting others.

Furthermore, one in ten (10.5%) young people had adults in their families who had been guilty of the aforementioned crimes. These high rates of familiarity with individuals involved in criminal activities significantly increase the likelihood of youth falling victim to crime. Since young people occupy the same spaces as those who perpetrate crimes against them they are also often rendered powerless to protect themselves from victimisation.

Youth perceptions of safety

Given the high rates of violence exposure and crimes committed directly against these youth it was interesting to find that their perceptions of safety and fear were largely inconsistent with their levels of violence experienced. The overwhelming majority (91.6%) of the participants reported that they felt safe at home and in their communities, despite the prevalence of violence within their homes, as described earlier in this paper (see Figure 7).

This suggests, and is indicative of, the normalisation of crime and violence in South African communities. Since violence is such a common experience within the home and other social spaces that youth are likely to occupy, it has become part and parcel of the daily routine of youth in South Africa. Subsequently, many young people have learnt to tolerate the occurrence of crime and violence in their communities and to adjust their lives accordingly.

Implications for South Africa

These findings suggest that young people who are exposed to various forms of family violence both as witnesses and as direct victims are more vulnerable to criminal victimisations. Particularly concerning is that family violence exposure heightens the susceptibility of young people to violent crimes such as assaults and robberies. The family is the primary socialising agent where children are taught about the behaviours that are considered acceptable and unacceptable in the societies in which they live.

Clearly, many youth and children in South Africa are being raised in homes where they are taught that violence and aggression is an effective and acceptable means of problem solving. This is only exacerbated when these notions are reinforced outside of the home.

The National Youth Victimisation Study also found that despite the abolishment of corporal punishment in South Africa, many social and educational institutions continue to implement it as a means of effecting discipline. Children who are incessantly exposed to violence within their social locales – as is the case with the young people surveyed in this study – come to perceive violence as an appropriate means of conflict.
resolution and are likely to adopt these maladaptive problem-solving techniques.

These findings point to the need for targeted interventions aimed at raising awareness about appropriate conflict-resolution techniques. Alternative methods of discipline are also required, particularly aimed at families and schools since they constitute the primary role-models for children and youth.

The use of alternative means of discipline and conflict-resolution techniques would result in a decline in the levels of assault among children and youth, particularly those incidences that occur within their families and at schools.

Youth who are victimised outside of their homes generally seek protection and support from their parents or other adults in their households. However, when domestic violence is a regular occurrence within their families, adult members are unable to meet the needs of these youth adequately because they themselves are caught up in cycles of violence.

The subsequent lack of parental support is an issue of grave concern because many South African youth do not have access to support systems outside of their families and thus rely solely on their parents/caregivers for emotional support following traumatic events.

These findings therefore highlight the need for psycho-social support structures to be made available to youth outside of their homes, given the high rates of family violence in South Africa.

Community violence often represents an added stressor to many South African home environments that are already suffering from various adversities such as unemployment, poverty, inadequate housing, and a lack of basic services. These factors all influence the type of support that families are able to provide to children and youth who are victimised outside of the home.

The provision of much needed support services would allow for the empowerment of youth, and in this way may prevent youth victims of crime from being caught up in cycles of violence where they later become the perpetrators of crime – an issue of grave importance given the increasing rates of youth offending in this country.

The Service Charter for Victims of Crime in South Africa (the brainchild of the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development) identifies seven rights of victims of crimes. These are the right:

- to be treated with fairness and respect for your dignity and privacy;
- to offer information;
- to receive information;
- to protection;
- to assistance;
- to compensation; and
- to restitution.

The fact that the victimisation of young people is taking place without being recognised, reported or dealt with, clearly denies young victims these rights.

In South Africa support services for victims of crime are not readily available. Furthermore, when these services are available it appears that victims of crime are not being informed thereof, since the youth in this study commonly attributed their failure to access counselling and other support services following their victimisations to a lack of information about these services.

Victim support programmes that are meant to be implemented at all police stations in the country are often not functional due to a number of factors, of which a lack of resources, manpower and issues of priority within individual police stations are central.

Furthermore, crimes against young people are often not recognised as such by adults and the youth themselves but are relegated to various forms of bullying – often described as typical childhood experiences. This further feeds into the cycles of violence involving youth in South Africa.
The data also suggests that South African youth have very few safe spaces in which they are not at risk of being victimised. The widespread incidences of violence within these respondents’ homes have serious implications for their psychological, physical and educational well-being.

The limited places of safety that young people have at their disposal necessitate the creation of safe spaces for South African youth. The development of recreational and other social groupings and activities – that are lacking in many South African communities – can provide these much needed safe spaces.

Family and community violence exposure violates the rights of children to a life free from violence as stated in Article 19 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which protects children from all violence including physical and psychological forms of violence.

According to the CRC, government parties are also responsible for ensuring that children are provided with the protection and care required for their well-being; however, these findings suggest the clear violation of this right many times over.

These results prove significant since they provide insight into one of the correlates influencing the victimisation of youth in South Africa.

Youth victimisation of any sort is likely to shape young people’s attitudes to crime and violence as they mature. Subsequently, a more comprehensive understanding of these experiences, as well as the extent and nature of the problem, could go some way in dealing with the crimes against children themselves, as well as ameliorating the negative impact of such events on the South African society as a whole.

Furthermore, an enhanced understanding of the factors influencing youth victimisation is crucial for advocating for more relevant and targeted youth policy that will speak to the specific threats facing South African youth.

The way forward

These findings point to the need for a more comprehensive youth safety strategy that comprises various interventions aimed at reducing the alarmingly high rates of youth victimisation in South Africa.

Included in this strategy should be targeted interventions aimed at children and youth, informing them that particular incidences perceived as typical childhood and youth experiences can be classified as crimes, and for this reason they have a constitutional right to be protected from such occurrences.

Young people should also be informed about the importance of reporting the crimes perpetrated against them and should be encouraged to access support services where they are available following their traumatic experiences.

Parents and other adults, including educators, should be made aware of the incidence of youth victimisation and should be taught how to recognise these victimisations and how to deal with them after the fact. It is also important for police and other stakeholders, particularly those involved with children and youth, to prioritise the provision of support to young victims.

Consistent with findings of previous researchers, this paper shows that exposure to violence in the social environments in which young people live increases their likelihood of subsequent criminal victimisation and offending.

One can therefore conclude that an important method by which to reduce youth involvement in crime – both as victims and as perpetrators – would be to limit their exposures to violence in their homes and communities.
Young people should also be informed about the importance of reporting the crimes perpetrated against them and should be encouraged to access support services where they are available following their traumatic experiences.

Endnotes

3 The National Mortality Surveillance System provides the most detailed information on fatal injuries in South Africa.
6 As reflected in the 2003 National Victims of Crime Survey conducted by the Institute for Security Studies, which found that 22.9% of adults in South Africa had been the victim of any one crime in the 12-month period between September 2002 and August 2003.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
18 The term ‘hurt’ was used here to refer to incidences in which the youth had witnessed someone being beaten, punched, kicked, physically pushed, hit or slapped, or attacked with a weapon such as a knife, stick, panga or gun.
21 Jewkes, Levin & Penn-Kekana, op cit.
22 Wallen & Ruben, op cit.
25 Leoschut & Burton, op cit.
27 Soneson, op cit.
29 Ibid.
The Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention (CJCP) is dedicated to developing, informing and promoting innovative evidence-based crime prevention focused on the groups identified as being vulnerable to victimisation or offending. The CJCP does this by:

- conducting rigorous research into issues of relevance to policy makers, public service officials, development partners and crime prevention practitioners;
- facilitating the implementation of crime prevention projects;
- providing sector-specific and accredited training in crime prevention for policy makers, public sector officials and non-governmental organisation practitioners; and
- disseminating the results of its research and lessons learned to relevant audiences.

Crime and violence is pervasive in South African society and is perceived by the general populace as one of the primary challenges facing our country. Young people, and particularly those between the ages of 12 and 22 years, are commonly at the receiving end of this escalating violence.

Given the alarmingly high rates of youth victimisation, this paper attempts to shed light on one of the correlates influencing this phenomenon by exploring the relationship between violence exposure in two social locales – the family and community – and criminal victimisation.

To this end, this paper draws on the research findings of the first National Youth Victimization Study conducted in 2005 by the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention.

In short, this paper demonstrates that violence exposure in the social environments in which young people live increases their vulnerability to subsequent criminal victimisation. For this reason, one can conclude that an important method by which to reduce youth involvement in crime both as victims and perpetrators would be to limit their exposure to violence in both their homes and communities.

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