Lifetimes of Violence in a Sample of Released Prisoners

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Abstract

Men and women who go to prison are poor and involved in violence. This paper explores the connection between poverty and violence for a sample of former prisoners who left incarceration for the Boston area. Analysis of life history data indicates that violence arises in poor contexts across the life course because they are often chaotic, lack informal sources of social control, and under these conditions violence often comes to be positively valued. This situational perspective on violence diverges from the criminal justice perspective in which offenders and victims represent distinct classes of people and punishment involves the assessment of individual culpability.

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Poverty and violence collide in the lives of people involved in the criminal justice system. Those who are arrested and incarcerated are mostly poorly-educated, black or Latino, coming from low-income neighborhoods in America's inner cities (Travis, Western, and Redburn 2014, chs. 2 and 9). About half of state prisoners are serving time for violent crimes. Others convicted of drug or property crimes have also been involved in serious violence (Blumstein 1995).

Poverty is fertile ground for violence. Poverty can strain the bonds of family and community that help create social order (Sampson and Wilson 1995). Poor neighborhoods may be suffused in a culture that normalizes sharp conflict in social interaction (Anderson 2000). Rather than working through individual motivations, empirical research often emphasizes the collective effect of poverty on patterns of social organization and shared norms. Disadvantaged and disorganized communities, where violence is normalized or helpful for meeting daily challenges, are dangerous places.

This paper explores the connection between poverty and violence by studying the life histories of a sample of state prisoners leaving incarceration for neighborhoods in Boston. Rich interview data collected over several years allow us to take an expansive view of violence. Instead of focusing just on offending in a sample positively selected for its involvement in crime, I examine the myriad forms of violence, from accidents to homicides, with the aim of describing the conditions of poverty in which violence arises.

In the perspective of this paper, the social contexts of poverty display a high level of violence, but violence emerges in a range of different ways. The life history data show that conditions of poverty were often chaotic, unpredictable settings conducive to victimization. These places were also missing the steady influence of parents and neighbors who would control antisocial and disorderly behavior. In places that were unpredictable and weakly supervised, violence

was positively valued as a source of identity or a useful way of getting things done. Where poor contexts give rise to violence, roles in violence are not neatly divided between different groups. Instead at different times and in different venues, people come to play the roles of victim, offender, participant or witness.

If we think of violence emerging in poor social contexts, people's roles in violence are as much a product of their situations as their individual dispositions. Empirically, we see that former prisoners have been surrounded by serious violence since early childhood and their roles in violence have shifted unevenly from victim to offender. The social facts of violence challenge the usual criminal justice jurisprudence of individualized culpability that is largely stripped of social context and biography. Some implications are discussed in the conclusion.

Poverty and Violence

Social scientists have widely observed high rates of violence in poor places. For many researchers, poverty has a contextual effect. Instead of poor individuals being motivated to violence, poor contexts structure social interaction in a way that makes violence more likely. Students of human development observe that poor households are often chaotic, placing children at risk of victimization. Sociologists find that poor neighborhoods are often disorganized, lacking the informal social controls that curb crime and delinquency. Anthropologists find that poor communities can provide the material conditions for cultures of violence.

Focusing on child maltreatment and abuse, research on human development links violence and poverty by pointing to the chaotic character of poor homes. Chaos describes settings with a high level of ambient stimulation be-

cause of noise or overcrowding, a low level of structure and routine in daily life, and unpredictability in everyday activity (Wachs and Evans 2010). Gary Evans and his colleagues (2010) observe the close association between poverty and chaos reflected in statistics on crowding (home and school), residential and school relocation, and maternal partner change. Beyond these widely measured indicators, poor homes and communities tend to be noisier and have less regular meal times and bedtimes for children. Thus chaos is part of the "environment of child poverty" (Evans 2004). Chaos is both a source of stress for parents and children, and undermines the consistent supervision of children. Under conditions of stress and unpredictability, chaos interferes with warm interactions between parents and children and among siblings; harsh and impatient family relationships are more likely. The stress of chaotic homes, neighborhoods and schools has been widely found to be associated with child maltreatment, and sexual and physical abuse (Gabarino and Sherman 1980; Panel on Research on Child Abuse and Neglect 1993, pp.126–136; Drake and Pandey 1996; Emery and Laumann-Billings 1998; Paulle 2013).

Whereas research on chaos and child development has focused on the home, urban sociologists have concentrated on the problem of neighborhood violence. In Sampson and Wilson's (1995) classic paper, the collapse of urban labor markets for poorly-educated African American men sidelined them as breadwinners, increasing the number of single-mother families. With fathers in poor neighborhoods only loosely tied to their children's households, families were unable to play a strong role in supervising adolescent boys. Consistent with the theory, researchers found a close relationship between rates of single-parenthood and juvenile rates of murder and robbery (Sampson 1987). In African American communities where poverty was spatially concentrated, the social networks and organizational ties that help regularize and monitor

urban life were also weakened adding to the level of inner-city violence. Out of the structural conditions of poverty, Sampson and Wilson (1995, 51) also argued that a culture emerged in which "youngsters are more likely to see violence as a way of life in inner-city ghetto neighborhoods." At the level of cities, contiguous clumps of poor and high-crime neighborhoods where black residents lived were at additional risk not just because of their own internal dynamics, but because of violence in adjacent communities (Peterson and Krivo 2010). Common to much of the sociological research, the spatial concentration of unemployment, family disruption, and other social problems in poor urban areas fueled violence in American cities (Sampson 1987; Lee 2000; Kubrin and Weitzer 2003).

Anthropological field studies also link poverty to violence, often in vivid portrayals of chronic danger in contexts of extreme material deprivation. Documenting the everyday harshness of poverty in rural Brazil, Scheper-Hughes (1992) shows, for example, how food is withheld from children and persistent hunger is reinterpreted as illness, transforming it into a problem for magic or modern medicine. Bourgois and Schonberg (2009) describe an encampment of Bay Area heroin addicts shrouded in a "gray zone," "an ethical wasteland" in which "survival imperatives overcome human decency" (p. 19). Writing about the poor urban residents of Buenos Aires, Auyero and his colleagues (2014) observe that violence has an instrumental quality, whether it is used to discipline children or defend oneself and one's property. In all these field settings, conditions of poverty made violence culturally available, something that could be readily contemplated and acted upon. Although these researchers emphasize that cultures of violence have grown out of material conditions of poverty, an openness to brutality in human interaction gains a life of its own with fierce consequences for the social life of the poor.

Three ideas run through the diverse disciplinary approaches to studying the relationship between violence and poverty. First, poor contexts are chaotic. Partly this, means that poverty brings together a number of combustible social conditions, undermining the routine and predictability of social life. Children may divide their time between several residences or move frequently. In the absence of steady work, daily life for adults unfolds more by accident than design. Poverty also brings financial insecurity, untreated addiction and mental illness each of which is a potent source of stress and emergency. More than this, chaos also results from the turnover of people in poor contexts. Population turnover in disorganized neighborhoods has been observed at least since Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay (1942) studied juvenile delinquency in Chicago neighborhoods in the 1930s and 1940s. At the level of the household, housing insecurity, multiple partner fertility, and high incarceration rates all contribute to the present-day circulation of adults and children through poor homes. Chaos produces violence by inviting victimization. Agents of violence–stressed, impaired or unrelated adults—are abundant in chaotic homes and neighborhoods. The weakest and the most vulnerable—often women and children—face great uncertainty and thus cannot plan for their safety or easily hide from trouble.

Second, poor contexts lack informal supervision. A large research literature describes how poor families—often through some combination of single-parenthood and maternal employment—struggle to provide the structure and oversight of adolescent boys that curbs truancy and delinquency (e.g., Sampson 1986; Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls 1997; Warner and Rountree 1997). Poor neighborhoods lack the street-level web of social networks and organizational life that can head off violent conflict, or quickly provide assistance when it occurs. The informal sources of social order in stable families and neighborhoods regulate violence in a non-violent way, nudging everyday social interaction in

the direction of the productive participation in prosocial roles. Without informal supervision, institutional efforts at social control play a larger role. Schools, police, and prisons are called on to control violence in poor communities relying on the instruments of punishment, arrest, and incarceration. Without informal supervision, the formal social control agencies kick into gear, bringing their own kind of violence to the effort to maintain order.

Third, under these material conditions of chaos and weak informal controls, violence itself becomes positively valued. The positive valuation of violence has come to mean different things in different settings. Proficiency with violence may signal status in the pecking order of a street gang, masculinity among adolescent boys, or more instrumentally, just a competence in handling the exigencies of daily life. There is no single culture of violence that operates across poor contexts, but under conditions of extreme material deprivation, violence becomes recognized as a valuable way of getting things done.

Several empirical implications follow from this account of poverty as a social context for violence. In this approach, varieties of violence from street crime to child abuse can be traced to broadly similar conditions of material disadvantage. Instead of focusing just on the statistics of murder and robbery, for example, research connecting poverty to violence should observe different forms of violence over the life cycle and across institutional domains. In this view, poverty is fundamentally contextual creating situations in which violence is likely to occur. Poverty produces myriad forms of violence not chiefly through its influence on individual action, but in how it structures social interaction. If poverty is a violent context, poor people will see a great deal of violence in their lives but come to play a range of roles—as victim, offender, or witness. Instead of focusing just on offending, a research design should observe the variety of different roles comprising a violent situation. Last, poverty

produces violence in specific venues. The research reviewed here emphasizes the local neighborhood and the family home as the main sites of violence in the lives of poor people. The empirical evidence presented below also points to the importance of the institutional settings of the school for children, and the prison for adults. Again, a research design for investigating the link between poverty and violence must be flexible enough to observe these different venues.

Life History Data on Violence

This analysis is based on data from the Boston Reentry Study, a longitudinal survey of men and women released from state prison in Massachusetts and entering the Boston area (Western et al. 2014). Sample respondents became eligible for the study by reporting a release address in the Boston area. Respondents were recruited to the study with the help of the Massachusetts Department of Correction and the BRS sample is similar to the Boston-area prison population in terms of demography and criminal history. Sample respondents were interviewed five times over a year, the first time in prison just prior to release. Supplementary interviews were also conducted with family members, and the survey data were linked to criminal records. Survey interviews covered a variety of topics including the respondents' involvement in crime and the criminal justice system in childhood, in adulthood before their current incarceration, and in the period since their prison release. The BRS research design aimed to produce a high rate of study retention over a one year follow-up period. The study maintained a response rate of over 90 percent over the follow-up period, ensuring that the most socioeconomically vulnerable were retained in the data collection.

Life histories were constructed from all the data collected over the one-year follow-up period for 40 of the 122 men and women in the sample. To construct

the life histories, researchers reviewed all five surveys, interview field notes, phone notes, a supplementary survey of a family members, audio tape of the interviews (six to eight hours of recorded interviews), and any other records on the respondent. The empirical material was used to form a life history record that contained a report of key life events, the respondent's age at the time, and transcribed accounts of these events. The life histories themselves were coded to flag about 70 different search terms. The search terms indicated the respondent's involvement in crime and with the authorities, their family and social life, health and well-being, and a variety of other topics.

The forty respondents chosen for the life history subsample are roughly representative of prison releasees to the Boston area. The life history sample was chosen to include respondents for whom a supplementary interview was conducted and a full set of audio records were available. Women and African Americans are slightly over-represented, but otherwise demographic characteristics and criminal histories of the subsample are similar to those of the sample as a whole.

The socioeconomic characteristics and life histories of the BRS sample are reported in Table 1. Table 1 shows the BRS sample is mostly black or Hispanic and more than half the sample are in their thirties or older. Most respondents are high school dropouts and reported irregular work history over their lives. Two months after prison release, 70 percent were receiving food stamps. Besides their low socioeconomic status, the data provide clear evidence of unstable and dangerous childhood homes. Over half the respondents grew up with someone with drug or alcohol problems, and about half the respondents were victims of violence at the hands of their parents. Over 40 percent of the sample had witnessed a killing in childhood. Eighty percent had been suspended or expelled from school and nearly all had got in fights as children.

Table 1. Percentage distribution of the social and economic characteristics of a sample of released prisoners, Boston Reentry Study.

	Full Sample	Life History Subsample
Demographic Characteristics		
Median age (years)	34.0	34.0
Female	12.3	17.5
White	30.3	25.0
Black	50.8	57.5
Hispanic	18.9	17.5
Socioeconomic Status		
Dropped out high school	59.8	60.0
Employed before arrest	59.0	70.0
Employed two months after prison release	43.4	46.2
Receiving food stamps two months after prison release	70.5	75.0
Adversity in Childhood		
Both parents in home at age 14	34.4	27.5
Domestic violence while growing up	32.7	27.5
Witnessed someone get killed	42.1	47.5
Grew up with someone with drug or alcohol problem	57.3	45.0
Hit by parents (not incl. spanking)	46.8	45.0
Suspended or expelled from school	80.6	80.0
Got in fights	91.7	95.0
Got in trouble with police	85.2	85.0
N	122	40

Patterns of Violence

Violence was a common theme in the survey interviews trailing only only the topics of family and the criminal justice system in the tagged life history data. In the six interviews with the forty respondents, including the supplementary interview with each proxy, we coded 291 violent situations. Figure 1 compares the frequency of reports of violence to other life events in childhood (0 to 12 years), adolescence (13 to 18 years) and adulthood (over 18 years). The tagged terms are listed from top to bottom in order of their overall frequency. Across all 40 respondents, family was the most common topic and prison intake was the least common. When describing early childhood, before age 13, respondents often talked about family relationships and violence. Respondents spoke at length about their home life as children and the supportive adults in their lives. Talking about adolescence, from age 13 to 18, family relationships remained a prominent theme, but violence and criminal justice involvement were increasingly important topics. Reflecting the respondents' growing independence, descriptions of adolescence also included frequent mention of drugs and alcohol and time spent with peers. Describing adulthood, after age 18, family life was again a dominant topic. At this life stage, family life extended to relationships with partners and children. The respondent's accounts of adulthood were also dominated by descriptions of arrest and incarceration, a new topic that also reflected the respondents' aging.

The frequency of different topics at different stages of life is partly shaped by the survey interviews. For example, the surveys ask about the respondents' youthful experience of family life and exposure to trauma. These are common topics in the life history data in childhood and adolescence. Still the interviews ranged widely asking about topics like residential mobility, housing, employment, government programs and so on, and these topics are less prominent in

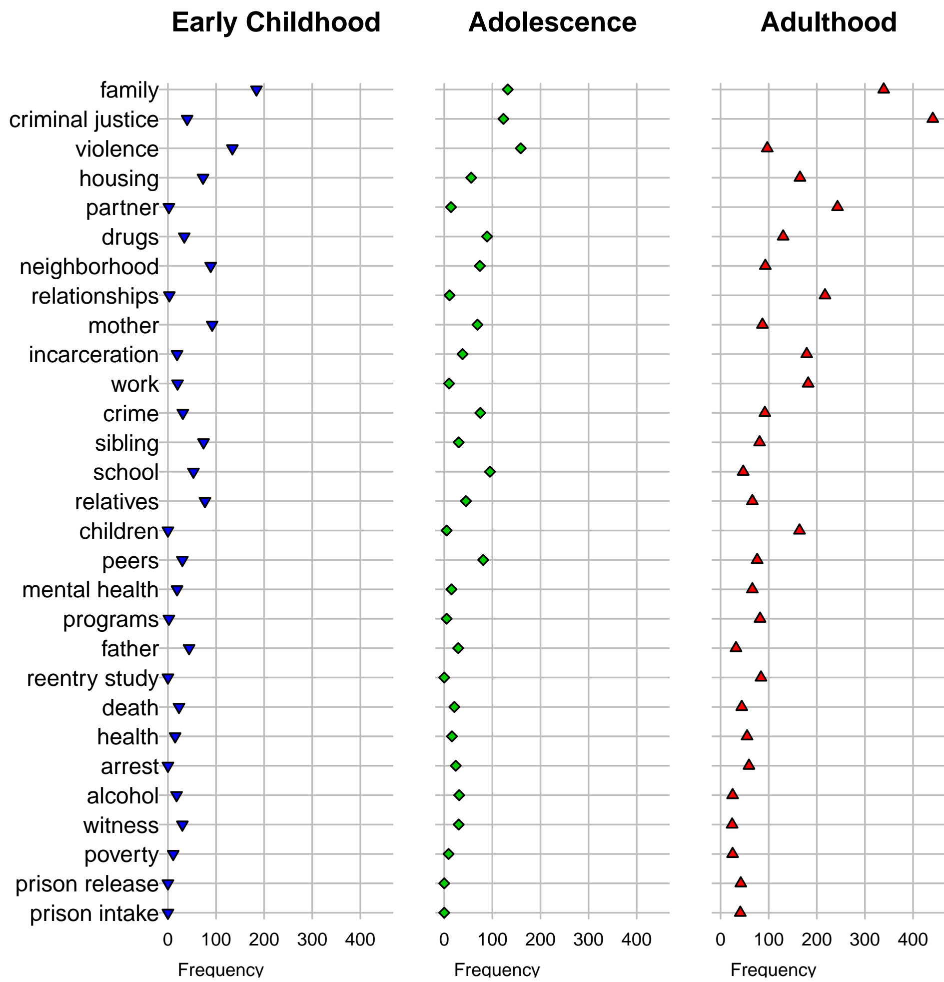

Figure 1. Frequency distribution of coded life events in a sample of 27 formerly-incarcerated men and women in Boston, by life stage.

the life histories. Thus the discussion topics likely signal the salient events and experiences in the lives of the respondents at each of the three stages of the life course.

Because the survey asks about specific time periods (childhood, immediately before incarceration, during incarceration, and the year after release) the data do not provide a systematic inventory of violence over the entire life course. However, respondents often talked about violence outside of the structure of the interview and interviewers would follow up qualitatively. Because respondents talked with interviewers in some detail about violence we are able to qualitatively describe a wide variety of violent events and situations, the people involved, and the social context in which violence happened.

In this paper, violence refers to aggressive physical force. A violent event inflicts bodily injury. In this definition, violence need not be intentional or unlawful. A person may be in an accident and get seriously injured in the absence of any deliberate harm. Although accidents are an important category, violence in the BRS interviews usually had a social quality, describing how people interacted with each other. We coded seven types of violence: suicides, accidents, sexual abuse, domestic violence, murders, assaults and fighting. In this classification, robberies were grouped with assaults because we sometimes lacked the information to draw a clear distinction. We also separated assaults from fighting. An assault is defined as a predatory type of violence perpetrated by an offender on a weak or unprepared victim. A fight, often growing out of an escalating conflict is a mutual exchange among participants who are prepared for conflict. People can be connected to violence in a variety of ways. Researchers usually focus on offenders and, less commonly, on victims. These roles are not always clear-cut, and in cases of retaliation or fighting it is more descriptively accurate to identify participants in violence. In addition to active

involvement, violence can also be witnessed, sometimes instilling fear and psychological trauma. For each violent situation described by our respondents, we coded their role as offender, victim, participant or witness.

Figure 2 shows the characteristics of each of the 291 violent situations described by our 40 respondents. Describing violent situations in early childhood, before age 13, respondents were most often victims or witnesses to violence. These roles are closely related to very high rates of family violence in the childhoods of formerly incarcerated men and women. (Twenty-two out of 40 respondents reported at least one incident of family violence.) Respondents also talked about fighting in early childhood, so the participant role was common from an early age. Because family violence and fighting were so common, nearly 80 percent of all reported violence happened in the neighborhood or in the home.

The relationship of respondents to violence changed in adolescence. Respondents were increasingly involved as participants and offenders and they were less likely to report being victims or witnesses. This reflects the emergence of assaults and fighting as the most common forms of violence reported in adolescence. With the predominance of these two types of violence, the school and the neighborhood become the modal sites of adolescent violence.

The pattern of violence reported in adulthood is qualitatively different from that reported in childhood and adolescence. Accounts of adult violence involve the respondents as offenders about 40 percent of the time, significantly higher than in earlier life stages. About 25 percent of all violent situations in adulthood are witnessed. Over half of all violence reported for adulthood involves an assault and fighting has become significantly less common. Strikingly, 16 percent of all reported incidences in adulthood are murders. Sites of violence have also changed in adulthood. Neighborhood violence remains commonly reported,

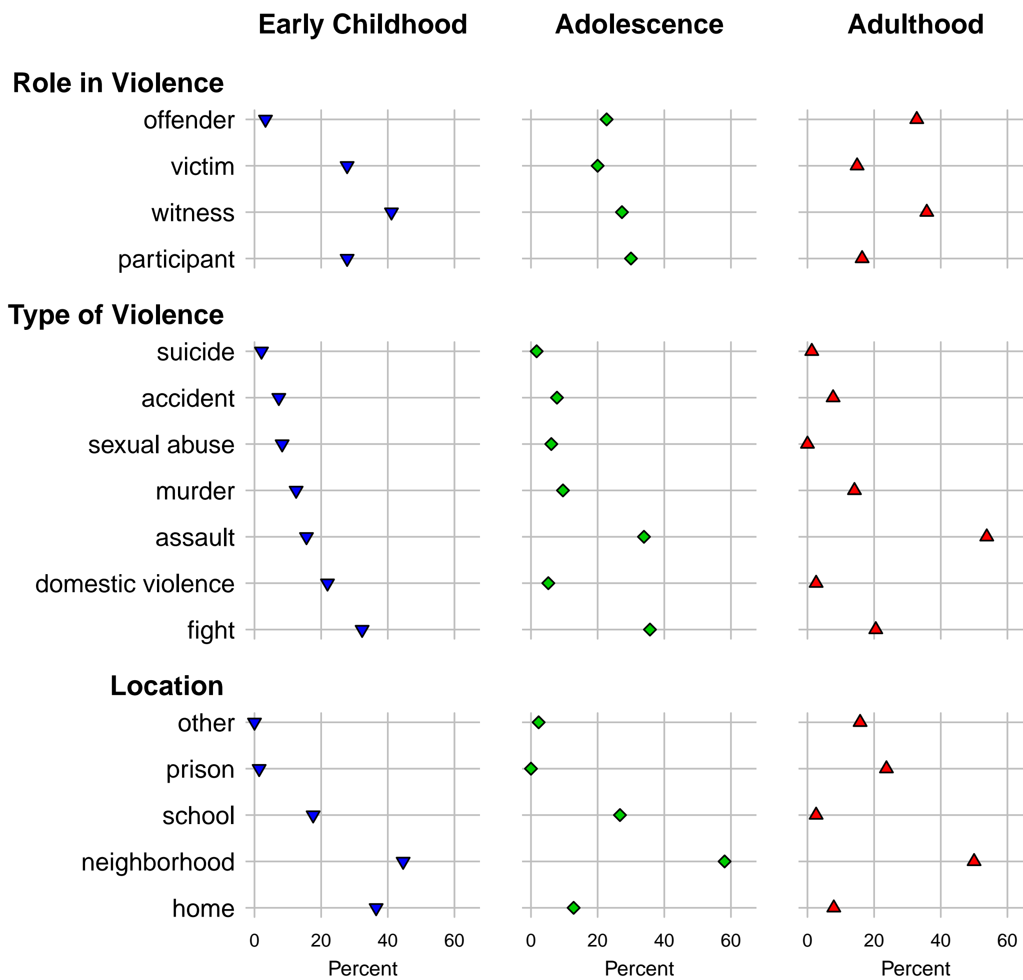

Figure 2. Percentage distribution of characteristics of violent events in life history data from a sample of 30 formerly-incarcerated men and women in Boston, by life stage.

but reports of assaults in prison and in other locations (mostly in neighboring states and cities) also become more prevalent.

The quantitative patterns show how types of violence, the respondents' roles in violence, and the venues of violence vary over the life course. Family violence in the childhood home and adolescent fighting in the neighborhood were ultimately eclipsed in adulthood by assaults, often in prison.

Despite variation over the life course, the respondents remained close to serious violence throughout their lives. Data on violent death provide one indication of the seriousness of violence. Over half of the life history respondents (24 out of 40) reported the violent death of a close friend or family member at some point in the lives. The respondents also sustained many serious injuries. One respondent told us he fell from tier in prison. Another was unable to complete the study because a shooting had left him comatose in hospital. All together, 10 out of 40 reported to us that they had been shot or stabbed.

How is poverty linked to the child abuse, fighting, assaults and murders reported by the respondents? Qualitative life histories suggest how chaos at home and in the local neighborhood, deficits of informal social control, and the cultural context all make poor social contexts likely settings for violence.

Chaos

Patrick was born in 1981 and lived the first years of his life in the Old Colony Housing Projects, one of a cluster of public housing complexes in South Boston. Southie of the early 1980s remained one of the few neighborhoods of concentrated white poverty in urban America, and a stronghold of Boston's Irish-American working class. Patrick's mother was a heroin addict and gave up custody of her son to her parents when he was five. She died of AIDS when Patrick was 17. Patrick's father had left his mother when his son was two, but 20 years later he

would reenter his son's life helping him find a union job in the construction industry.

Patrick's grandparents were reluctant guardians. His grandmother had raised a family of eight children in the small wood house on J Street a few blocks from Old Colony that was to become his childhood home. His grandfather had a seventh grade education and for many years struggled to find steady work because of his own criminal history. (Though he later got a city job after his record was sealed.)

Thirteen people lived in the house when Patrick was growing up. Much of the energy at home was provided by his uncles, a brawling pair of young men who used drugs and alcohol heavily. "My uncles and my mother mother were all heroin addicts," he said. The house was the venue for violence, sexual abuse, addiction and a sprawling kind of family life that Patrick described as "emotionally cold," and "insane," and yet, he added, "it was normal to me." Reflecting on the childhood home, Patrick's aunt recalled "It was just a crazy house, between my brothers coming in either beat up or having some horrible car accident … or someone falling asleep with a cigarette and a mattress going up on fire. It was a very traumatic house to live in."

Patrick's mother was not allowed in the house on J Street. Still, she stayed in contact with her son, we know, through his descriptions of his beatings at the hands of his mother's boyfriends. This was from age five through his teenage years.

Things were also chaotic on the street. When he was six, a man tried to grab Patrick and one of his uncles stabbed the offender in retaliation. At age eight, Patrick saw a neighborhood kid get shot in the head in the housing projects. At age ten he and his uncle stole a car from the neighboring town of Brookline and drove it triumphantly around the Southie streets. The following year, he started

drinking and smoking marijuana and at age 13 he and his friends invaded and robbed the home of a local drug dealer, a neighborhood boy of 15. Patrick was 16 when he used heroin for the first time, encouraged by a girl in the neighborhood. With a spate of suicides in the South Boston schools that year, he tried to hang himself but was cut down by a woman who discovered the attempt. He dropped out of school shortly after. In his aunt's account, Patrick was expelled as a result of the suicide attempt because the school wanted to avoid the expense of mandatory counselling.

Patrick's early life illustrates much of the chaos associated with extreme deprivation. Extreme deprivation spawns the confluence of multiple disadvantages—in this case, untreated drug addiction, housing insecurity and derelict parenting. Under these conditions, life is regularly disrupted by catastrophes small and large and hums with the chronic disturbance of noise and over-crowding.

In general, home life for nearly all respondents as children and adolescents was unstable and often chaotic, regardless of whether childhood violence was reported. Two threads ran through the more violent accounts of domestic chaos: the presence of unrelated men in the childhood home and drug and alcohol use by adults.

Out of the 40 respondents, only 11 reported that both parents were present in their family home at age 14. Adult males, where present, included stepfathers, mother's boyfriends, uncles, and older brothers. Unrelated adult males were often sources of violence in the childhood home, and domestic violence was roughly twice as common in homes where the two biological parents were not living together (62 percent versus 36 percent reporting domestic violence when parents were together).

A Puerto Rican man we interviewed, Hector, grew up with his mother and his siblings, living in many different houses shared with at least several of his

mother's boyfriends. His partner described Hector's unstable home life and how family violence emerged:[1]

> So like, alright, he has four siblings, three siblings through his mom and three siblings through his dad. His brother Jorge [and] him have the same mom and dad and then there is Pedro and Sofia on his mothers side and Omar and Isabella on his father's side... like if there is one word I can describe his mom is unstable. I've been with Hector for 10 years and she's lived in like 20 apartments from the time I've been with him.
>
> ... [Hector's mother] is not a provider, she's dependent on [her boyfriends] so that was a lot. During that time, when he was 14 years old, she may have been ending her relationship with his [Hector's] sister's father and she got involved with this guy from the Dominican Republic and at one point [sighs], when [Hector's mother] was with Sofia's father, he had control over what, what was, where the boys were, what they were involved in and so forth. And I know him and Hector bumped heads a lot, a lot and she had given him power to hit, like discipline them and that was the beating and stuff...

Hector provided his own account of his abuse:

> Basically what I felt was a grown man picking a fight with an eleven, ten year old kid, you know what I mean. A ten year old boy and hitting him like a grown man, hitting that boy like a grown man, you know.

[1] Direct quotes were transcribed from audio-taped interviews, and slightly edited for grammar and verbal tics.

For some respondents, the circulation of men through the house created an ongoing a climate of instability and violence. Manny, a Cape Verdean man in his forties, grew up with several different men in his house.

> *Interviewer: When you were growing up was anyone in your household ever a victim of a crime?*
>
> Yes.
>
> *Interviewer: Who was that?*
>
> My mother.
>
> *Interviewer: Was that just one time or more than one time?*
>
> She used to get beat up by her boyfriends.
>
> *Interviewer: How old were you when that was going on?*
>
> Between twelve and fourteen, I believe. Could have been earlier, but I probably don't remember earlier ages.
>
> *Interviewer: So, what would happen after one of the boyfriends would beat her up?*
>
> Well, while it was going on, I would run in there with my Louisville slugger bat that I used to sleep with.
>
> *Interviewer: And did you ever get involved?*
>
> Oh, yeah. Definitely. Every single time.
>
> *Interviewer: And then what would happen?*
>
> Well, the very last time when I hit one of her boyfriends , they fell down the stairs, with the bat, and then… my mother basically hit me and said why did I do that. So I just left the house and went to

> live with my grandmother for a few years… I was about fourteen, yeah.
>
> *Interviewer: And was it multiple boyfriends, or just…?*
>
> She had a few. She had a few. She had a few.

Drug abuse stoked violence directly with a rage that only alcoholism seems able to produce, and indirectly as parental indifference flourished with the narcissism of addiction. Half of the 40 respondents reported growing up in a home where there were problems with drugs or alcohol and 12 out of these 20 reported incidents of family violence before the age of 18. Alcoholism, cocaine and heroin use were most commonly reported. Whereas heroin and cocaine were often associated with parental neglect, alcohol it seemed could uncork anger that sobriety had bottled up.

Several respondents described a fretful climate that settled on families with alcoholic fathers and stepfathers. Jemarcus, an African American man never met his father and grew up with his mother, stepfather and older brother. His stepfather was an alcoholic "who passed away because he drank so much." Life at home he said was "Stressful, stressful. It was hard. It was uncomfortable. Stressful. I was on edge. Scared. Nervous. My mother would always fight because my stepfather would always come home drunk… when he sober he was the greatest person in the world. And when he drank he just didn't get on with her and he took it out on us."

Brian, from the Irish working class neighborhood of Charlestown, described a similar tense uncertainty surrounding his father's alcoholic moods:

> He would come home from work… he just come home between 5:30 and 6 every night, he'll be feeling pretty good, then he would

> continue to drink and we were never quite sure what type of mood he would be in, whether angry drunk, happy drunk, you know
>
> *Interviewer: And what was he like as an angry drunk?*
>
> He would be disrespectful towards my mother and same way toward us but with physical consequences. That's why I hated Boston College. He had a Boston College ring and I used to get it whacked off the head so I hated Boston College, his college ring.
>
> *Interviewer: And what was he like as a happy drunk?*
>
> I mean he was great and like all happy drunks, you know laughing and jovial.
>
> *Interviewer: Was this going throughout your entire childhood?*
>
> I would say yes, as long as I can remember yeah. Probably mostly from, as I can remember from 9 on… There was like a regular routine.
>
> *Interviewer: Was this every night?*
>
> During the week, when he worked, it was typical, probably three or four nights out of the five but then he would always drink at home. He was better if he started drinking when he got home from work.

Chaos, as it was revealed in the interviews, was frequently characteristic of home life and readily arose in respondents' accounts of childhood. Family violence at the hands of men, often unrelated and often under the influence of drugs or alcohol, created a climate of fear and uncertainty. The respondents connected poverty, chaos, and violence to the childhood home, but many of the men we interviewed circulated as adults through the homes of other children, bringing their own histories of addiction and antisocial behavior with them. In

all our interviews, we never heard much about violence against women or children perpetrated by the respondents themselves. Still, it seems possible with biographies of chaos and violence in childhood and under conditions of severe poverty in adulthood, family violence was sustained over the life course but overlooked in the interviews.

Deficits of Social Control

Luis is a Puerto Rican respondent who grew up "very poor" in a housing project in the Bedford Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York. He and his four brothers and sisters were raised by his mother, though he sometimes lived with his cousins as well. His mother suffered from depression and was unemployed and on public assistance for much of his childhood. She was a strict disciplinarian who sometimes beat her sons with wire cables to try and keep them in line. His stepfather, Carlos, also lived with them. He was a regular heroin user who used at home, nodding off on the sofa in those early years in Brooklyn. Luis first became aware of his Carlo's heroin addiction around the age of thirteen when the police and an ambulance were called in response to an overdose. There were several such medical emergencies in Luis's childhood, but that's the first that he remembers.

Bedford Stuyvesant in the 1980s when Luis was growing up was a poor high-crime neighborhood. Violence was often close at hand on the streets and in the corridors of the housing project. Luis told us that stabbings and shootings were common and he witnessed several people get killed during that time, the first time at age ten. The family was robbed several times and in his early teenage years Luis himself started to getting into fights with neighborhood kids.

When Luis was 14, the family moved to Boston to separate from Carlos and his heroin habit. (Carlos later got clean and followed them up to Boston, start-

ing a second life as a devout churchgoer.) Soon after moving to Boston, Luis got arrested and served time with the Department of Youth Services for assaulting a police officer. He was expelled from high school for this arrest. Throughout his teenage years in Boston, from 14 to 18, Luis served "two or three years" in DYS custody before dropping out of school in the eleventh grade. From age 18 to 33, he spent about half his life incarcerated for assaults and drug dealing. He had three children during this period and at the time of our last interview, he was maintaining contact with each of his three sons and their three mothers.

We recruited Luis to the reentry study during his last stay in state prison. By this time, in his early thirties, he had been diagnosed with depression, anxiety, hypertension and hepatitis C. At the baseline interview just before release, Luis told us that during his current prison term he had witnessed 6 to 10 assaults among prison inmates and another 3 to 5 assaults involving prison staff. His neighborhood, he said, was safer than prison. By the time of our final follow-up interview Luis had been out a year, his longest period in free society since childhood.

Closely related to the chaos of severe deprivation are the deficits of informal social control, the supervising adults whose presence in households and neighborhoods helps maintain social order. Luis grew up in a two-parent family, but his stepfather was immobilized by addiction and his mother had to manage this, her own depression, and her four other children. The Bedford Stuyvesant housing project was a paradigm of ghetto violence, playing host to concentrated poverty, and high rates of single parenthood and unemployment. Authority in Luis's life was provided mostly by the formal institutions of the school, police, juvenile incarceration and state prison. These institutional settings themselves were rich in the possibility of violence and order was maintained through the threat of further punishment.

Weak informal social controls are indicated throughout the sample in the prevalence of neighborhood violence. The neighborhood was named as the site of violent situations in about half of all cases, and was the modal place of violence across the life course. Respondents mostly grew up and lived in the poor and working class neighborhoods of Boston. For black and Latino respondents these were the areas of Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan, all contiguous neighborhoods in the southern part of the city. A handful also grew up in public housing projects in the South End. White respondents spent most of their time in East Cambridge, Charlestown, East Boston and South Boston, white working class communities in the northern part of the city. Both regions were racially segregated, though passing through significant demographic changes in the lifetimes of older respondents, and dotted with areas of concentrated poverty. Violence in these areas took the form of robberies and assaults, street fighting, and serious accidents. Although respondents often reported getting involved in street fights or committing assaults, they most commonly reported witnessing serious violence more than directly participating in it. Respondents witnessed accidents, assaults, fights, murders and one suicide. Often this involved groups of people, violent manifestations of gang rivalries and, in the 1970s and 1980s, racial violence between blacks and whites in the period of school desegregation.

One vivid account from Charlestown, a center of racial violence during the introduction of school busing, described an incident from 1974:

> I saw five black kids from Philadelphia get beaten with golf clubs and a bat, during busing, and I was thirteen years old, it was the first year of busing in Charlestown, and unfortunately, that group of kids from Philadelphia, on a tour, went to the Bunker Hill monument and they got misdirected and they went down towards the

> projects to wait for the bus to go back towards Boston and I can remember the car driving by, there were four kids… Two out of four them were [later] killed and ummm, they get out, went to the trunk and opened the trunk up and three of them had golf clubs and one of them had a bat and started beating them pretty bad.

As respondents moved into adulthood, their accounts of violent situations shifted to prison. When asked about violence in prison during their current incarceration (a period of 26 months at the median), 32 out of 40 respondents witnessed violence involving inmates and 11 out of 40 respondents reported witnessing violence involving a correctional officer. A few respondents also reported on their own involvement in violence, resulting in long spells in solitary confinement. Two respondents talked about violent deaths in prison, one involving a friend who was murdered and another involving an uncle's suicide, an account that was widely disbelieved within the respondent's family.

Respondents spoke of prison as a stressful place in which the climate of violence promoted extreme vigilance. When asked at one week after prison release about the adjustment of returning to the community, one respondent said:

> Big adjustment? Just trying to [pause] just trying to like ease back into society like trying to leave the mentality prison thing alone. Leave it in there.…
>
> *Interviewer: What is that mentality?*
>
> I don't take shit from nobody or uh I just like, I'm real like edgy like one little thing, like you bump into me you don't say excuse me I wanna freakin' flip out you know? I wanna punch your head in. Don't disrespect me. Stuff like that you know, like the way people

> talk to me you know… Give me respect, I'll give you respect you know. Just things you know like I like to learn how to just walk away… That's what I gotta do. I know what I'm capable of and he has no idea… and he's more like I guess innocent and if I get the best of him he's gonna rat me out and then I'm gonna be doing time and that's it, I'm done you know what I mean? So it's like I gotta stop that [and] just walk away. It's not worth it anymore pretty much… It got worse being in prison most of the time and growing up on the street always fighting… I even did a lot of hole time over the years you know, my mind ain't right from that… I'm always on my toes.

Often violent contexts are described in terms of their capacity for formal and informal social control (Sampson 1986; Kornhauser 1978, pp. 69–82). The four main venues of violence—the home, the school, the neighborhood, and the prison—varied in their organized social control, but informal controls were weak everywhere. Schools and prisons are organized around formal authority structures, and authoritative means of discipline. Here, the informal constraints on violence were weak. At home and on neighborhood streets, where organized checks on violence were largely absent, children often lack the supervision of adults, adults themselves are often in violent conflict and violence, at least in the respondents' accounts, seems unexceptional.

Cultures of Violence

In chaotic contexts where there were few authoritative adults were present, violence became positively valued. In some cases, respondents talked about how violence became a way of getting things done. In disputes between male youth, where police were widely discredited, resolution was often found through violence. Thus nearly all respondents were involved in fighting in adolescence. As

one respondent remarked, "I thought it was normal... Everybody was fighting. It was considered a problem if you didn't fight."

Adolescent fighting was ubiquitous among the respondents and several spoke about the larger meaning of fighting in daily life. For some, fighting marked status in the adolescent pecking order. One reported he got in "[three or four fights] a month. 'Cause you always had to prove yourself to your peers on how tough you are." While children were often punished for fighting, some adults saw fighting as a life skill. One male respondent described how he came to be repeatedly suspended for fighting:

> See that's the thing, that's what's weird because my mother seen me lose a fight, right? So she told my uncle I was a punk. So when she told my uncle I was a punk, he took me to boxing school. So now, I know how to fight, you know what I'm sayin', now, I'm you know, just abusing what I know.

A similar sentiment was sounded in another interview, although in this case the respondent was just in the first grade:

> I got in a fight... My mother said, "Did he put his hands on you?" I said, Yeah. She said, "You whipped that ass?" I said, Yeah. She said, "Alright. I'll go up to the school tomorrow."... That's one thing my mother said she wasn't gonna raise, she wasn't gonna raise no woosies. In fact she actually said, "If I was supposed to have bitches I would have had two girls." She said I ain't a punk and my kids ain't gonna be punks and that was just, she taught us right from wrong [not] just be going around being a bully but if somebody put their hands on you defend yourself. She said if you started it then that's your ass. [Laughs]

Another respondent connected the culture of violence to preparation for prison life:

> Sometimes the older people encourage you to do that. They'll encourage you to fight.
>
> *Interviewer: Yeah. Why was that?*
>
> Nobody wants there nephew or their son, or their cousin to be a punk so it's like you wanna go out there and fight. Go on out there and if you wanna fight you go out there and fight.
>
> *Interviewer: Did you have that happen? You know other cousins or uncles that…*
>
> You see, that can be looked at good and bad cause it kinda helped me later on in life. When I was in jail, there's no guns, there's none of that. There's knives and stuff but mostly everybody fights so if… it kinda like gives you a little bit of, you know, [pause] gives you a little leeway. [pause] Most kids my age, when they were 22, 21 they wasn't fighting you know, they was shooting guns and stuff so when you know how to fight when you go to jail, it's like a different world.

In these cases, a readiness to use violence is both preparation for life and a source of masculinity. This is viewed as a reality in settings that are chaotic, weakly supervised by adults in authority and where there is a reluctance to call on police or other authorities to resolve disputes. Adults sometimes play a role socializing children into the value of violence even as others reprimand and discipline their children for fighting. Though we see evidence of violence as valued, this value emerges in a concrete material circumstances where violence can solve problems and other markers of mastery over the world may be

in short supply. In short, violence was often easily contemplated in the poor neighborhoods and institutional settings in which our respondents regularly found themselves.

Discussion

Three main conclusions can be drawn from this review of the encounters with violence described in the interviews with a sample of released prisoners and their families. First is the great salience and high level of violence disclosed through the interviews. While respondents spoke about their own violent offending, they were frequently witnesses and victims of violence too. Years of chronic violence in childhood and adolescence was largely beyond the agency of the respondents in which they were victimized or witnesses to domestic abuse and street crime unfolding around them. Serious violence flowed through intimate networks as friends and family—for 24 out of 40—died violently through an accident, suicide, or murder.

Second, respondents played many different roles in the violence that surrounded them over a lifetime. Their offending was clearly revealed in interviews and criminal records. They had committed robberies, assaults, and one self-reported murder. In addition, all forty respondents described their own victimization by violence, often in childhood, and often at the hands of adult guardians in the form of domestic violence or sexual abuse. As victims, the respondents were shot, stabbed, beaten, raped, and molested. But even beyond the familiar roles of victim and offender, nearly all respondents reported witnessing serious violence and all reported fighting in which the roles of victim and offender were difficult to distinguish.

Third, the main sites of violence—in the home, the school, the neighborhood, and the prison—reveal the influence of poverty. Home life was com-

monly unstable, with adult males unrelated to the respondent often living in the house. We heard many reports of drug or alcohol dependence among the adults in the childhood home. Even in the most stable settings, mothers worked long hours leaving children unsupervised after school and in the evenings. Interviews revealed less about school environments but fighting was common at school along with the disciplinary measures of suspension and expulsion. Some respondents changed schools frequently and more than half dropped out before graduation. School counsellors appeared in short supply, mentioned in just a couple of interviews. Few special measures—except for suspension or juvenile justice detention—were taken for children with behavioral or learning problems. Neighborhoods, typically in the poorer high-crime area areas of Boston, were also violent places in which informal protections against street crime and gang rivalries were weak. Street violence appeared to stretch across the life course, common among youth but also exposing children to violent conflict among adults. History is also imprinted on neighborhood violence where older respondents reported racial confrontations, particularly in the 1970s and early 1980s in the white working class neighborhoods when Boston schools were first desegregated. As respondents spoke about the recent past, prisons mentioned more often as sites of violence. We heard many reports of fighting among prisoners, though correctional officers were also sometimes involved.

What is the role of poverty? Sometimes the line is quite direct. Mothers must work to support the household leaving children unsupervised after school. More commonly the path from poverty to violence was indirect placing children in neighborhoods with weak informal controls or in chaotic homes where addiction or mental illness went untreated. In these settings, violence was not just a failure of social control to prevent impulsively aggressive behavior. Violence was valued. It was something you did to establish your reputation. In some

cases violence was a skill that helped you on the streets or in jail in later life. Unstable families, poor schools, high crime neighborhoods and state prisons: these are the environments in which violence flourished and was sustained over a lifetime.

In these contexts, violence is not simply a rare episode of disorder or a random shock that upsets a well-ordered life. Violence is a type of deprivation that systematically engulfs poor contexts and the people who populate them. As a type of deprivation, violence undermines human welfare. Victimization is accompanied by physical injuries and psychological trauma. Witnessing violence, especially in early childhood, not just intermittently but in a sustained way, affects neural development and causes lasting psychological harm. Violent offending and fighting produce stress and hyper-arousal. More fundamentally, in the perspective developed here, one role in violence not easily divorced from another. In the poor families, schools, neighborhoods and locked facilities, people do not specialize as either victims, offenders, or witnesses. Instead, it seems, one inhabits all these roles in due course.

This perspective on violence departs from the view of criminal justice authorities. In the criminal justice system, there are just two main parties to violence, a victim and an offender. Offenders, through their intentions and actions, are culpable. The job of the criminal justice process is to identify offenders and render punishment. Social context is introduced in a limited way through defenses to criminal charges or mitigation in sentencing, but even here the legal process abstracts from much of the defendant's biography and social context. The deep social fact that violence attends to contexts of poverty and roles in violence circulate freely in those contexts is hard to reconcile with a system of individualized judgment in sentencing. The individualized justice of the criminal trial might be rightly decided in every single case, but the collective

effect is to concentrate punishment on the poor who themselves are owed this individualized justice by virtue of their own victimization.

There have been several significant efforts to admit the social context of violence and other crime into criminal processing. Michael Tonry (1995) describes a "social adversity mitigation" where judges might be allowed to consider socioeconomic disadvantage. These considerations would not affect verdicts, but would be introduced in sentencing to reduce punishment to reflect diminished culpability. In the federal system, judges receive pre-sentence reports (independently prepared by federal probation officers) describing criminal history and the fact situation to guide in the sentencing decision. Pre-sentence investigations could be expanded to provide a detailed account of the defendant's material life conditions that judges could further consider in prescribing punishment.

From the sociological perspective developed here, the implications for criminal justice are even more fundamental. Justice is not achieved through the punishment of the offender but through the abatement of violent contexts. In violent contexts, victims and offenders are not distinct classes of people, but roles produced by the social conditions of poverty. Skeptics may object that the sociological perspective that identifies violent contexts rather than violent people seems to deny moral agency to criminal offenders. But none of this denies the agency of criminal offenders. Instead, it acknowledges that the offender's role is often temporary, that violence has been present since early childhood, and serious victimization is also common in the offender's history. This is the social context in which justice must be found.

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