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“Bullets Have no Names”: A Qualitative Exploration of Community Trauma Among Black and Latinx Youth

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Abstract

Repeated exposure to violent crime and drug use among youth of color can have negative health and behavioral outcomes. Using a community trauma theoretical framework, this qualitative study examines the lived experiences of Black and Latinx youth living in an under-resourced community with high levels of violent crime. Data were collected through eleven focus groups comprising of ($N = 59$) youth. Common themes arose including daily occurrences of witnessing gun violence, feelings of hopelessness, and lack of opportunities among youth. Implications highlight the importance of youth serving community-based organizations to nurture resilience and community healing within trauma-exposed neighborhoods.

Keywords Community trauma · Violence · Youth · Drug use

Highlights

- Urban Black and Latinx youth are disproportionately exposed to community violence.
- There is limited qualitative research using a community-trauma framework.
- Trauma-informed care and community-based organizations for youth is crucial.

Low income, urban communities where youth of color and their families primarily live have a history of

communal neglect and unpleasant living conditions (Rawles 2010). Urban communities refers to densely populated cities and neighborhoods in the United States. Race and socioeconomic class separate most neighborhoods in the U.S., and as such, vital economic and educational resources are often withheld from groups that are seen as unworthy (Parker and Stansfield 2015; Roscigno et al. 2009). This imbalance leaves people of color belonging to historically marginalized backgrounds (e.g. Black and Latinx) often lacking the essential resources that are needed to advance or succeed (Biello et al. 2013). This inequity in neighborhood composition contributes to areas with concentrated poverty, high occurrences of violence, drug use, crime, and the resulting detrimental mental and physical health consequences (Bhavnani et al. 2014; Sharkey and Sampson 2010; Williams and Collins 2016). Unfortunately, within urban neighborhoods where Black and Latinx youth reside in, youth are more likely to witness violence, be exposed to drug use, and lack necessary resources (Andrews III et al. 2015;

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Cooley-Strickland et al. 2009; Floyd and Brown 2013; Mrug et al. 2016).

Community violence is defined as intentional acts of interpersonal violence committed in public areas (e.g. bullying, fights among gangs and other groups, shootings in public areas such as schools and communities, civil wars in foreign countries or “war-like” conditions in US cities (Chen et al. 2016; Margolin and Gordis 2000). Exposure to community violence among youth has been designated a public health epidemic (Finkelhor et al. 2013). The extant research on youth of color exposed to violence uses primarily quantitative methodology and often focuses on individual factors such as mental health disorders (Butcher et al. 2015; Gaylord-Harden et al. 2011), poorer school outcomes (Borofsky et al. 2013), delinquency (Henneberger et al. 2013), and engagement in more risky behaviors such as youth substance use (Tyler and Melander 2015). Qualitative inquiry, however, has been underexplored in the literature (see van Wesel et al. 2014). Qualitative analyses draw from the narratives and actual lived experiences of urban youth who witness violence, drug use, and crime, and will allow researchers to adequately examine the spectrum of experiences of youth of color who have been exposed to violence, drug use, and crime. Similarly, limited research has examined how exposure to traumatic events can extend beyond the individual and affect the entire community. The present literature indicates that such exposures manifest into community trauma, which can penetrate the attitudes and values of a community and promote a collective idea of hopelessness, degradation, and despair (Drummond et al. 2011). Filling these gaps in the literature may lead to an understanding of how multiple contextual factors within an under-resourced, urban community can have a lasting impact on entire groups of people.

Using a community trauma framework (Pinderhughes et al. 2015), this qualitative study uses the perspective of youth of color to explore their lived experiences and consequences of trauma in a violent community. Such an inquiry in the lives of urban youth is unique and crucial to understand their environmental context, needs, and aspirations through their own voices, and to provide community-based implications based on their experiences. For the current study, the term “youth of color” refers to youth whose racial and ethnic groups are currently marginalized and oppressed in the United States (i.e., Black and Latinx). In order to avoid repetition, we will use the terms “youth of color” and “Black and Latinx youth”, interchangeably. Though we discuss Black and Latinx youth through a binary lens, we acknowledge that youth can identify as multicultural, which offers more varied and complex experiences.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Community Trauma Framework

Exposure to violence, crime, and drug use is embedded within family, social, and community contexts (Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn 2000). Previous research has placed the blame on individuals, particularly youth, as opposed to acknowledging the systemic structures in which youth are nested. Confounding variables such as poverty, discrimination, witnessing or experiencing family/domestic violence, neighborhood disorganization, and parental substance use, are all difficult to explore in cross-sectional quantitative studies due to inability to establish causal inferences of behaviors (Lee et al. 2017; Lewin et al. 2010; Yabiku et al. 2007). Community-based interventions that address the consequences of residing in under-resourced communities include drug use prevention programs (Hawkins et al. 2012; Parsai et al. 2011) and anti-gang initiatives (McGarrell et al. 2013); however, many others fail to account for contextual and structural factors within a community that can contribute to residual effects of neighborhood trauma.

Trauma is defined as an event or series of events experienced or witnessed that is perceived as physically or emotionally harmful or life-threatening with lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA] n.d.). Trauma can be a significant barrier to the most successful implementation of healing and well-being strategies, including those to prevent violence (Wu et al. 2010). More recently, researchers have uncovered that the impact of trauma can extend beyond the individuals who directly witness or experience violence to influencing collective norms that can increase the presence of violence, criminal acts, and drug use throughout a community (Ullman et al. 2013). Pinderhughes et al. (2015) define community trauma as systematic and social injustices through structural violence that prevents people and communities from meeting their basic needs (Pinderhughes et al. 2015). The residual effects of community trauma include a lack of social capital, disorganized social networks, and a collective feeling of hopelessness among community members (Morselli 2017). Community trauma framework is a multidimensional construct used to describe “symptoms” as explained by Pinderhughes et al. (2015) that emerge at the community level through three dimensions: (1) socio-cultural environment, (2) physical/built environment, and (3) educational and economic environment. Within this framework, it is posited that practitioners and researchers refrain from examining the

effects of trauma from an individual perspective an instead seek an environmental approach to understanding how symptoms manifest within the neighborhood context.

The social-cultural environment

The socio-cultural environment comprises of personal and organizational relationships within a community. Residential segregation and concentrated poverty lead to individuals' decreased sense of political efficacy, damaged social relations, and broken social networks (Brondolo et al. 2012). For youth of color who face adversity by living in under resourced environments, such a disruption manifests into a lack of supportive relationships (e.g. social support) that are necessary in order to nurture resiliency (Opara et al. 2019). The concept of resiliency among youth suggests that supportive adult relationships are necessary in order to combat symptoms that arise within the sociocultural environment (Clonan-Roy et al. 2016). Specifically, youth-adult connections, both within family networks and with other adult mentors, have the ability to promote healthy development resulting in lower levels of criminal involvement, improved mental health outcomes, and reduced risk behaviors (e.g., drug use) among youth (Shaw et al. 2014).

The physical/built environment

The lack of concern or investment in urban communities of color in the U.S. remains evident (Rawles 2010). Under-resourced neighborhoods often have common visible characteristics including crumbling infrastructure (Anguelovski 2013; Cunradi et al. 2011), abandoned properties (Butcher et al. 2015), and high alcohol outlet density (Cunradi et al. 2011; Lardier et al. 2019; Morton et al. 2014). As researchers begin to understand trauma through a community lens, rather than an individual perspective, it is evident that community trauma is best understood through examining neighborhood and environmental context which includes the physical/built environment (Wade et al. 2014).

The economic and educational environment

The collective symptoms within this dimension result in decreased educational and economic opportunities for residents (Blake et al. 2011; Daly et al. 2010). It is well documented in the literature that violence, crime and delinquency, education, psychological distress, and health outcomes are affected by neighborhood characteristics, particularly the concentration of poverty and residential segregation (Butcher et al. 2015; Deutsch et al. 2012). With inadequate access to economic and educational opportunities, trauma begins to manifest at the community level.

The stressors of living with inequitable access to economic and educational opportunities can also place a significant toll on the minds and bodies of individuals living in these community (Stockdale et al. 2007).

Community trauma and repeated exposure to violence can result in residents desensitization of violence, property destruction, and social norms that promote or encourage violence and unhealthy behaviors (Gaylord-Harden et al. 2011; Ng-Mak et al. 2002; Ng-Mak et al. 2004). Community context and norms are highly influential in shaping individual behavior, including one's tendency to resort to violence (Sampson 2012). Social tolerance of violent behavior has the potential to increase the likelihood of violence within families, peer groups, communities and societies. Harding (2009) refers to this as "criminal socialization," emphasizing the role that individuals (e.g. peers, family) can have on influencing each other to commit unlawful and devious acts.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of youth who live in a resource-deprived and segregated urban community located in the northeastern United States. Drawing on 11 focus group interviews among 59 youth of color, we sought to understand how these young people viewed their community and supportive structures within their neighborhoods using a community trauma framework.

Method

Research Setting

This study was conducted within a densely populated, urban community in the Northeast that is among the top ten "most dangerous cities" in the nation (Federal Bureau of Investigations [FBI] 2016). The community's population is one of the most diverse in New Jersey, with 57.7% of the population identifying as Latinx, 34.7% identifying as African American/Black, followed by 31.7% identifying as White. Approximately, 43.3% residents living in this city were foreign born and approximately 29.1% live below the poverty line, with a median household income of \$33,000 yearly compared to 10.4% and \$71,180 median income for the entire state respectively. The city is one of the poorest cities in the region, with a median income that is among the lowest in the state (U.S. Census Bureau 2016). The city's child poverty rate is 41%, which is higher than New Jersey's rate of children in poverty, which is 16% (Advocates for Children of NJ 2015).

Table 1 Focus group participant demographics (N = 59)

	N	%
Gender		
Male	29	49.2
Female	30	50.8
Age		
16–18	28	47.4
19–24	29	49.2
25–27	2	3.4
Race		
Black	29	49.2
Hispanic/Latinx	24	40.7
White	3	5.1
Asian	1	1.7
Native American	1	1.7
Receive Government Assistance		
Yes	29	49.2
No	27	45.8

Researchers Positionality

The research team consisted of four graduate students (i.e., master's and doctoral-level research assistants at the time of data collection) and two program staff who conducted all of the focus groups. The first author, a Black woman, was also a focus group facilitator and a PhD student at the time of the study. Two of the focus group facilitators identified as Hispanic females, while the other two facilitators identified as Non-Hispanic White males. The authors of this manuscript are racially diverse. The first, second, and fourth authors were involved in the data collection and data analysis. Taking an objective stance, the third and fifth authors (Black women) were not involved in data collection but provided an un-biased view of the data. As part of a larger federal substance abuse coalition grant initiative, the researchers engaged with many participants as educators, mentors, and/or advocates for their needs in substance-abuse prevention. Also, the researchers have working relationships with youth-serving community organizations. Part of the research coalition mandate is to educate the community regarding substance abuse trends impacting youth in the targeted community. Although some of the researchers identify with intersectional perspectives of race, ethnicity, and gender and neighborhood upbringing, it is important to note that social proximity does not suggest expertise into the daily issues and lived reality of urban youth that were a part of the study. The goal of this study was primarily to let the voices of the youth be heard.

Research Sample

Institutional review board approval was secured prior to the investigation. Recruitment of participants occurred through a partnership with a larger community-based initiative in the target community. Youth in the study were asked to be a part of formative focus groups in order to understand the social context of substance use in their community. Through partnering with organizations across the city, community leaders that worked closely with youth and young adults recruited participants after informing them of the study's goals. Participants (N = 59) were between the ages of 16 to 25 years old with a mean age of 17 years old. Participants were not given any monetary incentives. Among participants, 49.2% identified as Black and 40.7% identified as Latinx (see Table 1).

Data Gathering and Analysis

Using a phenomenological framework (Patton 2014) and semi-structured interviews, the team sought to understand the lives and stressors of youth of color living in an impoverished, under-resourced environment. Our research team facilitated eleven audiotaped focus groups. Focus groups provided insight and understanding of phenomena, examining interactions among participants (Kevern and Webb 2001). Focus groups can empower vulnerable youth and allow them to develop rapport in a group setting, while also becoming comfortable in expressing their opinions and thoughts. Youth assent, parent/guardian consent, adult consent (for youth over 18 years of age) were obtained before participants could be a part of the study. Interviews were transcribed verbatim; facilitators also took field notes.

The focus groups ranged from 60–90 min and each focus group consisted of eight to ten participants. Typically, three to four focus groups yield saturation; eleven focus groups ensured rigor (Patton 2014). To establish trust and comfort, facilitators provided detailed information on the purpose of conducting the groups. Each focus group had two facilitators. The lead facilitators conducted the focus group interviews while the second facilitator's role was to administer and collect the questionnaires, observe the moods and behaviors of the participants, probe as needed, and take observational notes. A semi-structured focus-group interview guide was used during these sessions. Each focus group involved the interviewers asking a series of open-ended questions (e.g., "What does your future mean to you?"), designed to elicit data that were rich and allowed participants to describe their own beliefs of their ability to achieve success (see Table 2). Probing occurred during the interview process to provide a narrower understanding of

Table 2 Focus group interview questions and sub questions

Research theme	Interview questions	Sub questions (probes)
Individual	<p>1. Tell me, what does your future mean to you?</p> <p>2. What resources do you need to help you reach your goals?</p>	<p>a. Where do you see yourself in 5 to 10 years?</p> <p>b. Tell me about how confident you feel in achieving your goals?</p> <p>What services, if any, within your community have helped—e.g., social service agencies or alternative schools?</p> <p>Probe for the following:</p> <p>a. Adult-mentors (empowerment, push them to think critically, talk about how these people influenced them to believe in themselves etc.)</p> <p>b. Parents</p> <p>c. Other-mentors (counselors, teachers etc.)</p>
Community Level	<p>3. Can you tell me about any problems barriers in your community that make it hard for you (and young adults like you) to succeed?</p> <p>4. What does community mean to you?</p>	<p>a. What are issues that are preventing people like you from succeeding?</p> <p>a. Do you feel supported by your community and if so, how and why?</p> <p>b. How have barriers influenced your community connection?</p> <p>c. Has it provide you with leadership opportunities?</p> <p>d. Tell me about how this organization involves you in the community</p>
Organizational	<p>5. I am interested to hear more about the organization you are each currently a part of. How has this organization worked with you (or not) in reaching your goals?</p>	

participants' responses, and clarity for participants (Agee 2009).

In a confirmability audit, the research team, which consisted of four research assistants whom were graduate level research assistants at the time, coded all transcripts. Data from the interviews were first analyzed by interviewers using open coding, whereby concepts were identified and labeled as they emerged from the data and across the focus groups (Boyatzis 1998). Data were coded using NVivo version 11 software. Each member of the research team read and re-read all the transcripts and developed initial codes in isolation. During the weekly research meetings, the initial codes were reviewed and discussed. There were no discrepancies in coding. The team agreed on the process of coding before analysis occurred. This was done in order to address inconsistencies and rule out any discrepancies during the data analysis. Direct quotations were used during the meetings to ground the findings and interpretations of the data. The researchers came to a consensus and reached 98% interrater reliability, because each identified nearly identical codes. Using multiple coders provided insight to finding consistency and minimizing researcher bias (Lincoln and Guba 1985). To increase the rigor of the study, the researchers used prolonged engagement, regular team debriefings, and peer consultation.

Next, axial coding was used to further interpret the open codes and put the data back together in light of a coding paradigm. Upon completion of axial coding, the research team constructed categories, which were based on recurring codes and themes that cut across all transcriptions. Although data were categorized initially, it was by similarity in this phase of analysis that the categories were further formed by their connections. Our inductive analysis resulted in concepts that were described by the participants as they defined their experiences and sensitizing concepts that we developed to represent patterns in the data (Patton 2014). The final stage of inductive analysis entailed categorizing major themes by concept, which was guided by the community trauma framework (Pinderhughes et al. 2015). As a form of member checking, the researchers that were involved in the study held several meetings with participants and youth leaders to discuss findings before finalizing on themes. We triangulated notes and memoranda of analyses and reached 95% substantive agreement.

Findings

Youth brought forward narratives describing their environment and issues that they noticed within their community. The themes that arose from the analysis of the data manifested in a collection of symptoms of community trauma which were divided by: (a) Socio-cultural environment,

(b) Physical/built environment, and (c) Educational and Economic environment. We used rich descriptions of the community symptoms as an attempt to highlight the voices and the experiences of youth within this context.

Socio-cultural Environment: “We don’t Care about Each Other”

Among participants, there was a collective feeling of abandonment within their community which resulted in the manifestation of negative emotions associated with their community. Youth described their feelings of not being valued by adults in their community—this led to lack of supportive relationships and a low connection to their community overall. As a participant mentioned, “*You know I just want to put it out there, I feel like, we don’t care enough about each other...*”, we begin to unpack the narratives of urban youth whom are navigating broken systems that have contributed to their overall sense of detachment to their community. The community trauma framework posits that an indicator of trauma on the community level can be the isolation of supportive structural resources that can allow for members to flourish and thrive. Consequently, residents felt detached from other members due to the complexities of having to navigate failed systems that marginalize and oppress them. The presence of trauma within a community can also prevent community members from establishing supportive relationships that allow younger generations to succeed and thrive, due to broken structures within the community and generational oppression.

Youth described and quoted statements from adults in their community including their teachers. These quoted statements outlined the lack of care that adults exhibit towards youth, “...you got some teachers that are you telling you, I don’t care if you learn, I still get paid...these teachers don’t care about us. It’s just a paycheck.” This sentiment was consistent across all 11 focus groups where youth described their perception of their teachers not caring about their education, “if the class was acting bad, the teacher would just say, it’s okay, like I’m just going to sit here. You don’t want to learn, it’s on you, I still get paid.” Although youth in the group acknowledged that their classes could be difficult to manage, they mentioned the disappointment they felt when their teachers refused to engage and would use their employment status as an excuse not to push students further. As a participant noted, “we are kids, why would you tell us that? It’s your job to make us learn”

Youth participants were aware of their lack of community attachment to their community. As one participant noted, “*we don’t care enough about each other... like the community...the people in this town don’t like to be told*

that their doing something wrong.” This participant, a young adult, described their frustration in the need for members to take accountability for their actions and behaviors. As this participant describes their thoughts on community accountability, it becomes apparent that the other youth participants agreed with this sentiment, suggesting that in order for their community to be safe, members had to trust one another and take heed of advice regarding behaviors that were deemed “negative” by youth participants. A youth participant added, “*that’s the problem that we have in this town and our community. We don’t like to take advice from anyone...*” A collective sense of mistrust for adults especially law enforcement arose naturally and transcended throughout all focus groups as described by youth. One participant stated, “*I’ve had cops tell me they’re going to kill you. You’ll be in jail. They will kill you or you are going to be in jail.*” Participants described their environmental conditions and their mistreatment by the police, immediately attributing it to the lack of police officers that were born and raised from their community:

“I think the problem is there’s no cops in our town that are from here, like there’s very few cops that were born in our town...you go to these little white towns, their cops have grown up there. They’ve played on the football teams, and I don’t even know half these people [police], so they don’t care about us.”

Across all focus groups, participants acknowledged that within their community, there was a divide among neighborhoods where residents did not feel a sense of attachment to their community. However, when youth discussed their thoughts on police-community relations, they attributed the disruption in relations to the police officers not being residents in their towns. In addition, participants in this study also felt that police in their community were verbally abusive and not supportive: “*the police don’t care about us. I hate those cops, they will tell you that you are going to die if you mess with them. I have been there, and they said it to me*”. Youth in the study were overwhelmingly disappointed with the lack of supportive systems and structures in their neighborhoods, leaving a low sense of community with high amounts of exposure to violence and crime.

As youth began to discuss their daily experiences in their community, violence and drug use were common occurrences that arose across all of the focus groups. Within the narratives provided by participants, we begin to hear the desensitization to violent acts and crime that occur within their town. The facilitators probed to further understand the types of violence that youth in each group witnessed in order to get a better understanding of their daily lives in their environments, a participant mentioned, “*It’s so bad to the point where when someone gets killed or you hear a*

bullet, you just keep on walking." This participant discussed the frequent acts of violence that they hear about and also witnesses, acknowledging that this is an issue that they have no control over and continue move forward in the midst of chaos. Another participant described their reaction to gun violence in their town, "*You hear gunshots, you see somebody, you be like what are you doing? What is going on? You are so intrigued by it.*" Within this discussion, this participant described how their emotions associated with gun violence transitioned from a fearful response to entertaining over time. Through this brief exchange, the participant describes how the repeated imagery of violence, drugs, and crime have been shown so much in their community, that they are unsure how they would be able to live without it. Adding that since her and her family moved away from the town to a nearby suburban neighborhood, she still visits this community and is intrigued by the frequent occurrences of gun violence and crime. During this discussion, the interviewer probed, interested in her clarification of being "intrigued" by witnessing gun violence,

"It's just exciting. It's just something about it that makes you want to keep coming over there...everyone gets shot, everybody sells drugs, it's like even though that's bad, even though it could be you, you still want to come here because it's just something to do."

Another youth participant countered her peer's comments, insinuating that violence and risky behaviors have become a normal occurrence in their community. This was echoed across all groups:

"I feel like our generation is seeing this as something so normal when it's not. That's the problem. It's like they keep hearing about teen pregnancy because it's happening every day, somebody getting shot, it's happening every day, it wasn't always like that... it's not stopping, and no one is doing anything about it either."

Youth across all groups described their feelings of hopelessness and being abandoned in their communities. Acknowledging that the presence of risky behaviors expected in their community and they do not feel that there is enough support or action taking place to alleviate them from what they are witnessing. Other participants in the focus groups expressed a genuine fear in their community of their loved ones getting hurt by gun violence. As many participants mentioned, gun violence being a major issue in their community and described gun violence as an occurrence that makes it difficult for them to connect with their community:

"...and then you have to sit there and worry about sitting in the house and your kids, your siblings, your

family, are outside. You have to worry about, 'ok my kid might get shot...Bullets have no one's name on them, bullets can hit anybody..."

Lack of social capital, community mistrust, and desensitization of violence were apparent in the narratives of youth in the study. Thus, symptoms of community trauma become present within the socio-cultural environment that affects the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of youth in this community.

Physical Environment: "Where are the Parks?"

Participants continued to describe neighborhood inequities that were visibly present in their communities. Commonly, youth in the study discussed differences they noticed in their town compared to other surrounding suburban towns. One participant mentioned, "*You can smell the difference. You come in our town and your like, what just happened? Where are the parks? Where is the green grass?*" As described by this participant, it became apparent that youth in the study were aware and concerned with their physical environment. As such, consequences of residential segregation and lack of resources that contributed to dilapidated conditions in their town contributed to the physical environment in their community, noticeable by youth.

Differences were not just in the structure and built environment of their community, but youth participants were also hyperaware of the access and visibility of drug use and abuse present in their community. For instance, one participant noted that: "*you see heroin everywhere...needles...everyone is using it, it's normal!*" Another participant discussed the wide availability of liquor stores in her community,

"... there is a liquor store at every corner, and it's like people drink outside and they are drunk, and we walk passed it every day and see that...They are of course bound to fight, and we witness that on the regular."

Similarly, another participant added the value that is placed on liquor stores in their community, over parks and recreation: "*the city spends a lot of money on liquor stores. What happened to the parks? What happened to the green grass? What happened to the trees?*". Furthermore, youth were quick to make connections between the vast availability of drugs and alcohol and the probability of youth in their community engaging in risky behaviors. As one participant stated:

"This is a drug influenced area, and also high crime, which is bound to influence a whole bunch of kids. You are more susceptible of becoming a part of the

street life instead of looking forward to the future and trying to reach your goals that you set as a little kid living in this town and seeing what we see”.

Participants felt collectively that the presence of crime, violence, and drug use in their community played a significant role in their future prospects. One participant mentioned, *“I feel like the only way for me to make it is to leave this town, no one cares about us”* Similarly, another participant mentioned, *“Every year it gets worse... the good people just they just leave the town... things will never change so the good ones leave while the rest stay here.”* Social inequality resulting in neighborhood segregation has contributed to the economic and social deprivation placed on people of color living in urban locales. Such an outcome has resulted in youth’s view of limitations in their upward social mobility.

Educational/Economic Environment: “We don’t have Money, We have Criminality”

Within the educational/economic component of the community trauma framework, participants overwhelmingly felt that in order for them to succeed, they would need to leave their town in order to achieve success. Feelings of hopelessness were present throughout the focus groups, where youth felt like their immediate environments forced them to work hard and leave their community:

“When you’re born and raised in this town and you walk outside your door and you constantly see the same thing every day, it’s like, man I don’t want to be like this. I want to get out of here, I need to, go hard so I can make it and leave.”

Another participant added:

“It’s just too much to deal with in this town... everywhere you go, something always happens in the street or on the corner, and it’s like I am sick and tired of this I want to get out of here. I want something different. I want the smell, to taste something different.”

Across the focus groups, there was a consistent theme of the lack of resources available in this community that hindered success and growth for youth: *“There is nothing here. It’s absolutely nothing in this town, whatsoever that can make you better yourself, literally. You have no choice but to leave or get into something bad.”*

According to the community trauma framework, lack of educational and economic opportunities manifests in lower academic achievement, unemployment, a low sense of

belonging to schools within a community (Pinderhughes et al. 2015). Within urban, under-resourced environments, residents are surrounded by examples of poverty, have lower levels of social capital and upward mobility, which they overly identify with thus allowing them to lose hope in achieving a prosperous future. One youth described the design of her community and outlined barriers that attribute their success,

“I think having no police who care about us, no after school programs for kids, making it hard to be on welfare, are what is keeping us down, like there is no safe haven for us. Nothing”.

Another young person added their perception of inner-city neighborhoods, “I feel like the inner city was designed to have everybody begging and poor”.

Another participant mentioned the lack of sustainable programs and educational resources to assist youth that actually want to achieve success:

“I feel like, we should have more tutors and more things in the school. We need it, especially in math and science classes, there’s always that one subject that always throws you off, no matter if you’re an A student, and makes you give up, we need mentoring programs like Big Brother Big Sister, we don’t have that”

Another participant also expressed a lack of sufficient resources in their schools and asserted those resources as vital to their success.

“Some schools don’t have as much materials as, like when I was in middle school, we use to have books and take textbooks home to do our homework. Now we can’t do that. Because they don’t have enough textbooks, or books, nothing! So we have to share, which makes it hard because I don’t want to share books with people”

Consequently, participants were astute at making connections to the lack of opportunities caused by social and structural factors present in society, and the reasons behind individuals participating in risky or criminal behaviors in order to survive. One participant specifically told a story about her older brother, who had difficulties finding employment:

“I feel like when you are limited in opportunities and like ways of getting money, that it could like, it leads to like other things, like. My brother couldn’t really find any jobs, he tried really hard but then he got into

like drug dealing and stuff like that. He tried to find the easier road, because he didn't have any legal opportunities to get money. If you don't have money or a lot of it, you got criminality".

Within this theme, it is apparent that as youth continue to be marginalized in an under-resourced society, their ability to obtain safe and "legal" jobs may seem limited. Consequently, resulting in youth and youth adults being pushed into unlawful work. As a consequence, this work (e.g. illegal drug sales) perpetuates violence in community and may lead to mental health concerns due to lack of stability and fear. Overall, youth attributed violence, the presence of guns, and drug use as major barriers in their community to success. One participant noted, "I think if you take all three of them things [guns, violence, drugs] off the streets, it'd be a little better for us to be safe and work hard, just a little, cause after you take that off the streets, it's up to the person to change themselves now.

Discussion

The current study expands our understanding of the impact of community trauma on Black and Latinx youth in their community. Participants across the focus groups discussed their lived community experiences that involved daily occurrences of violence, crime, and exposure to drug usage, and consequently lead to collective feelings of hopelessness. Feelings of hopelessness among Black and Latinx youth are associated with negative outcomes including violence, injury to self and others, depression, substance use, promiscuous sexual behavior and school problems (Margolin et al. 2009; Stoddard et al. 2011) that impacts youths' success into adulthood (Zyromski 2007).

Using Pinderhughes' et al. (2015), Community Trauma Framework, findings from this study were organized by the three dimensions which are seen as indicators of community trauma. Beginning with the socio-cultural environment, participants described their lack of connection with adults including teachers, neighbors, and police officers, in their community whom they felt did not value their position as youth. Within the framework, the absence of supportive connections for youth implies a disruption in the environment that has led to mistrust between community members and lack of responsibility for future generations. Research examining the role of adult-youth relationships in under-resourced urban neighborhoods suggests that adults struggle to protect youth in these contexts (Antunes and Ahlin 2017; Zeldin et al. 2017). However, these studies often negate the experiences of adults in the youth's immediate systems who are themselves traumatized. An explanation of this phenomena can stem from intergenerational trauma that has not

been addressed in adults, therefore leaving them at limited capacity to effectively support others. For Black and Latinx youth whose backgrounds have been historically marginalized in the United States, it is unavoidable that they will experience instances of adversity and it is expected that they develop attitudes that prevent internalizing such experiences (Clonan-Roy et al. 2016). However, these youth are unlikely to receive emotional support in processing such events (Butcher et al. 2015) due to inequities in access to receiving mental health services in the environments that they reside. As a consequence, youth are left to manage the trauma alone, which fosters feelings of hopelessness among youth due to the diminished presence of protective resources that can buffer against exposure to violence and stressful events (Zyromski 2007). In order to alleviate symptoms of community trauma within this context, healing and connection between adults and youth is crucial. In addition, shifting cultural norms to promote safe and healthy behaviors is essential by incorporating community-based programs that foster sense of community and utilizing community members to engage in change within their environments.

Moreover, within the physical environment, findings revealed that abandoned houses, high presence of drug use and paraphernalia, and deteriorated roads and neighborhoods are all indicators of community trauma. Youth defined their environments as visually unappealing which led to a lower sense of community or connection. Research confirms the association between physical environments, sense of community, and negative outcomes among youth such as violence and exposure to trauma (Porter et al. 2019; Speer and Hughey 1995; Teixeira 2016). In their narratives, participants described these problems and identified them as reasons for their lack of community connection. The need to restore and beautify public spaces that reflect the community's culture and bring a source of pride can be another strategy to rectify this symptom. In order for youth to heal, the beautification of the community's roads, housing, and inclusion of parks can provide social interaction, positive relationships and encourage healthy prosocial behaviors and activities (Ries et al. 2009).

In addition, the co-occurrences of violence, crime, and drug use were apparent in this community. As a result of structural inequities and extreme poverty, such instances of crime and violence can further contribute to worsened emotional outcomes (e.g., increased hopelessness) for youth of color (Stoddard et al. 2011). Unfortunately, albeit in line with the existent literature, it was difficult for youth in the current study to see themselves being successful in the future due to lack of economic and educational opportunities that they were aware of. Improving economic opportunities through job training and placement for young adults, college recruitment programs, and establishing more employment opportunities can alleviate the symptoms of

trauma present within this community. Youth in the study attributed lack of opportunities to drug use and crime—admitting that people in their community do not feel that they have any other option but to engage in illegal activities just to support their families. This revelation was disheartening for youth in the study as they struggled between

Through a community trauma framework, we recognize such narratives from the perspectives of youth that describe environments that foster traumatic events. As evident in the findings, trauma can extend beyond the individual to indirectly impact community behaviors and norms. Youth participants in the current study described a disconnect from their community, an unnatural fear of their environments, feelings of hopelessness, and norms regarding risky behaviors practiced by their peers. Consistent with existent literature, exposure to community violence manifested in symptoms that damage the necessary connections and limits resources that can be made available to youth. Through utilizing a public health approach, we suggest that addressing the needs of an entire community and solving larger inequities requires collective action and cooperative efforts from such diverse sectors as health, social services, education, and policy.

Implications for Research and Practice

Clinicians and practitioners are urged to create strategies to address community trauma by promoting healing and resilience in a culturally sensitive manner for populations that have been marginalized. Using the community trauma framework allows for practitioners and community leaders to understand how community trauma undermines both individual and community resilience, especially in communities highly impacted by violence. Utilizing a community trauma framework is essential when working with people of color to: (a) prevent further community violence and drug use and (b) alleviate the effects of witnessing such acts. In addition, longitudinal studies involving large epidemiological samples of children exposed to varying levels of community violence are needed to further understand the complex risk and protective factors associated with living in violent neighborhoods.

This systemic social disadvantage and oppression is likely to traumatize individuals at the community-level, as well create a sense of hopelessness and apathy among community members (Pinderhughes et al. 2015). Findings from this study show the need for researchers and practitioners to view violence as a manifestation of community trauma and for coping behaviors (e.g., substance use) to be treated and not criminalized (Fergus and Zimmerman 2005; Revital 2017; Wallace et al. 2017). Thus, it is particularly important to assess and target a variety of coping strategies

that youth may use in these contexts including compensatory behaviors that allow youth to adapt to volatile environmental demands (Fergus and Zimmerman 2005). An ecological approach that infuses cultural strengths (Opara et al. 2019, 2020; Williams et al. 2014) in interventions is warranted both in terms of how youth are recruited into helping institutions (e.g., youth outreach), and in identifying the targets of treatment (e.g., peer groups, neighborhood-related projects, education and employment support; Espelage 2014).

Conclusion

Trauma can manifest at the community level, yet most frameworks address trauma only at an individual level. The literature conceptualizes community violence as a public health issue that can prevent communities and individuals from receiving basic needs that can lead to poor health outcomes (Jones 2007; Pinderhughes et al. 2015). Though literature has explored the deleterious effects of urban, under resourced communities on youth, it is essential to begin to seek a resolution to improve the well-being of an entire community. The burden of improving a community should not be placed on the shoulders of youth nor the oppressed, but rather individuals in position of power whose privilege has contributed to the traumatic symptoms to our socio-cultural, physical, and our educational/economic environments, as described in our study. “Bullets have no names,” but the people have voices, and as such, we urge practitioners, researchers, community leaders, and mentors to listen to the urban youth of color as they have so much to say and contribute.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethics Statement All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee (include name of committee + reference number) and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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