

IS YOUTH VIOLENCE PURELY AN AMERICAN PROBLEM?

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ABSTRACT

Violence has probably always been part of the human experience. It is found everywhere and any one may experience some types of violence at any time. Violence is not uniquely the use of physical strength against someone else, nor is it solely performed by gangsters or some deviant peers. The problem of violence is more complicated than it appears to be. This paper is going to evaluate the problem on a global scale, shed light on youth violence in the United States and, highlight its predominant risk factors.

Keywords: Violence, Youth Violence, Homicide, Gun Violence, Risk Factors.

1. INTRODUCTION

Violence causes more than 1.6 million deaths worldwide every year, more than 51,000 are Americans. Suicide accounts for 54% of violent deaths globally, homicide for 35% and war and other armed conflicts 11%¹. Violence is one of the leading causes of death in all parts of the world for persons ages 15 to 29². Many of those who survive acts of violence, road traffic crashes, or other causes of injury are left with temporary or permanent disabilities – 16% of all disabilities globally are caused by injury. All causes of injury, but particularly child maltreatment, intimate partner and sexual violence, have been shown to have a range of other health consequences. They contribute significantly to depression, sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies, while also increasing the likelihood of engaging in risky behaviors, such as smoking and the harmful use of alcohol and drugs³. In this paper, we are going to investigate the problem of violence in general, more particularly gun violence and youth violence. A special focus will be given to the risk factors of violence as well as youth violence. At the end, the paper is going to answer the article's major question: is youth violence solely an American problem?

2. DEFINING VIOLENCE

Any comprehensive analysis of violence should begin by defining the term “violence” and its various forms. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines violence as: “The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation⁴”. In 1996 WHO, developed a typology of violence that characterized the different types of violence. (see figure 1)

¹ Research America (2008) Investment in research saves lives and money. Facts about: Global Violence. Internet resource.

² Ibid

³ World Health Organization.(2014). Injuries and violence: the facts. Geneva. P 6.

⁴Krug EG et al., eds. (2002) World report on violence and health. Geneva, P, 5.

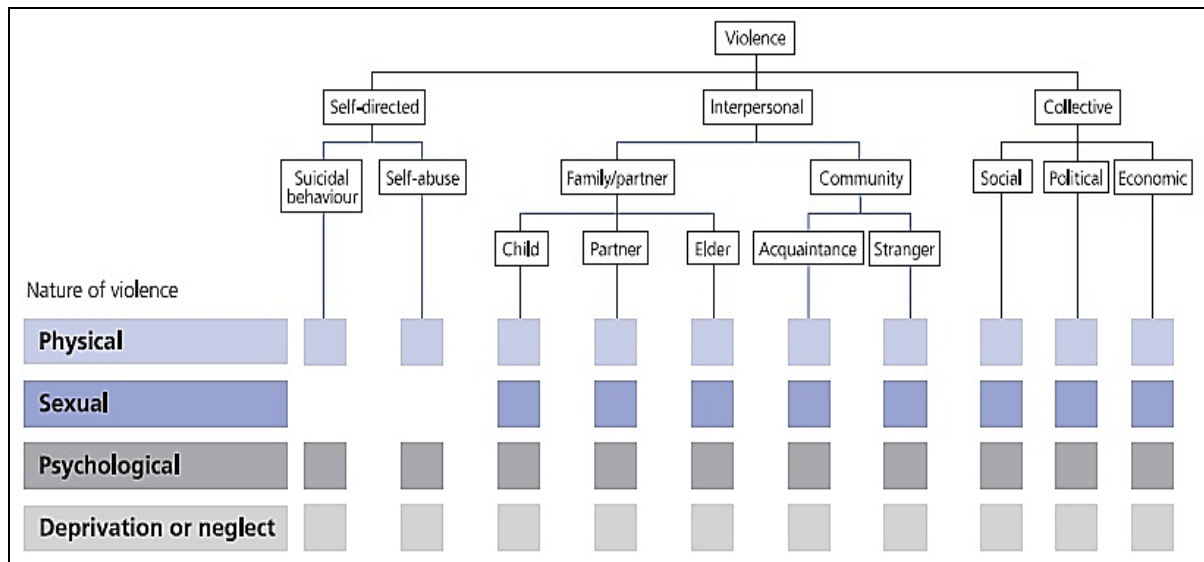


Figure 1: Typology of violence

Source: Krug EG et al., eds. (2002) "World report on violence and health". Geneva, World Health Organization, P, 7.

This typology, provides us with a useful frame-work for understanding the complex patterns of violence taking place around the world⁵. The horizontal array shows who is affected, and the vertical array describes how they are affected⁶.

The typology proposed, divided violence into three broad categories: self-directed violence, interpersonal violence and collective violence. Self-directed violence includes both suicidal behavior and self-abuse. Interpersonal violence covers family and intimate partner violence, and community violence. The latter includes many forms of violence like: child abuse, abuse of the elderly which encompasses youth violence, random acts of violence, rape or sexual assaults by strangers, and violence in institutional settings such as schools⁷. Collective violence is usually committed by larger groups or by states. Examples may include: crimes of hate, terrorism, mob violence, and wars⁸.

3. VIOLENCE AS A GLOBAL PHENOMENOM

Through an ever more rapid and widespread movement and exchange of information, ideas, services and products, globalization has eroded the functional and political borders that separated people into sovereign states. In some parts of the world, globalization has led to increased inequalities in income and helped destroy factors such as social cohesion that protected against interpersonal violence. In addition, the removal of market constraints, and increased incentives for profit can lead to much freer access to alcohol, drugs and firearms⁹.

Each year, thousands of people lose their lives as a result of self-inflicted, interpersonal or collective violence. Overall, violence is considered as the leading cause of death worldwide

⁵ Ibid, p7.

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid, p 14.

for people aged 15-44 years¹⁰. Nonetheless, rates of violent death vary from one country to another. In 2000, in the Region of the Americas and the African Region, homicide rates were nearly three times greater than suicide rate (see figure 2). However, in the European and South East Asia Regions, suicide rates were more than double homicide rates¹¹.

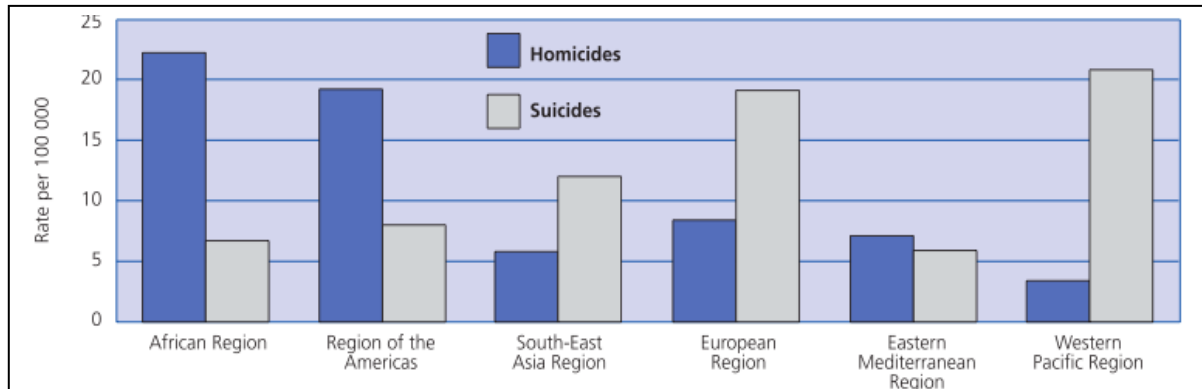


Figure 2: Homicide and Suicide Rates by WHO region, 2000

Source: Krug EG et al., eds. (2002) "World report on violence and health". Geneva, World Health Organization, P, 11.

In 2010, the total number of annual homicides estimated by United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) was 468,000. More than a third (36%) of those were estimated to have occurred in Africa, 31% in the Americas, 27% in Asia, 5% in Europe and 1% in Oceania¹². UNODC reported also that even though not all homicides involve a weapon, 42% of global homicides are actually committed by firearm^[12]. Homicides in the Americas, for instance, are more than three and a half times as likely to be perpetrated with a with a firearm than in Europe (74% vs 21%), (see figure 3)¹³.

This high rate of gun homicide in the Americas can be justified mainly by the high rate of firearm ownership. In 2007, the Small Arms Survey reported that the United States of America has got the highest rate of civilian firearms worldwide. The Small Arms Survey estimated the number of civilian firearm ownership worldwide at approximately 650 million weapons out of some 875 then in existence. National ownership rates ranged from a high of 90 firearms per every 100 people in USA, to one firearm or less for every 100 residents in countries like South Korea and Ghana (see table 1)¹⁴.

¹⁰ Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2012). Ten Leading Causes of Death and Injury NCIPC: Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System (WISQARS). Internet resource.

¹¹ Op. cit. Krug et al., p11

¹² United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2011) 2011 Global Study on Homicide: Trends, Contexts, Data. Vienna, Austria, p 40.

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Small Arms Survey. (2011) Estimating Civilian Owned Firearms. Geneva, Switzerland, p,1- 2.

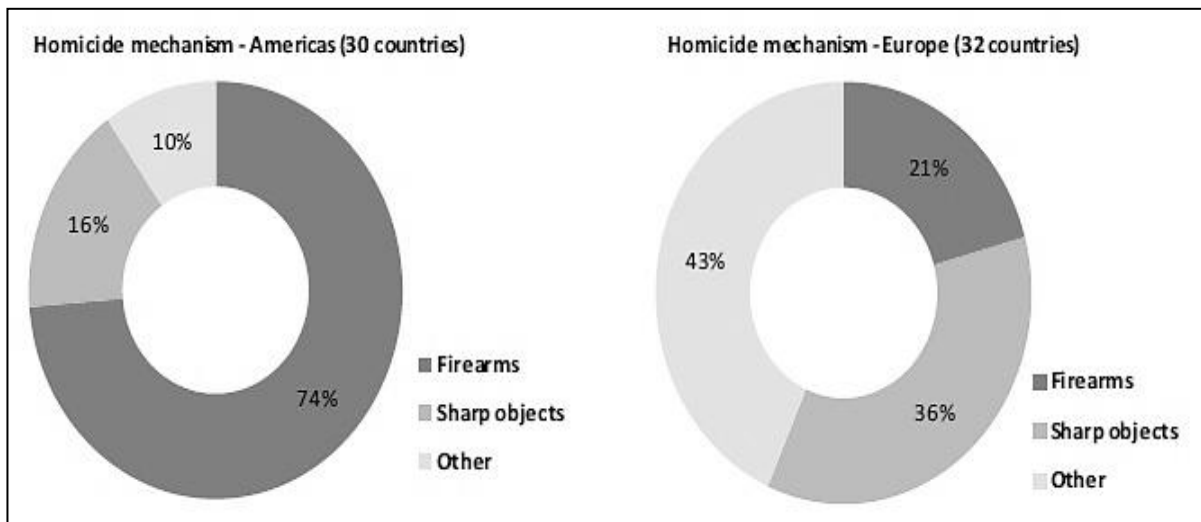


Figure 3: Homicide Mechanism, The Americas and Europe (2008 - 2010)

Source: United Nations Staff, Drugs Crime Prevention Committee. "Global Study on Homicide 2011: Trends, Contexts, Data". United Nations Publications, p 40, 2012.

Table 1: Civilian gun ownership for 09 countries, in descending order of averaged civilian firearms.

Source: "Estimating Civilian Owned Firearms." Geneva, Switzerland: Small Arms Survey, p,1- 2. 2011.

Country	Rank	Civilian firearms per 100 residents	Estimated civilian firearms (rounded)
USA	1	89	270 000 000
Yemen	2	55	11 500 000
Switzerland	3	46	3 400 000
Finland	4	45	2 400 000
Canada	13	31	9 950 000
Germany	15	30	25 000 000
Russia	68	9	12 750 000
Korea, South	149	1	510 000
Ghana	174	0,4	80 000

We conclude that, the role played by firearms in homicide is fundamental and, while the specific relationship between firearm availability and homicide is complex, it appears that a vicious circle connects firearm availability and higher homicide levels.

4. EXAMINING THE ROOTS OF VIOLENCE

In 1970's, Urie Bronfenbrenner, an American developmental psychologist, developed an Ecological Systems Theory of child development in which he tried to understand human development by taking into consideration the entire ecological system in which growth occurs¹⁵. Bronfenbrenner, wrote that: "The ecological environment is conceived as a set of nested structures, each inside the next, like a set of Russian dolls"¹⁶. This model explores the relationship between individual and contextual factors and considers violence as the product of multiple levels of influence on behavior (see figure 4).

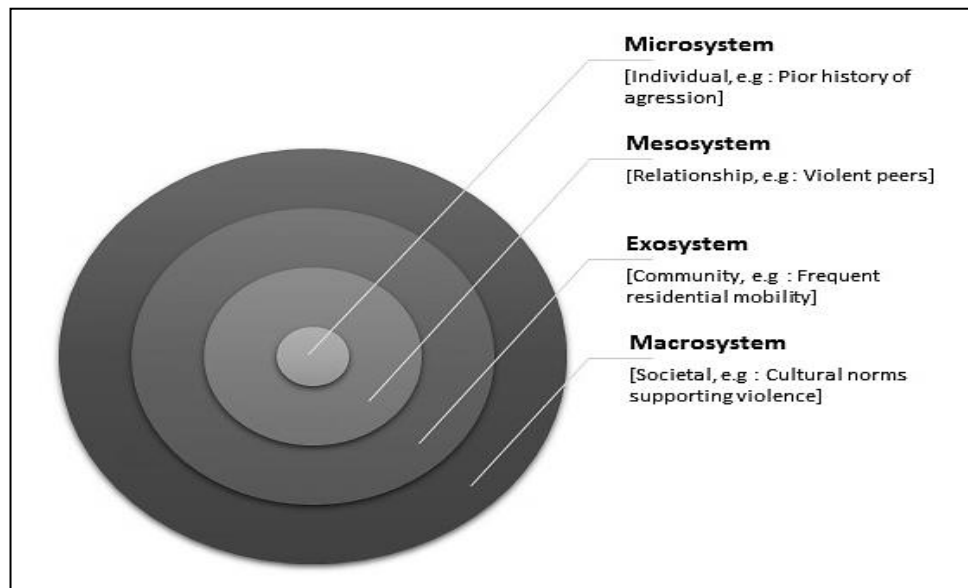


Figure 4: The Ecological Systems Theory of Human Development (modified)

Source: Bronfenbrenner, U. *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1979, p 3

Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, was initially applied to child abuse of violence, and subsequently to youth violence and intimate violence¹⁷.

The first level of the ecological model seeks to identify the biological and personal history factors that an individual brings to his or her behavior. In addition to biological and demographic factors, factors such as impulsivity, low educational attainment, substance abuse, and prior history of aggression and abuse are all taken into consideration. So this level of the ecological model, focuses on the characteristics of the individual that increase the likelihood of being a victim or a perpetrator of violence. The second level of the ecological model explores how proximal social relationships – for example, relations with peers, intimate partners and family members – increase the risk for violent victimization and perpetration of violence. In the cases of partner violence and child maltreatment, for instance,

¹⁵ Bronfenbrenner, U. (1993) Ecological Models of Human Development. In *International Encyclopedia of Education*, (pp. 37-43).

¹⁶ Bronfenbrenner, U.(1979) *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, p 3

¹⁷ Op, cit, Krug et al. (2002) P, 12-15.

interacting on an almost daily basis or sharing a common domicile with an abuser may increase the opportunity for violent encounters¹⁸.

The third level of the ecological model examines the community contexts in which social relationships are embedded – such as schools, workplaces and neighborhoods – and seeks to identify the characteristics of these settings that are associated with being victims or perpetrators of violence. The fourth and final level of the ecological model examines the larger societal factors that influence rates of violence. Larger societal factors include: cultural norms that support violence as an acceptable way to resolve conflicts; attitudes that regard suicide as a matter of individual choice instead of a preventable act of violence; norms that entrench male dominance over women and children and norms that support the use of excessive force by police against citizens¹⁹.

So, no single factor explains why some individuals behave violently toward others. Violence is the result of the complex interplay of individual, relationship, social and environmental factors. However, if violence in general is not limited to a specific region, and if it is the result of a number of reasons, can we apply these findings on its sub-branches?

5. YOUTH VIOLENCE

Violence by young people is one of the most visible forms of violence in society. The victims and/or the perpetrators are themselves young adults who are just 10 years old and even less. The factors that lead those young “predators” to commit violent acts range from internal to external reasons, and the consequences are in most cases devastating.

5.1. Trends of Youth Violence

In 2000, WHO reported that between 1985 and 1994, youth homicide rates increased in many parts of the world, especially among youth in the 10-24 years old age bracket. The increases in youth homicide rates were generally associated with increases in the use of guns as the method of the attack.²⁰ (see figure 5).

However, in the U.S for instance, although homicide rates declined between the 1980s and 1990s, youth homicide, particularly gun homicide, increased dramatically. Between 1984 and 1994, juvenile (younger than 18) homicides committed with handguns increased by 418%, and juvenile homicides committed with other guns increased by 125%²¹. During this time, adolescents (ages 14 to 17) had the largest proportional increase in homicide commission and victimization, young adults (ages 18 to 24) had the largest absolute increase, and there was much crossfire between the two age groups i.e., gun homicide accounted for all of the increase in youth homicide²².

¹⁸ Heise, LL. (1998) Violence against Women: an Integrated, Ecological Framework. *Violence against Women*. P, 262-90.

¹⁹ Op. cit. Krug et al (2002) p 12-13.

²⁰ Op.cit. Krug et al (2002), p 12-13

²¹ Braga, Anthony A. (2004) Gun Violence among Serious Young Offenders. Washington, D.C: U.S. Dept. of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, p 1-2.

²² Ibid, Braga, p 1-2.

The youth violence epidemic peaked in 1993 and was followed by a rapid, sustained drop over the rest of the 1990s²³. In 2000, more than 10,000 Americans were killed with guns, and guns are much more likely to be used in homicides of teens and young adults than in homicides of people of other ages²⁴.

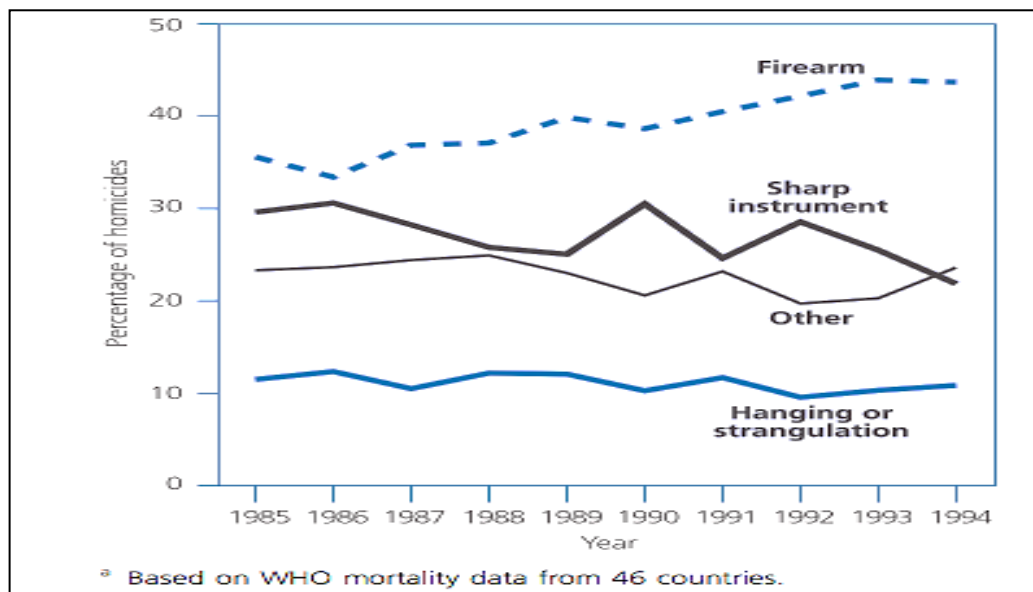


Figure 5: Trends in method of attack in homicides among youths aged 10-24 years, 1985-1994

Source: Krug EG et al., eds. (2002) "World report on violence and health". Geneva, World Health Organization, P, 12.

In fact, youth gun violence remains a critical concern in the U.S in comparison with other industrialized countries. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDCP), the U.S has the highest rates of childhood homicide, suicide, and firearm-related death among children in 26 industrialized countries. Children in America are 12 times more likely to die from guns than children in 25 other industrialized countries²⁵.

In an attempt to compare patterns and the impact of violent deaths among children in the United States and other industrialized countries, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) analyzed data on childhood homicide, suicide, and firearm-related death in the United States and 25 other industrialized countries²⁶. Each country reported data for 1 year between 1990 and 1995; U.S. data were reported for 1993. The number of homicides per 100,000 children under age 15 in the U.S. was five times the number in the other countries combined (2.57 vs. 0.51). The rate of child homicides involving a firearm, however, was 16 times greater in the U.S. than in the other countries combined (0.94 vs. 0.06). A similar pattern was seen in the suicide rates of children under age 15. Overall, the U.S. suicide rate was twice the rate for the other countries combined (0.55 vs. 0.27). For suicides involving firearms, however, the suicide rate in the U.S. was almost 11 times the rate for the other countries combined (0.32 vs. 0.03)²⁷.

²³ Cook, Philip J, and John H. Laub. (2001) After the Epidemic: Recent Trends in Youth Violence in the United States. Cambridge, Mass: National Bureau of Economic Research, p, 1-5.

²⁴ Ibid, p 1-5.

²⁵ National Center for Children Exposed To Violence, (April 2006) Statistics. Internet resource.

²⁶ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (1997) Rates of Homicide, Suicide, and Firearm-Related Death Among Children: 26 Industrialized Countries. Atlanta: MMRW. Internet resource.

²⁷ Dept. of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (2000). Kids and Guns. Washington, DC: U.S p, 10.

Another cross-national study was conducted in 2007, explored firearm-related deaths by comparing the incidence of firearm-related deaths among 25 industrialized countries. The report deduced that the United States had a higher firearm mortality rate among children and youth than the next highest 25 industrialized nations of the world combined²⁸.

Not only that, in 2010, the CDC reported that homicide in the United States ranks in the top three leading causes of death for persons aged 10-24, resulting in approximately 4,800 deaths and an estimated \$9 billion in lost productivity and medical costs. The CDC also indicated that homicide rates varied substantially during the period 1981-2010, with a sharp rise from 1985 to 1993 followed by a decline that has slowed since 1999. During the period 2000–2010, rates declined for all groups, although the decline was significantly slower for males compared with females and for blacks compared with Hispanics and persons of other racial/ethnic groups. By mechanism of injury however, the decline for firearm homicides from 2000 to 2010 was significantly slower than for non-firearm homicides²⁹.

Once again, just like the problem of violence in general, youth violence is not unique to a specific region or country, but it is considered as a global public health problem. Nevertheless, the rate of youth mortality changes substantially from one country to another. In other words, as there are some countries with a high rate of youth violence like in Latin America and the United States, others have fewer youth homicides as it is the case for some European countries like U.K, France, and Germany³⁰. But, if the problem of youth violence is variable, then what are the factors that put some youths at risk for experiencing violence?

5.2. Risk Factors for Youth Violence

Some young adults are more likely to commit violent acts than others because of different interrelated factors. Firstly, among the major personality and behavioral factors that may predict youth violence are hyperactivity, impulsiveness, poor behavioral control and attention problem. In a follow-up study of over 1000 children in Dunedin, New Zealand, boys with violent convictions up to the age of 18 years were significantly more likely to have had poor scores in behavioral control (for example, impulsiveness and lack of persistence) at the age of 3–5 years, compared with boys with no convictions or with convictions for non-violent offenses. Secondly, factors associated with the interpersonal relations of young people – with their family, friends and peers – can also strongly affect aggressive and violent behavior and shape personality traits that, in turn, can contribute to violent behavior. Eron, Huesmann & Zelli followed up almost 900 children in New York, NY, and found that harsh, physical punishment by parents at the age of 8 years predicted not only arrests for violence up to the age of 30 years, but also – for boys – the severity of punishment of their own children and their own histories of spouse abuse³¹. Peer influences during adolescence are also generally considered positive and important in shaping interpersonal relationships, but they can also

²⁸ Blum MD, Robert Wm, William H. Gates, et al. (2011). Morbidity and Mortality among Adolescents and Young Adults in the United States. Astrazeneca Fact Sheet. P, 3-4.

²⁹ Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2013) Homicide Rates among Persons Aged 10-24 Years - United States, 1981-2010. Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report. 62.27 545-8. Internet resource.

³⁰ Op. cit. World Health Organization (2010). P 12.

³¹ Eron LD, Huesmann LR, Zelli A. (1991) The role of parental variables in the learning of aggression The development and treatment of childhood aggression, p, 169–186.

have negative effects. Having delinquent friends, for instance, is associated with violence in young people³².

Thirdly, the communities in which young people live are an important influence on their families, the nature of their peer groups, and the way they may be exposed to situations that lead to violence. Generally speaking, boys in urban areas are more likely to be involved in violent behavior than those living in rural areas. Within urban areas, those living in neighborhoods with high levels of crime are more likely to be involved in violent behavior than those living in other neighborhood³³. In the United States, for example, the presence together in neighborhoods of guns, gangs and drugs would appear to be an important factor in explaining why the juvenile arrest rate for homicide more than doubled between 1984 and 1993. Blumstein suggested that this rise was linked to increases occurring over the same period in the carrying of guns, in the number of gangs and in battles fought over the selling of crack cocaine³⁴.

Finally, several societal factors may create conditions conducive to violence among young people. Rapid demographic changes in the youth population, modernization, emigration, urbanization and changing social policies have all been linked with an increase in youth violence³⁵. In places that have suffered economic crises and ensuing structural adjustment policies – such as in Africa and parts of Latin America – real wages have often declined sharply, laws intended to protect labor have been weakened or discarded, and a substantial decline in basic infrastructure and social services has occurred³⁶. In their demographic analysis of young people in Africa, Lauras-Loch & Lopez-Escartin suggest that the tension between a rapidly swelling population of young people and a deteriorating infrastructure has resulted in school-based and student revolts³⁷. Diallo Co-Trung found a similar situation of student strikes and rebellions in Senegal, where the population under 20 years of age doubled between 1970 and 1988, during a period of economic recession and the implementation of structural adjustment policies³⁸.

So the problem of youth violence is the result of individual, relationship, community and societal factors. That is why, the problem does not solely concern a group of people living in a certain geographic area, but it concerns the whole nations and everyone is supposed to collaborate in order to address the problem effectively.

³² Thornberry TP, Huizinga D, Loeber R. (1995) The prevention of serious delinquency and violence: implications from the program of research on the causes and correlates of delinquency. Sourcebook on serious, violent, and chronic juvenile offenders. P, 213–237.

³³ Farrington DP. (1998) Predictors, causes, and correlates of male youth violence. Youth violence. Chicago, IL, University of Chicago Press. P, 421–475.

³⁴ Blumstein A. (1995) Youth violence, guns and the illicit- drug industry. Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology, p, 86:10–36.

³⁵ Ortega ST et al. (1992) Modernization, age structure, and regional context: a cross-national study of crime. Sociological Spectrum, p, 257–277.

³⁶ Op. cit. Krug et (2002). p, 36.

³⁷ Lauras-Loch T, Lopez-Escartin N. (1992) Jeunesse et démographie en Afrique. Youth and demography in Africa Paris, L'Harmattan.. P: 66–82.

³⁸ Diallo Co-Trung M. (1992) La crise scolaire au Sénégal: crise de l'école, crise de l'autorité? [The school crisis in Senegal: a school crisis or a crisis of authority?] Paris, L'Harmattan. P: 407–439.

6. CONCLUSIONS

It has been demonstrated in this paper, that violence is perceived as a global problem with biological, psychological, social and environmental roots. Nonetheless, it has been argued that the United States is usually depicted as the host country for gun violence as well as youth violence due to the availability of guns. Yet, gun control debate is considered as a delicate balance in the United States. For some, it is a “birth right” and there should be no restrictions at all. Still for others, this right should be regulated because it increases the probability of deaths in incidents of domestic violence, raises the likelihood of fatalities by those who intend to injure others and among those who attempt suicide, and places children and young people at special risk.

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