

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Teachers' Challenges, Strategies, and Support Needs in Schools Affected by Community Violence: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

BACKGROUND: Exposure to community violence compromises teacher effectiveness, student learning, and socioemotional well-being. This study examined the challenges, strategies, and support needs of teachers in urban schools affected by high levels of community violence.

METHODS: Twenty teachers from 3 urban middle schools with predominantly low-income African American students completed open-ended interviews. Selected schools were in geographic areas with high violent crime levels.

RESULTS: Consistent with an ecological risk and resilience framework, findings revealed that teachers experienced challenges and adopted coping strategies at the individual, family, school, and community levels. Teachers employed a number of strategies associated with resilience, such as prayer and seeking support from family and colleagues, but also engaged in some avoidant strategies, such as emotional withdrawal and avoiding difficult students.

CONCLUSIONS: Findings suggest interventions to improve school safety and reduce the negative impact of violence-related stressors. Teacher training in behavior management, effective school leadership, improved school security, peer mediation, expanded mental health services, and parent involvement may promote resilience among both teachers and their students.

Keywords: violence; risk behavior; safety and emergency care; stress; resilience.

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Community violence is a major public health problem that continues to permeate the boundaries of many urban schools.^{1,2} Teachers who work in schools located in high violence neighborhoods report direct and indirect exposure to assaults, shootings, gang conflicts, and drug-related crime.^{3,4} Some students who live in areas affected by chronic violence bring high-risk behaviors into their schools, such as fighting, bullying, or carrying weapons on school property.⁵ Other students exhibit trauma symptoms^{1,4} stemming from personal or family victimization. Such school and community environments not only threaten the academic and socioemotional development of students, but also the well-being of teachers.

Despite numerous studies examining the impact of community violence on children and youth, there is a sparse literature examining its influence on teachers.

Research that addresses middle school teachers in violent communities is especially scarce.⁶ Given the important role of teachers in promoting student learning and adjustment,⁷ information is needed about the challenges faced by middle school teachers who work in violent communities and the strategies they use to cope with violence-related stressors. Teachers' perceptions of the support required to ensure a safe school environment may likewise inform interventions. Thus, this study examined the challenges, coping strategies, and support needs of teachers in middle schools located in violent communities.

Although overall rates of violence within school borders have declined or stabilized in recent years,⁸ community violence continues to contribute to negative youth outcomes. Studies have linked witnessing or being the victim of community violence with

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diminished academic performance and greater behavioral and emotional problems among students.⁹ Community violence affects all racial and ethnic groups. However, African Americans residing in low-income, urban neighborhoods encounter significantly higher rates of community violence than urban European Americans.^{10,11} Moreover, African American youth aged 12 to 15 are more likely than their 16- to 19-year-old peers to be victims of all violent crimes.¹¹

Teachers throughout the nation have described violent youth behaviors that threaten their safety at school,¹² with higher threats reported in urban schools.¹³ Evidence has linked chronic community violence exposure in urban neighborhoods to increased aggression among youth.⁹ The 2009 national Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS)¹⁴ found that 32% of high school students engaged in a physical fight during the last year (11% at school); 8% were threatened or injured with a weapon at school in this time period; 18% carried a weapon in the last 30 days (6% at school); and 5% missed school in the past month because of safety concerns. The survey further found that these high-risk behaviors often develop during the middle school years.¹⁵

Few educational systems have administered the YRBS to middle school students because of parent/guardian permission policies and sensitive survey items.¹⁵ However, one study in a large majority-minority school district found that 53% of middle school youth had been in a physical fight during the last year and 12% had carried a gun.¹⁵ A national investigation found that 31% of students expelled for bringing a firearm to school were in middle or junior high school.¹⁶

Although most research on community and school violence fails to consider teacher experiences, one nationally representative study of 1000 teachers¹⁷ explored challenges linked to violence exposure. In this study, 16% of teachers in urban schools reported that violence inhibited learning for at least one fourth of their students. When asked about their preparation for dealing with violence-related problems, 41% of the teachers reported they were poorly or not at all well prepared. Whereas this study failed to provide findings for different school levels (elementary, middle, high), it underscores the need for further investigation of teacher challenges and coping strategies in schools affected by community violence.

Given the detrimental effects of violence exposure and limited teacher data to inform school policy and intervention, this study sought input from teachers in urban schools that were located in violent neighborhoods. To our knowledge, it is the first to solicit middle school teachers' views about how to manage and improve this challenging school environment. The study is also unique in focusing on teachers of predominantly low-income, African

American youth, a group overrepresented in terms of their community violence exposure.¹¹

Using a qualitative design, this study adopted an ecological risk and resilience framework to examine contextual factors that influence teacher experiences. According to Bronfenbrenner's ecological model,¹⁸ teachers' experiences will be influenced by individual, family, school/community, and societal level systems. The ecological model enabled us to examine middle school teachers' challenges, coping strategies, and needs for support at multiple levels. A risk and resilience perspective added the opportunity to examine how risk and protective factors at various levels may influence teacher outcomes, either by increasing the probability of adverse consequences or by buffering the effects of risk factors to promote resilience. Resilience, or the ability to increase competence and thrive in the face of adversity, stems from human processes or supportive systems that foster adaptation and development.¹⁹ Adopting this approach, we asked 3 questions:

1. What are the challenges faced by middle school teachers who work in schools that are located in violent communities?
2. What specific strategies do teachers use to cope with violence-related issues in their classrooms and schools?
3. What support systems would help teachers respond more effectively to the needs of students affected by community violence?

METHODS

Respondents

Twenty middle school teachers from 3 urban schools located near the Washington, DC border participated in this study. Seventeen teachers were women and 3 were men (1 from each school). Teachers were between the ages of 24 and 62, with an average age of 34 years. Fifteen were African Americans, 2 were biracial (African American/other ethnicity), 2 were Caucasians, and 1 was Asian. Teachers averaged 3.8 years of teaching in the target school, but most had prior experience. Teachers taught a variety of subjects, including math, science, computer applications, language and reading arts, social studies, music, and special education. The 3 schools were selected because of their location in high violence neighborhoods, identified through county police Collaborative Supervision and Focused Enforcement (CSAFE) Zone reports. The reports²⁰ pinpointed geographical areas with high levels of violent crime, including murder, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault. At the time of the study, the violent crime rate for the county in which target schools were located was 940 per 100,000, 38% higher than the state's violent crime rate

of 679 per 100,000²¹ and approximately double the US violent crime rate of 474 per 100,000.²² The 3 middle schools ranged in size from 700 to 1005 students. Approximately 85-98% of the students were African American, and two thirds of the students in each school were eligible for free or reduced-cost lunch. All 3 schools failed to meet state standards for the proportion of students achieving proficiency in reading and math.

Procedure

Following approval from the school district and the school principals, the first author completed a period of rapport building with teachers, visiting each target school for 3-5 days over a 2-month period. She described the study's purpose and answered teachers' questions. A purposeful sampling strategy was employed, with teachers selected based on their ability to provide information about the issues (eg, at least 1 year of teaching experience at the target school). Participants were asked to refer additional teachers who were then selected for interviews through snowball sampling. All participants volunteered and were promised anonymity and confidentiality through the use of teacher and school pseudonyms and removal of identifying information. Interviews were conducted by the first author, providing a consistent interview experience. They ranged from 1 to 2 hours, averaging 70 minutes. Participants received a \$25 gift certificate for completing the interview.

Instruments

Using a semistructured protocol, the interviewer asked teachers a set of open-ended questions about challenges, coping strategies, and support needs related to teaching in violent communities (Table 1).

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The interviewing process was stopped after 20 interviews when the investigators concluded that they had reached saturation, defined by sufficient repetition of major themes. The interviewer also kept field notes documenting her reflections.

Data Analysis

Qualitative research methods²³ were used in data analysis, employing systematic procedures to capture themes that emerged from transcripts and field notes. QSR NVivo software was used to analyze data in 3 coding stages.²⁴ In the first stage, the researchers identified salient categories of information from interview transcripts and field notes, placing them in a tree node system with subcodes. In the second stage, categories and subcategories were related to each other using a combination of inductive and deductive reasoning. In the final stage, data were interpreted to build a "story" connecting categories defined in the previous stages.²⁵

The researchers confirmed trustworthiness of the data through prolonged engagement (interviewer rapport building over a 2-month period), triangulation (comparing interview data to field notes), peer debriefing (comparison of themes by 3 colleagues in a qualitative research workgroup), and member checks (review of findings by three teachers in violent communities). After initial review of themes and discussion of minor discrepancies in coding, the 3 peer reviewers reached 100% agreement that coding results accurately represented teachers' expressed challenges, strategies, and support needs. In the member checking process, 3 teachers (one from each school) confirmed that study findings reflected their personal experiences.

Table 1. Middle School Teacher Interview Questions

1. What are the challenges faced by middle school teachers who work in schools that are located in violent communities?
 - What is the area like where students in your school live and hang out?
 - How does the neighborhood feel safe or unsafe?
 - How has neighborhood violence affected students in your classroom and school?
 - What have been your personal experiences with violence in this community?
 - How have these experiences affected your teaching?
 - What do you see as the challenges of teaching middle school students in this community?
 - How do school administrators handle violence?
2. What specific strategies do you use to cope with violence-related issues in your classroom and school?
 - How do you handle a student who acts aggressively in your classroom? School?
 - How do you deal with a student who is distressed about an incident of violence, such as a fight or shooting?
 - How do you respond to news of a violent event involving a student or his/her family?
 - What other strategies do you use to work with students who are exposed to community violence?
3. What support systems would help teachers respond more effectively to the needs of students affected by community violence?
 - What support systems are currently available to help you assist students who are dealing with community violence issues? School resources? Community resources?
 - Can you describe any educational, mental health, or other resources that are available to help you deal with violence-related problems?
 - What additional support systems or resources would help teachers deal more effectively with community violence?
 - Are there any professional development opportunities that would assist you with this task? What are they?
4. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience teaching in a school that is located in a high violence community?

Table 2. Violence-Related Challenges, Strategies, and Support Needs of Middle School Teachers, by Ecological Level

Challenges	Strategies	Support Needs
Individual •Lack of training •Fears for personal safety •Somatic stress symptoms	Individual •Praying •Emotional withdrawal	Individual •Behavior management training
School •Inadequate school security	Family •Communication with family and friends	School •Effective school leadership •Improved safety and security •Peer mediation programs •Mental health services
Community •Neighborhood violent crime	School •Sharing stressful events with teachers •Limiting involvement with difficult students •Separating work and personal life	Community •Parental support and involvement
	Community •Professional counseling	

RESULTS

Study participants identified major challenges, strategies, and support needs related to teaching in schools affected by community violence. Major themes in each of these areas are presented within an ecological framework in Table 2, categorized according to levels that ranged from the individual to the community. Quotations from 14 of the 20 teachers were used to illustrate themes that emerged from teacher interviews.

Challenges

Teachers identified 5 major challenges of teaching in violent neighborhoods (Table 2).

Lack of training. At the individual level, 17 teachers noted a *lack of training* to help students cope with violence-related stress. One teacher stated: “If I could get some type of training . . . that would help me help [my students] better. That’s not part of our requirements for teacher certification . . . but this violence thing . . . it’s escalating.”

Fears for personal safety. A second individual-level challenge was teachers’ *fears for their personal safety*. Most teachers described situations when students had carried weapons or look-alike weapons on school grounds, including knives and guns. These situations, although relatively rare, heightened feelings of

vulnerability among more than a quarter of teachers. One stated: “I fear on a daily basis because we have students coming in here with knives . . . you always have to have that fear, because a student can just turn on you in a second.” Another noted, “Sometimes I’m afraid of just walking in the hallway, that’s why I just make sure that my back is on the wall . . . [when] I do hallway duties, I have my cell phone always in my hand, standard operating procedure.”

Somatic stress symptoms. In some cases, these fears grew to *somatic symptoms of stress*, such as anxiety, sleep disturbances, crying spells, and decreased productivity at work. One teacher, who shared these symptoms, stated: “I am not responding very well. I went to a funeral on Monday of another student’s brother who got killed and I’ve been losing sleep over this. . . . Some of the teachers who’ve been here much longer, they say there’s so many (funerals) they’ve had to go to . . . they’re more hardened to it than I am. I don’t want to become hardened, but I want to be able to deal with it in a more effective way so it doesn’t affect my health.”

Inadequate school security. At the school level, 16 teachers described being challenged by *inadequate school security*. This challenge included ambiguous school rules and behavioral expectations, inconsistent enforcement of rules violations, ineffective hallway supervision, and failure to inform teachers about weapons-wielding students. One teacher stated: “We have poor management . . . the kids basically act any way

they want without any consequences. You have a bunch of kids, maybe, in the hallway that are disrupting your class, you have kids in the hallway that threaten you.” Another teacher noted: “They’ve found knives, they’ve found look-alike guns, they’ve found a real gun, and none of the teachers were ever informed about it.”

Neighborhood violent crime. Finally, at the community level, virtually all teachers noted the challenges of teaching in *neighborhoods with high violent crime*. Middle school students lived in communities where the availability of weapons and drugs contributed to incidents of community violence and police arrests. Teachers empathized with students who exhibited symptoms of grief and trauma when family members and friends were injured or killed in violent events. However, these community-level problems were largely perceived as beyond teachers’ control. One teacher noted: “There’s a lot of police activity, a lot of crime, so the kids are struggling to grow up in this area. Even if they have their families, once they leave the door of their home, who knows what they’ll see.”

Strategies

Middle school teachers adopted 7 major strategies to cope with community violence and to preserve their personal well-being (Table 2).

Praying. At the individual level, a majority of teachers used a spiritual approach, *praying*, to help them cope with the stress of teaching in violent communities. One related: “With me, I’m a really religious person so I just pray a lot. I pray over my classroom and my students. . . .” Another noted: “I was almost Superwoman and just ran myself ragged. And then I realized I’m human, I can’t save everybody’s life. So I’ve learned to back off certain things, just help as much as I can and pray for the rest.”

Emotional withdrawal. Notably, half of the teachers used a second individual-level strategy, *emotional withdrawal*, to cope with violent incidents affecting their students. Teachers shared that this strategy allowed them to avoid stress associated with confronting the consequences of violent events. Some teachers reported becoming “numb,” “cold,” or desensitized to violence to maintain their mental health and teaching effectiveness. One stated: “Violence in my school is like an everyday occurrence; nobody goes through withdrawal, nobody acts out, nobody does much of anything ‘cause they are so used to violence occurring. It’s nothing new. It’s like somebody putting butter on a slice of bread and it’s really sad, but that’s how it is right now.”

Communication with family and friends. At the family level, half of the teachers reported *checking in with family members* or close friends to cope with the stress of teaching in violent communities. Being able to communicate their feelings and frustrations with these trusted adults helped teachers to continue

with their daily school work. One teacher noted: “My sister or my mother-in-law will call on me to see how I’m doing . . . because it does get to the point where you’re like, ‘I’m quitting. Y’all can have this.’ We teachers need to take that break and vent [to our families]. . . .”

Sharing stressful events with teachers. At the school level, two thirds of the teachers reported gaining strength from *sharing stressful events with teachers*. They described discussing violent incidents with their colleagues and seeking support. One teacher stated: “During our planning time, we discuss it, then if some of us go home and think about something else, we bring it back and discuss it again. But nobody has to take it home [alone] and burden it, have the stress of it all day and the next day.”

Limiting involvement with difficult students. A second school-level coping strategy reported by one fourth of the teachers was *limiting involvement with difficult or potentially dangerous students*. Some teachers described this as a deliberate method to preserve their safety, even if it meant ignoring behavior that violates school rules. One reported: “I’ve been threatened by boys that say, ‘I’m gonna kick your A . . .’ There are a number of kids that are not here to learn, that are here to cause trouble. And I just avoid them . . . if they’re doing stuff in the hall that they’re not supposed to do, I just ignore it.”

Another teacher who feared harm from older, violent juveniles in the community stated: “How much [can] you press a child on their behavior, because they’ll tell you in a minute, ‘I’ll have my people come up here and take care of you.’ And once you hear that, I back off. You don’t have to stay after school. I’m not staying after school. I’m not going to get into it.”

Separating work and personal life. A third school-level coping strategy shared by teachers was *separating work and personal life*. Approximately half of those interviewed stressed the need to maintain strict boundaries between their daily work and personal lives. Many explained that this strategy allowed them to preserve their physical and psychological strength so that they would not “burn out” or leave the profession. One noted: “That’s why I’ve been able to stay [in teaching] for 40 years. I have a separation between my life and my job. Teaching, as much as I love working with children, it’s my occupation, it’s not my life.” Another noted: “I know that what helps me is that when I leave the school, I’m not taking anything with me.”

Professional counseling. Finally, at the community level, 3 teachers talked about professional counseling as an option for dealing with the stress of teaching in violent neighborhoods. One noted that going outside existing networks of family, friends, and fellow teachers became essential to preserve her mental health, stating: “I had to come to terms with myself, that I’m not coping like I should. I’m about to suffocate if I don’t get this off my chest. So you have to come to the realization that (counseling) is what you need. Talking to your friends really isn’t good enough.” However, she also

shared her conflicted feelings about seeking mental health assistance, noting: *"In the Black community . . . going to a counselor is really looked down upon. If you're seeing someone it's almost like you're crazy. People who knew that I was seeing a counselor [said] why are you doing that, that's what you have friends for, you're paying someone to do something your friends are supposed to do for free . . . [But] it's like, you can't help me . . . you talk to me all the time and I'm still feeling what I'm feeling, so obviously I need something more."* Notably, one teacher who sought counseling had decided to take a break from teaching at the end of the school year.

Support Needs

Middle school teachers also identified school support services and resources that would enhance their teaching effectiveness in schools affected by community violence (Table 2).

Behavior management training. At the individual level, 17 teachers advocated for *behavior management training* to address their difficulties in managing the aggressive, antisocial behaviors of some middle school students. Teachers recognized that most of their students were exposed to negative role models in their neighborhoods and some were targets of bullying and harassment by peers. One noted: *"We need specialists from the county to come into this school . . . as mentors [who can] help teachers with strategies on how to cope with these difficult students."*

Teachers in the targeted middle schools reported that training in youth behavior management was currently limited to viewing videotapes about how to handle a school shooting or major crisis. District budget cuts had forced them to spend their own money for conferences during nonschool hours to learn behavior management skills. One teacher stated: *"Dealing with disadvantaged youth, we should have some [anti-violence] training, some type of strategies that we can incorporate in the classroom, as well as outside the classroom."* Several teachers stated that behavior management training should focus on ways to develop motivation, discipline, and respect in their classrooms through lessons on civility, communication, and other pro-social skills.

Effective school leadership. Teachers had 4 school-level recommendations for creating a safer, more supportive learning environment. All of those interviewed advocated for *effective school leadership*, including a strong principal, responsive administration, and clear expectations for student behavior. One teacher emphasized the need for consistent enforcement of school policies, noting: *"It should be you fight once, you get suspended. Not you fight once, it's okay, second time, third time you fight, [still] okay. We need strong discipline at this school. You throw a chair at a teacher, you fight . . . you're suspended."* Teachers differed in their appraisals of how much work was required to improve leadership in

their schools but all stressed the need for principals to articulate clear behavioral expectations and follow through with consequences for violations.

Improved school safety and security. A second school-level support need voiced by 16 teachers was for *improved school safety and security features*. Two teachers advocated for installing metal detectors in middle schools and high schools. A few teachers suggested improving the quality and location of security cameras to monitor hallway behavior and identify intruders. Teachers also recommended "no-nonsense" security guards or hall monitors, better lockdown procedures, and comprehensive crisis management plans. With respect to security guards, one stated: *"For the kids' sake, we need somebody in there who doesn't play with the kids . . . They need to be strong, firm and believe in discipline: 'Hey, where do you belong? You go there now.'"*

Peer mediation programs. A third school-level resource, also advocated by 16 teachers, was for re-implementation of *peer mediation*. All 3 schools had lost former, successful peer mediation programs, presumably due to budget cuts. These programs were supervised by educational specialists who trained students to help their classmates resolve disputes peacefully and responsibly. One teacher noted: *"[With peer mediation] students knew they had an alternative to fighting. They knew if they were arguing with someone, instead of fighting, they could go to the peer mediator and say, 'I need to be mediated. I need two [student] mediators to come in and talk to us.'"*

Although the county had employed a "roving" counselor to serve targeted schools, teachers explained that this strategy eliminated peer involvement because the counselor was now responsible for resolving disputes. Teachers believed that peer mediation programs had taught students problem-solving skills and reduced school fights and discipline referrals.

Mental health services. A fourth school-level support requested by approximately one third of teachers was for *more school-based mental health services* to address the needs of students and teachers exposed to community violence. Teachers stated that youth with serious, violence-related mental health problems (eg, grief, depression) and antisocial behavior required appropriate professional counseling. One noted: *"A lot of our kids need counseling, not just guidance, because now (counselors) really only deal with grades and getting kids to pass . . . and accommodations, but they're not dealing with the social issues. There's nothing set in place where we can just nominate a kid to go and get severe counseling [for socio-emotional problems]."*

Three teachers recommended that schools provide psychological counseling for teachers who were dealing with violence-related stress. One stated: *"Just like they bring in grief counselors for students, they need to do the same thing for teachers. No one really asks are we okay, or what we think, and that needs to be addressed. I think*

that's why some teachers become hardened, because that's their way of coping and dealing with it... They put up a shield."

Parental support and involvement. A final, community-level need voiced by middle school teachers was for more *parental support and involvement* in children's education. One teacher stated: "*We need a person in the building who is solely responsible for bringing parents in*" to educate parents about the effects of community violence exposure and to teach them behavior management skills, such as "*how to use rules, supervision, and positive reinforcement.*" A few teachers suggested that parents might also advise schools on safety issues, such as ways to increase students' safe passage between home and school, and ways to reduce students' access to weapons.

DISCUSSION

This study explored the challenges, coping strategies, and support needs of middle school teachers in urban schools affected by community violence. Use of a qualitative approach enabled us to capture teachers' voices and perspectives in an underinvestigated area of research. As in previous studies, ecological theory provided a valuable framework for organizing and interpreting teachers' responses within multiple systems of influence, as well as identifying levels for potential intervention. Use of a risk and resiliency perspective further enabled us to identify risk factors that compromised teacher effectiveness and coping factors found to predict resilient outcomes.²⁶ These positive coping strategies can be supported and promoted to enhance teacher resilience and to mitigate the negative impact of risk factors.

Middle school teachers in this study expressed challenges at various levels of the ecological framework. At the individual level, they reported a lack of training needed to manage students' behavior, enforce school rules, and introduce social skills curricula in their classrooms. Our results were consistent with those of a national study¹⁷ in which teachers in urban schools felt ill-prepared to deal with youth affected by community violence. This lack of training likely contributed to 2 additional individual-level challenges, fears for personal safety and somatic stress symptoms. Some teachers acknowledged that such fears and stress symptoms threatened their mental health and compromised their instructional effectiveness.

At the school level, many teachers reported being challenged by safety and security concerns. As in one recent study,²⁷ school climate was critical in perceptions of safety, with teachers feeling challenged by inadequate school discipline and ambiguous rules and enforcement policies. Research reveals that the ways in which schools enforce behavioral rules and handle student aggression has a significant impact on

student and teacher perceptions of safety.^{28,29} School leadership plays a key role in ensuring that school rules and policies are clear, broadly communicated, and consistently applied. When such leadership is absent, teachers' ability to focus on academics and student support is likely to be compromised.

At the community level, most teachers articulated the challenge of teaching in schools located in violent neighborhoods. Teachers were not only affected by reports of local crime but also by the number of their students who witnessed or were victims of violent acts. As in prior research,^{6,15} they interacted with students who brought aggressive, antisocial behaviors into the classroom, as well as students affected by grief and trauma. Teachers recognized the stressors associated with growing up in violent, disadvantaged neighborhoods, including exposure to negative adult and peer role models. However, almost universally, study participants perceived community violence and its contributing factors as a challenge beyond their personal control.

The current study also provided important insights about the coping strategies that middle school teachers adopt in schools affected by community violence. One recent national study²⁶ examined 270 published articles on resilience to identify ecological factors that promote this capacity. Among those most strongly linked to resilience were positive coping (including problem-focused and spiritual approaches), positive affect, positive thinking, behavioral control, family support, family communication, belongingness (sense of membership in schools, faith-based organizations, and/or other groups), and sense of community connectedness.

At the individual level of coping, middle school teachers reported adopting 2 major strategies: praying and emotional withdrawal. A majority of teachers reported using prayer to cope with violence-related stress, sometimes stating that they began to pray after realizing their limited ability to keep students safe. Use of this spiritual approach to enhance resilience by a sample of predominantly African American teachers is consistent with African American cultural traditions of using prayer to manage stressful life circumstances.^{30,31}

One of the study's most noteworthy findings was teachers' use of emotional withdrawal as a coping strategy. Many teachers described feeling "numb" or "hardened" to violence, accepting it as a normal aspect of their environment. While emotional withdrawal may provide temporary relief from stress, teachers also acknowledged that it negatively affected their feelings about themselves and their ability to make a positive difference for students. Emotional withdrawal contrasts with resilience behaviors such as positive, problem-focused coping, which involves dealing directly with difficult situations rather than

avoiding them.²⁶ Our interviews suggest that teachers' use of emotional withdrawal stemmed, in part, from their beliefs that they lacked sufficient training and skills to work effectively with youth affected by violence.

At the family level, teachers turned to sympathetic family members to help them cope with the stress of teaching in violent communities. Research has shown that family support provides individuals with tangible emotional comfort,³² helping them to adapt to adverse situations. Social support was also solicited at the school level, with teachers venting to colleagues and sharing the burdens of teaching in a challenging environment. This sense of group membership, or belongingness, has also been found to promote resilience.²⁶

Teachers employed 2 school-level strategies to cope with teaching in violent communities. Many reported limiting involvement with difficult students, at times even ignoring their misbehavior. As in the case of emotional withdrawal, this avoidant coping strategy would appear to undermine teachers' sense of confidence and self-efficacy.²⁶ However, a second strategy, separating school and personal life, appears likely to facilitate resilience by providing teachers with the time to regroup and devote energies to activities outside of work.

At the community level, a few teachers pursued counseling to deal with physical or psychological stress symptoms. This finding is consistent with prior research^{33,34} revealing underutilization of mental health services by African Americans. Although most teachers were more comfortable seeking informal rather than formal support, the act of appraising a stressful situation and seeking professional help may contribute to enhanced resilience.²⁶

Finally, middle school teachers identified support systems and resources that would facilitate more effective teaching in violent communities. At the individual level, they advocated for behavior management training, including instruction in how to teach communication, social problem-solving, and conflict resolution skills. These interventions have been identified as key elements of successful violence prevention programs.^{28,35} Researchers note the importance of building students' social competencies as well as developing skills to reduce antisocial behavior because prevention is generally more effective than punitive intervention.³⁶

At the school level, teachers advocated for strong, engaged principals and vice principals; clearly articulated student conduct policies; and consistent consequences for youth who violate the rules. Teachers also sought improved school security features such as well-trained hall monitors, greater use of technology (cameras, metal detectors), and regular review of crisis management plans. Such efforts have been

found to play an important role in reducing student aggression^{37,12} and may also reduce teachers' exposure to school violence.³⁸ Of particular note, there was near unanimous support for re-implementation of peer mediation programs because they engaged students directly in resolving youth disputes and gave them tools to mediate conflicts in their schools and communities. Prior research, including a randomized control study in urban middle schools serving predominantly African American youth, found that participants in peer mediation had fewer disciplinary violations and suspensions for violent offenses than those who were not involved in mediation.^{35,39}

Given the severity of violence in targeted communities and the victimization of some students, several teachers recommended adding mental health staff to treat children's stress symptoms. Prior research⁴⁰ has revealed that counselors in urban, low income schools can provide effective, one-on-one crisis intervention, group counseling and preventive mental health services. This school-level intervention might also help teachers to process violent events and obtain professional help, especially given the stigma associated with seeking counseling expressed by some African American teachers. Counseling has been found to delay "burnout" and increase teachers' longevity in challenging schools.⁴¹

At the community level, teachers had little involvement with community-based initiatives to reduce violence. However, several advocated for employing parent educators and building parent-teacher partnerships to reduce students' exposure to violence-related risks. In particular, teachers suggested programs to enhance parents' supervision skills and their ability to help children navigate dangerous environments. Previous research⁴² has found that parenting education may enhance parents' ability to rear their children in violent settings. Strengthening parenting involvement also helps to ensure that students receive consistent safety messages at home and school, an important element of effective violence prevention programs.²⁸

Limitations

Although current findings add to the literature on teaching in violent communities, limitations must be noted. First, although there is diversity in study participants by age, race, sex, and number of years of teaching, the strategy of self-selection suggests that participants were individuals willing to share their experiences in a research study. It is possible that this process excluded other teachers who were not coping effectively with community violence and were uncomfortable sharing their stress. Second, although 4 techniques were employed to establish the trustworthiness of the data, there was only one

interviewer of study participants. Use of multiple interviewers might have yielded additional themes. Finally, given that our sample included mostly African American teachers who taught in urban middle schools with predominantly African American students, findings cannot be generalized to other groups.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL HEALTH

Current findings have implications for educators seeking to develop programs and policies to help urban, middle school teachers cope effectively with community violence. Teachers perceived challenges within a number of ecological levels, illustrating the need to develop multi-system, coordinated approaches to combating violence-related stressors. At the individual level, teachers' perceptions that they were ill-trained to manage students' problem behaviors and to teach pro-social and conflict resolution skills underscores the need for targeted training to help teachers acquire these competencies. Similarly, at the school level, the perceived lack of support from some school administrators indicates the need for top-down, comprehensive initiatives to support violence prevention and provide a safe school environment. Specifically, schools need to establish clear expectations for student behavior, enforce disciplinary rules, and ensure adequate safety and security protections. Findings also suggest potential benefits of implementing peer mediation programs and exploring use of professional counselors to address students' and teachers' violence-related trauma. Such strategies should build a more cohesive school community, ensuring teachers that they have administrative support to confront students engaging in antisocial behavior and to assist those victimized by violence.

Teachers in this study used a number of coping strategies that have been associated with resilience, including praying, obtaining social support from colleagues and family, and separating work and family life. These strategies enabled teachers to tolerate or reduce stress, but did not equip them to implement problem-focused solutions to youth behavior problems that have been associated with resilience. Many teachers engaged in emotional withdrawal to avoid dealing with violent incidents and ignored youth who engaged in misbehavior. Such avoidance strategies may be related to teachers' lack of training for managing youth behavior. Providing such training may increase teachers' self-efficacy and problem-focused coping, which in turn, might reduce fear and stress linked to dealing with problems that feel beyond teachers' control.

Finally, our findings suggest the value of engaging middle school parents in violence prevention. Such efforts will likely benefit students since youth who are

strongly connected to family, school, and community are at lower risk for violent behavior.²⁹ Greater parent involvement should also strengthen teachers' sense of community connectedness and belongingness,²⁶ factors that have been found to promote individual resilience.

Conclusion

Overall, this study adds to the literature examining the challenges, coping strategies, and support needs of teachers working in violent communities. As one of the first studies to query middle school teachers about their experiences with violence-related stressors, it provides important recommendations for school-based interventions. Caring adults have the potential to play an important, protective role in mitigating the adverse effects of violence exposure. Strategic interventions that enhance middle school teachers' professional competence and self-efficacy, as well as foster a safe and secure school environment, may promote resilience in both teachers and students exposed to community violence.

Human Subjects Approval Statement

This study was approved by the institutional review board at the University of Maryland, College Park, and the Office of Testing, Research, and Evaluation for the county public school system where the study took place.

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