Links between Childhood Exposure to Violent Contexts and Risky Adolescent Health Behaviors

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ABSTRACT

We assess whether childhood exposure to violent contexts is prospectively associated with risky adolescent health behavior and whether these associations are specific to different contexts of violence and different types of risky behavior. Data come from 2,693 adolescents in the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a population-based, birth cohort study of children born between 1998-2000 in 20 large American cities. Using logistic regression models, we evaluate whether exposure to 6 indicators of community violence and 7 indicators of family violence at ages 5 and 9 is associated with risky sexual behavior, substance use, and obesity risk behavior at age 15. Controlling for a range of adolescent, parent, and neighborhood covariates, each additional point on the community violence scale is associated with 8% higher odds of risky sexual behavior but not substance use or obesity risk behavior. Alternatively, each additional point on the family violence scale is associated with 20% higher odds of substance use but not risky sexual behavior or obesity risk behavior. We conclude that childhood exposure to violent contexts is associated with risky adolescent health behaviors, but the associations are context and behavior specific.