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Researchers who work in at-risk communities too often focus on the deficits in those neighborhoods, and spend too little time identifying important community resources and strengths. So says Duane E. Thomas, assistant professor in the Graduate School of Education, and an expert in youth violence prevention, who works to identify early risk factors for aggressive or violent behavior in kids. [Read more ...](#)

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It seems like a natural: Two Penn professors— an award winning architecture critic and a renowned landscape architect—teaming up to write a book together. It came about purely by chance, though, that Witold Rybczynski, the Martin & Margy Meyerson Professor of Urbanism and professor of real estate and Laurie Olin, practice professor of Landscape

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## Quoted Recently

*"There's no locomotive coming down the track saying we have to have a high homicide rate. What it's more like is a bubbling caldron that could either boil over or go back down to simmer."*

—Lawrence Sherman, director of the Jerry Lee Center on Criminology, discussing jumps in crime that could continue to increase or begin to decline, depending on factors such as the amount of federal and local funding set aside for anti-crime measures (*The Baltimore Sun*, Jan. 17, 2007).

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## Targeting crime

By Heather A. Davis



Photo credit: Candace diCarlo

Researchers who work in at-risk communities too often focus on the deficits in those neighborhoods, and spend too little time identifying important community resources and strengths. So says Duane E. Thomas, assistant professor in the Graduate School of Education, and an expert in youth violence prevention, who works to identify early risk factors for aggressive or violent behavior in kids.

He's worked in East Baltimore as a Johns Hopkins postdoctoral student, and was recently named as co-investigator to the Philadelphia Collaborative Violence Prevention Center, a partnership between CHOP, Drexel, Penn and Temple and community-based organizations. In this role he'll tailor some well-known antiviolence strategies to specific neighborhoods in West and Southwest Philadelphia with the goal of decreasing truancy and crime among young people. What's important about this work, says Thomas, is to put in place programs that will last in the community long after the researchers are gone. He says researchers must ask, "Are we being honest, are we

working in ways to empower the community, to make this research their own? How can communities take this on their own and carry this work out?”

**Q. What are some early risk factors in kids and when is the ideal time to intervene?**

A. One of the best predictors of whether a person will engage in violence in adulthood is an early history of aggressive behavior problems and involvement in criminal and delinquent activity. There are also important environmental factors such as what's happening in the community, what's happening in a child's home. Then there are important individual-level factors.

It's really important to understand that when we think about an issue like violence, it's not caused by a single factor, but it's actually multiple factors that combine to shape development at a very early age and through the course of childhood and adolescence to create circumstances and situations in which one might ultimately engage in violent behavior.

**Q. What are some specific environmental factors?**

A. Definitely poverty plays a very important role. You deal with issues of limited resources available to individuals within their schools. You deal with a lack of training and job-related skills—the general issue of unemployment altogether. Clearly kids who are exposed to graphic violence and programming, that might desensitize kids to violence or maybe give the false impression that violence is something that's normative and is an acceptable way of solving problems. When we think about more community-level factors, just the prevalence of the drug trade itself. Clearly if individuals [are] not afforded opportunities to seek financial independence or success in legitimate ways, then that might legitimize their participation in the drug trade, which in many respects might be looked on as an underground second economy. There's also the availability and accessibility of guns and firearms for kids and for young individuals, which can operate in ways to really escalate conflict.

Exposure to community violence—that's another way of desensitizing kids to violence and aggression. It can

also create other circumstances for kids, such as anxiety, and other forms of internalizing problems, such as depression.

We can think about community deterioration and disorganization as well. That gets into lack of resources, the lack of availability of recreational activities for kids, funding more adaptive pro-social ways to engage kids during relatively unstructured times during the day. A lot of recreational programs provide kids with very positive adult role models. They can be very important to the kid's development.

Clearly parenting can play a role. The types of parenting styles that might be more punitive, abusive and negative, but alongside that, parenting that's also overly permissive, where there's limited monitoring or supervision of a child's activities, particularly during adolescence, might create situations where [they] are not forging important social ties to their communities but associating with deviant peer groups or other things of that nature.

**Q. Can you talk about the role of schools in violence prevention?**

A. One of the contexts that's been grossly under-researched is the influence that schools can play in the early development—and let me emphasize early—development of aggressive behavior problems that can serve as the bedrock of some of these later problems.

**Q. Do you mean as early as elementary school age?**

A. My research specifically looks at elementary school, particularly during kids' initial transition to school. We tend to pay a lot of attention to the family and the extent to which some of those factors that I talked about before have been associated with kids who become aggressive. That's some very important work. But we don't really understand the specific roles that schools are playing. When we think about poverty, what is the association between under-resourced schools, unskilled staff being associated with aggression in kids? What is the extent of large school size or the percentage of kids who receive free lunch? What's happening in the classroom? What are processes in the classroom that

might contribute to kids becoming aggressive?

I look at the extent to which classrooms with a high density of kids that are aggressive and disruptive can create an environment that normalizes, reinforces and also elicits aggressive behaviors. ...

I think that in some instances, teachers can also create similar conditions. Teachers who spend more time being adversarial, nonsupportive and do not reinforce positive behaviors, but spend more time acting in a punitive fashion to punish kids or to deal with the negative behavior, that can have an influence as well.

Now, it's clear that maybe teachers lacking warmth and support might be a function of the kids that are out of control in the class, so we have to definitely pay attention to that issue. The important thing is, we're looking at both of these processes.

**Q. So, what can help at-risk kids?**

A. Having an understanding of their cultural heritage and lineage and how that's important can really help to create a positive self-esteem for kids. It might go a long way in terms of helping youth to forge some type of a healthy tie with individuals in their communities.

**Q. You're a part of the Philadelphia Collaborative Violence Prevention Center. What makes this initiative different from other partnerships?**

A. There are a number of different programs out there (focusing on parental strategies, teaching kids how to problem-solve, mentoring) but the point is... they don't work. So why don't they work? Some of these programs have been ineffective because they are top-down types of approaches that have been developed for individuals without taking into account the cultural norms and contextual realities these individuals have to contend with. These programs have also been developed with very limited input from community members.

I think our approach would be unique [because] community members will be involved every step of the way. It's a partnership between not only academic-based researchers of several institutions here in the city, but also a number of community stakeholders and

community-based organizations.

We are trying to bring all of these different players together to the table in a true partnership to be involved in the planning, the designing, the implementation and the evaluation of active preventative intervention strategies for dealing with issues of violence in West and Southwest Philadelphia.

**Q. What do you hope will happen?**

A.. We definitely want to see some type of improvement, in terms of children's behavior, early on. We want to see gains with respect to family interaction patterns, conflicts in the homes, parenting practices and so forth.

We would hope that we'd start to see better gains in terms of kids staying in school, less discipline referrals. Of course, we want to see a reduction in the number of kids who are having police contact and dying. We also hope the results can generalize to other areas in Philadelphia.

**Q. You ran a similar program in East Baltimore as a postdoc. What did you do there?**

A. [I was] interested in the parenting component to psychoeducational violence prevention programs for African-American male youth, ages 12 to 16. Through that particular research...we brought together parents of kids who were participating in the violence prevention program and provided them with opportunities to examine different programs currently in existence and how they could be modified to suit the needs of a particular neighborhood within East Baltimore. ...[We found] ways to engage fathers in reduction as well, which was a unique aspect of what we were doing.

I also worked with parents in elementary schools in Baltimore around issues of chronic tardiness of kids in school. Each of these efforts was a way to raise levels of home-school communication.

**Q. How has your work there informed your work here?**

A. If we're focusing attention just on individual-level problems and not really on the contexts by which a lot of these problems are initially developed and especially

maintained, then we're only scratching the surface and we're really destined for failure in the type of prevention work we do. It's very important to engage parents in this process.

**Q. What role do you think local government plays in violence prevention?**

A. We can't just look to the mayor's office although these are individuals who are charged to protect citizens and to increase public safety. It's a responsibility that is shared by everyone. ...

Local government can definitely play a role in terms of establishing a presence in the community, really hearing from the community, giving community members the time to talk about issues, not running away from community members and coming to the table to solve a lot of these issues. You see some of that happening. There's a group here in Philadelphia—Men United for a Better Philadelphia—which really has strong ties with City Hall and the mayor's office. Men in the community are volunteering in school and taking the anti-violence message out into the street and actually providing consultation to schools around issues of violence and aggression. There need to be more opportunities of partnership...and also with researchers at the universities as well.

Police in many communities—the individuals that purport to have a great interest in public safety—often times are looked at as the enemy, as opposed to sources of support. I hear that a lot here in Philadelphia. People feel as if police aren't coming out to community events or taking time to talk to youth or responding appropriately when situations are occurring. Broadly, you need people in local government that are really going to put this issue on the forefront. I'm not talking about just talking about these issues during certain points in their career, such as trying to get into office or maintain a position, but actually keeping these issues on the forefront. Keep it there. Find ways to fund some of these recreational activities for kids, find ways to engage kids, to keep them involved in more productive activities.

**Q. Do aggressive or violent youth usually act out**

**with guns?**

A. What we're starting to see now is kids, 15 and younger, coming to emergency rooms increasingly with gunshot wounds. Clearly the level at which younger kids are handling conflict with the use of guns is definitely increasing.

Since the 1990s, particularly in 1993, the levels of homicide and other types of antisocial offenses really peaked to epidemic proportions, but since that time, you started to see some decrease. But, for individuals under the age of 18, the levels have remained disconcertingly high and in some instances, you have seen increases. Also, for young kids within these groups, overall, irrespective of race, you see that violence is the second leading cause of death, but for African-Americans, it's the number one cause of premature death.

There have been reports of kids riding on their bicycles, shooting. It's clearly a problem with younger kids gaining access to guns.

**Q. Does this factor—more access to guns by young people—account, in part, for Philly's high murder rate last year?**

A. It's hard to pinpoint one particular cause, but certainly the ease by which kids are getting access is associated. It's clear.

Irrespective of age, when we think about homicides, the gun is clearly the weapon of choice. I do want to emphasize again, though, there's no one risk factor, so we do have to focus more on behavioral issues. So a kid has a gun and goes out and commits a crime with a gun, but what was that behavior in that kid that led to that to begin with?

**Q. What have responses been like from communities?**

A. There is passion in the community to really find answers to these problems and there are just overwhelming numbers of individuals willing to volunteer their time. They're groping in the dark to try and figure out how to solve the problem of violence. It's a resource that we definitely need to tap into. These communities want to be self-sufficient.

[They are] very protective, very sensitive about individuals coming in and just doing research for the sake of research, and leaving communities after they're finished with no results. They're really interested in being involved in every step of the way. They want to be able to continue, to maintain the effectiveness of preventative interventions that we all developed together. It takes a remarkable amount of time to build trust in communities, even from an individual who grew up and was raised in an urban area. Now, coming back as a researcher and working, there's no free pass for me or anyone else. There is a history of scientific abuse, so ...it takes an immense degree of flexibility to carry out this work and definitely a sense of being humble and understanding there are multiple definitions of experts. Some of the experts are not people who have PhDs or MDs, but they are people who are knowledgeable just based upon their experiences in life who really serve as great partners in carrying out this research.

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