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It takes a safe village to raise a child—a commentary on Dana McCoy et al. (2023)

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McCoy and colleagues examined the acute negative impacts of community violence on the healthy development of children in early childhood in low-income families in the city of São Paulo, Brazil. They found that recent community homicides were associated with less effortful control, more behavior problems, and lower overall developmental performance in 3-year-old children: effects on children's development scores were equivalent to approximately 7 months of learning losses. The effects were largest when community violence exposure was geographically proximal and smaller when more distal. Notably, the children did not witness community violence; they were not consciously aware that a homicide had taken place. Therefore, the impact of homicide on children's outcomes was indirect (via parents), since children had no direct experience of the event.

Building on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which accounts for environmental effects on parenting and child development, it is plausible to suggest that environmental threat may have caused extreme stress in both parents and their children, and may have had a negative effect on parental sensitivity and responsiveness to the children's developmental (attachment) needs, compromising healthy child development. Such adverse child-rearing conditions in early childhood, particularly in disadvantaged families, can set off a negative development pathway in children, including major threats for (lifelong) harmful brain development (Holz et al., 2023).

Despite the surge of general systems theory, starting in the early 1960s with the movement of antipsychiatry, emphasizing the pivotal role of societal effects on human development, the original 'medical model' with its focus on individual disease etiological factors and deviances from the norm (i.e. mental illness), has long dominated the field of child psychology and psychiatry. We argue that results from the study by McCoy et al. (2023) can be explained from the perspective of general systems theory, and provide empirical evidence that human development cannot be explained by individual factors alone, which calls for adjustment of the standard 'medical model', which unduly focuses on (treatment of) individual causes or their symptoms.

The implications of the study by McCoy et al. are in line with empirical evidence from modern brain

science (Holz et al., 2023), which points to strong and lasting negative contextual effects of trauma and repeated microtrauma—such as racial discrimination and possibly (indirect) exposure to neighborhood adversities—on human biological, psychological and social development (Onyebuchi et al., 2023). Negative contextual effects can increase children's susceptibility to stress and could inflict lack of self-regulation, partly explaining the problematic developmental outcomes as reported in a study by McCoy et al., which may have been reinforced by negative mutual influences (i.e. transactional effects) between child, family and the proximal and more distal child-rearing environment.

Findings of McCoy et al.'s study are also in line with results from research on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES), providing convincing evidence for a multiple risk model of family (e.g. child maltreatment) and contextual (e.g. exposure to violence) risk factors for healthy development (Sahle et al., 2022). In youth psychological therapy, mostly the child or parents are targeted, resulting in moderate effects for single-problem treatment (e.g. anxiety), but no significant effects for multi-problem treatment (Weisz et al., 2017), which mostly pertains to youth grown up under adverse environmental circumstances, such as poverty, neighborhood violence, and maltreatment (Baglivio, Wolff, Epps, & Nelson, 2015).

Societies should invest in the development of effective treatment of multiple problems if risk factors for negative youth outcomes co-occur. However, the bottom line is that children need warm and safe places to grow up, which has already been emphasized in the scientific work of John Bowlby starting in the 1940s, the founder of attachment theory, the observations of psychiatrist Karen Horney and the educational writings and work of Janus Korczak (1878–1942), who may be seen as a precursor of Bowlby and Horney and emphasized both children's rights and a safe, warm and supportive child-rearing environment.

The African proverb 'it takes a village to raise a child' emphasizes the necessity of a caring proximal social environment for healthy child development, which provides support and guidance to families with adversity, while caring for children is considered to be a shared responsibility. San hunter-gatherers who live in the Kalahari desert have known

this for a very long time; when a child is born he/she gets two other mothers and thereby a whole village to take care of him. Unfortunately, still, so many care and scientific efforts go into individual ‘cure’, while ‘the village’ with its capacity to care is often neglected or is overlooked as an important condition for individual psychological treatment to succeed (see Van Dam et al., 2021; Van Dijken, Stams, & de Winter, 2016). In line with the idea of the ‘a village to raise a child’ hypothesis, Van Dijken et al. (2016) conducted a review to examine the effects of community-based neighborhood interventions to prevent child maltreatment. The authors concluded that strengthening the child-rearing context by means of such interventions is promising, although the empirical evidence proved to be only provisional, lacking a sufficient number of robust evaluation studies. In the same line, Van Dam et al. (2021) recently conducted a meta-analysis on the effects of including a youth-initiated natural mentor from a youth’s direct social environment when receiving psychological treatment, which did substantially increase treatment effects on academic and vocational functioning, social-emotional development, physical health, and psychosocial problems.

Notably, the number of scientific studies examining the effects of the child-rearing (neighborhood) context is steadily growing, including research on interventions to improve the child-rearing context, such as the project on the Peaceable Neighborhood in Dutch disadvantaged and unsafe big-city neighborhoods. Another example is Van der Helm’s international work on residential living group climate of (secure) youth institutions for disadvantaged (justice-involved) youth, inspired by the work of Korczak before World War II and his child-centered Polish orphanage (<https://www.hsleiden.nl/residentiele-jeugd-zorg-english>).

From a children’s right perspective, societies must ensure that children can achieve their full developmental potential, which requires that children can grow up in safe and sufficiently affluent environments in order to become resilient given the many challenges of human life. Resilience, however, is not a static individual attribute, but the dynamic process of successful adaptation of both individuals and their environments during and after stressful life circumstances. We argue that societies should give children the opportunity to grow in a safe and sufficiently affluent social environment in order to give them a chance to achieve their full developmental potential. Governments and the health care system should, therefore, first and foremost invest in safe and stimulating child-rearing and educational environments.

The child-rearing and educational prospects sketched for Brazil may be important to consider for the US and other Western countries, where mental health problems in children are rising

alarmingly (Bommersbach, McKean, Olfson, & Rhee, 2023). Bommersbach et al. (2023) conclude ‘there is a critical need to expand nonhospital alternatives to mental health care for young people with outpatient programs, school-based and integrated care models’ (p. 1475). The McCoy study emphasizes the need for the integration of knowledge from modern brain science, psychology, psychiatry, and educational sciences, particularly accounting for contextual effects on families and children.

Intervention research on complex youth problems, such as juvenile delinquency and trauma, should shift its main focus from the evaluation of the effectiveness of individual therapy to system-oriented approaches to child development in order to find out how the child-rearing conditions of families that face serious economic and social hardships can be improved, and the social capital of these families can be increased and used to facilitate children’s health and development. Children need a safe and healthy village (i.e. child-rearing and educational environment) to become successful citizens in our modern democratic society, who acquire the complex cognitive and social skills to contribute to society, creating safe and healthy child-rearing and educational environments for their own (future) children.

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