

## Psychological Effects of Criminal and Political Violence on Children

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### 1. Introduction

This paper looks at the effects of political and criminal violence on township children. I am going to focus on children as victims rather than perpetrators of violence, although the latter can also be said to be victims of violence.

I am using the words child and children rather than youth, because I believe that we are not here to discuss adults. The term "child" is in this instance more clear than the term "youth", which as it is used in South Africa today, can often incorporate people in their late 20s and early 30s, who in other circumstances are typically viewed as adults.

Children living in South African townships are no strangers to stress. Whilst this may seem like an obvious thing to say, when we look at the meaning of the word stress we see that exposure to stressful situations is indeed a serious thing for a young person to understand and cope with.

A stressful event is any event which threatens our lives, our health. It involves the actual loss of the threat of the loss of someone precious or something very important to our existence or sense of identity and self-respect. Stress also involves the feeling that the demands of a life situation are more than one's ability to cope with it.

The threat or the experience of criminal and political violence are therefore generally experienced as very stressful and traumatic events because they threaten our ability to cope and our personal safety, as well as the safety of our family, friends and community. This does not mean that everyone who is exposed to violence will experience stress or view that event as having been traumatic for them. Some people, for some reason or another, do not experience loss or threat in response to a particular violent event.

Research done with victims of violence shows that 60-80% (or more) of people exposed to violent situations, whether directly or indirectly, suffer from symptoms of Post Traumatic

Stress Disorder. Research also indicates that just living in a society where the media is filled with images of violence and messages of doom and destruction, can result in people experiencing symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress.

Children are psychologically more at risk than adults through violent experiences. Follow-up studies of disasters found 80% of children had symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder one to two years later, compared with 30% of adults. Children's potential for long-term recovery without the support of a significant adult and/or the relevant treatment, is markedly less than that of an adult. Their conceptual and emotional inability properly to understand the violent event, and to have some measure of control over their environment, are factors which mitigate against a swift recovery.

When we talk about the effects of violence, we generally refer to the effects of political violence – such as riots, the repressive actions of security forces against people opposing this government, battles between hostel dwellers and township residents. However, a great deal of the violence that children are exposed to, is the violence of "ordinary" crime – such as sexual abuse and assaults. The most common violent crimes in South African society are the sexual crimes – rape, sexual assault, incest. Women and children are the most common victims of sexual crime.

Children are increasingly becoming involved in crime and in the perpetration of violence. In 1988 the average age of the first offender in South Africa was 22 years. A disturbing new trend emerged in 1990 when the average age of the first offender dropped to 18 years. This means that in the early 1990s most of the criminals who are arrested, charged and imprisoned are children.

A lot this "ordinary" criminal violence can also be caused by political factors. Alcohol abuse, poverty, unemployment and dangerous living conditions for example, all contribute to the incidence of crime, and all these factors can in turn be linked to the apartheid policies of education, employment, accommodation and influx control. However, to call all acts of violence political, is a mistake because it can result in people not properly understanding the causes of the different types of violence and not being able to recommend realistic solutions to end violence and effective treatment for the victims of violence.

## 2. Mediating factors

Before we discuss the actual effects of violence on children, it is necessary to look at factors which influence a child's response to political events.

### 2.1 Intra-personal factors

The way a particular child reacts to stressful situations and the coping strategies they use depends upon that child's age and stage of development. There is a big difference in the way a 5, a 12 and a 20 year old understand and cope with violence.

Likewise, treatment strategies will differ according to the child's age and stage of development. Research amongst victims of violence shows that the following family history's and pre-existing personality factors play a significant role in how a person copes with the effects of trauma.

- a history of family psychiatric disorder/psychological problems especially with alcoholism, depression and anxiety
- poor coping/adaptation skills through childhood
- an insecure, emotional home atmosphere
- people who tended to react bodily/psychosomatically to stress, and who had hypochondriacal tendencies
- high basic levels of anxiety and dependent, insecure, highly sensitive, introverted and neurotic traits
- a tendency to social withdrawal and psychological regression

## 2.2 Gender

Young boys seem to show more stress symptoms than young girls do in early childhood. This situation seems to reverse itself when children reach adolescence. This may be because girls face greater risks and, after all, the most common violent crimes are sexual crimes – rape, battery and sexual assault.

## 2.3 Inter-personal factors

Apart from their age, temperament, sex and physical health, the most immediate factor affecting children's reactions to violence is the family. A happy and supportive family, with strong family ties and the constant presence of parents and/or other significant adults, has been found to be the most crucial support for children coping with stress. Studies show that children suffer a great deal and take much longer to recover from the immediate effects of violence if there are no significant adults available to them.

Children are influenced as much by the attitudes, the mental state and the coping strategies of the significant adults around them, as they are by their own stress reactions. Children who cope better with stress seem to have come from families where discussions take place

between parents and their children; where parents show good coping and problem-solving skills; give their children feedback on their (that is the children's) behaviour; show concern for their children's education, and give their children greater self-direction/responsibility in doing everyday tasks.

Studies have also noted the importance of the material home environment. Low socio-economic status and crowded living conditions can make children more vulnerable to stress.

This does not mean that poor families do not offer their children support, but that poor families may, for example, live in more dangerous environments, the parents might work long hours and spend a lot of time travelling and so not see much of their children. Unemployment is a huge stressor which may in itself create violence in the home.

Another factor is that poor families may not have the resources to get specialised help for their child who may be showing the psychological effects of exposure to violence. They may not have the money to take them to a hospital, to the Trauma Clinic that we have at Wits University to treat victims of violence, or to phone The Sowetan's Victim Line, they may not be able to read or buy the newspapers which write about such services.

## 2.4 Social Support

Social support systems, that is the support of family, friends, neighbours and some known members of authority like teachers, act as a buffer, a sort of shock absorber to help individuals cope with stress. This is because when we receive such support, it tells us that there are other people who care for us, and that as individuals we are still able to control our world a bit, even if this is only to call on a friend's support. Having a sense of control is very important to somebody who has been a victim of violence because victimisation involves someone else taking away a very essential control – the sense of control over one's own life and future.

A particular source of support for young people is the school, which is ideally able to provide information, support and the calming influence of an on-going routine.

The role of friends is also crucial. It is often in young children's play situations or in teenagers' discussions, that children can talk about their experiences and understand that what has happened to them is something that others may also share.

This normalising of experiences plays an important role in understanding and recovery.

## 2.5 Broader ideological context

The values that individuals and families have are fundamentally influenced by the values and traditions of the broader society. A social order which favours tolerance of others and a legal, political and socio-economic system which is largely based on respect for human

rights, will serve to entrench such values in the workings of civil society. A social order which favours the rights of some groups in society over that of other groups, will entrench such values into the "hearts and minds" of our children. Apartheid is of course an example of this.

## 2.6 Differential exposure to violence

Children are exposed to violence in different ways: they may be witnesses to a violent event; they may be active participants in the violence; they may be direct victims of violence, like being an assault or a rape victim, or they may be 'indirect' victims in that they may be part of a family which suffers the effects of having a father in detention.

We find that generally children experience the same sorts of stress responses in reaction to different violent situations.

However, this differential exposure to violence may have an effect on the severity of the reaction of the reaction and on the social supports available to the child. A victim of rape may have less support available to her than a child who has just been released from detention.

## 2.7 Dimension of the trauma

The nature of the traumatic experience itself, does however influence the nature of the stress. Difficulties are more likely to arise if the stressor is:

- intense or severe
- involves heat, noise or darkness
- is sudden, unanticipated and uncontrollable
- is irregular or occurs in large chunks
- involves such loss as bereavement, threat to life, personal injury or exposure to death

Other important elements include:

- the duration of the event
- whether it was experienced alone or with others
- whether the threats involved in the event were single or multiple
- whether there is a possibility that they may reoccur

Dimensions of the child and the situation will interact with each other to determine how that child feels, thinks and reacts in the situation. The role the child adopted, the things they did or did not do and say, and the personal and moral conflicts that arise from this will further influence the emotional processing.

## 2.8 Criminal "vs" political violence

Contrary to popular belief 'ordinary' forms of violence appear to be as psychologically distressing as politically related violence is. Little attention has been given to contrasting the different effects that criminal versus political violence has on children. This may be because the distinction between political and criminal violence is often impossible to make. Another reason may be that it is assumed that children are apparently not targeted by criminals. Several examples contradict this latter statement because it seems that children are more exposed to violent crime than originally thought.

- Children, because of their vulnerability, are "common" victims of sexual crimes and battery.
- Children are increasingly targeted by drug pushers, house-breaking and car theft gangs because they are easy to influence, cheap to "hire", and small enough to squeeze through an open window – A study of 136 Standard 10 pupils in Alexandra in 1987 and 1989 showed that the children's most common experience of violence was witnessing shootings, assaults and stabbings of both a criminal and a political nature. The most commonly reported violent crime involving the actual student as the victim, was that of assault; followed by intimidation, harassment and being threatened.

The perpetrators of violence were identified as:

- (1) security forces
- (2) criminal elements
- (3) comrades
- (4) family and friends

Being a victim of an "ordinary" crime may in fact be more difficult to cope with than being a victim of political violence.

Political violence is directed more at ideological opponents, whether these be members of a different political party, ethnic group or merely residents of a disputed territory. Individuals, and especially individual children are rarely targeted. This is unlike more 'ordinary' violent crime where individuals are generally targeted because of what they can 'offer' the violent criminal. Therefore one's sense of self blame, guilt and humiliation tend to be greater.

The ideological component to political violence may serve to protect or inoculate the victim against stress. Studies show that involvement and identification with the politics of a violent situation may produce a resistance to stress. At the same time, long exposure and defiant/rigid political attitudes can result in stress reactions. People do not view their exposure to political violence as a totally negative experience, unlike the victims of crime. Part of the reason for this is that whilst emotional disturbance is often experienced, people feel that they have contributed to the struggle and strengthened their political awareness and commitment.

Despite the above differences, the similarities between political and criminal violence is increasing:

1. The perpetrators of the current political violence, like most criminals, are not always easily identifiable. While most people will acknowledge that they regard Inkatha, the police or the comrades as perpetrators of the violence, they cannot always be sure who these people are. Likewise with criminals. Whilst most sexual crimes are committed by people known to the victim, the dramatic increase in the crime rates and the massive influx of new people into the urban townships, means that both the "hits" and the victims are more random, and the picture of the "typical" criminal is becoming more complicated.
2. Political violence in the 1990s has split township communities in a more complex way than previously. In the past divisions tended to be between members of progressive organisations and those labelled as state collaborators, as well as between township residents and the state security forces. As the violence spills over into all contested terrains, so the conflicts are increasingly between the different communities residing within the broader geographic community of the township, like the conflict between hostel dwellers and township residents, and between the competing "progressive" political organisations – the ANC and AZAPO. The increase in crime rates and in the different types of crimes committed in the townships has created further splits in the township community, especially between squatters and the wealthier township residents, between gangs, drug traffickers and com-tsotsi's and the other township residents.

The increasing divisions within the township community are likely to further erode the protective nature of the availability social support networks, thus further weakening a child's ability to cope with stressful situations.

3. Both political and criminal violent activity rely on an element of unpredictability for their "success". However, the dramatic increase in both the rates of political and

criminal violence and in the increasingly random nature of violent attacks, means that people live with the constant possibility and fear of attack. This element of unpredictability creates the ideal conditions for rumours of violence to abound – rumours which in themselves become a further source of stress.

4. The sheer extent of the visible criminal and political violence in the homes and in the township has never before been experienced in the history of this country. This feature of current violence is likely to have two important psychological consequences. One could expect a larger group to be directly affected psychologically by the violence.

The fact that the violence occurs on home ground may result in profound feelings of anxiety and insecurity, as well as the desire to socially withdraw in an attempt to protect oneself against harm.

## Part Two:

### 3. The erosion of protective factors

In South Africa we find that the traditional mediating factors protecting children against the effects of violence and teaching them alternatives to aggressive attitudes and violent behaviour, have been eroded by the years of colonialism, apartheid, the civil war and other forms of oppression.

There are no safe environments left – fathers beat up mothers; the streets and schools are violent, figures of authority like teachers and respected businessmen are often involved in or encourage violent activity, like excessive corporal punishment at school and the buying of stolen goods. Political organisations and the government condone the use of violence if it allows them to reach certain goals.

Families are stretched to the limit. They may not have the time or the energy to protect and comfort a child.

A physically ill or emotionally troubled child puts further strain on already traumatised family groups.

In situations of violence and danger, parents, without realising it, often become distant from their children as they grieve for their own loss and cope with their own fear and anxiety. They become unable to fulfill the role of parent, let alone compensate for the loss of their child's feelings of security, and the possible loss of a brother or another parent – or the loss of their home.

Even the advantage of the great healing power of time has been eroded. In some instances, children are exposed to violent events on a daily basis and there is no time to recover and

to learn alternatives to violent behaviour. Children are often exposed to continuous trauma and have to be constantly on guard.

#### 4. Stress responses

Children in South African townships have the normal childhood worries of homework, money, separation from parents, friends.

However, the township wars, the violence of the police, house raids and other forms of violence, such as extreme deprivation and poverty, over-ride the ordinary worries of childhood.

The drawings of children living in Alexandra, for example, are full of guns, blood and police Casspirs. Some of the drawings also show a flower-filled village, possibly indicating a desire to escape the conditions in the township.

The most common responses to violent events are:

1. *Fear*: the most commonly expressed fears are of the security forces, of future attacks especially on the children's homes.
2. *Emotional changes*: feelings of emotional numbing, powerlessness, of extreme vulnerability and lack of safety. Anxiety, restlessness and irritability. Having no interest in life, feeling guilt or bad to be alive. No energy and feeling tired all of the time. Changing quickly from one mood to another.  
Younger children often act much younger than they are by clinging to their mother all the time and beginning to wet their beds again, for example. Older children tend to get depressed and withdraw into themselves.
3. *Difficulties with sleeping and dreaming*: nightmares about attacks and fear of falling asleep.
4. *Difficulties with thinking*: Constantly thinking about and re-experiencing the traumatic experience. Not being able to concentrate and to remember properly. Children's thoughts are negative and they find it difficult to be creative.
5. *Social difficulties*: not wanting to be social with other children, being aggressive with others.
6. *Eating problems*: refusal to eat and loss of appetite.
7. *Somatic complaints*: mainly in the form of headaches and stomach aches.

These general stress responses may develop into more distinct emotional, behavioural and somatic clusters which indicate the existence of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-3R, 1987) introduced a diagnostic term for the psychological damage following a traumatic event, namely PTSD. The outline below shows the criteria by which this diagnosis is made. These stress reactions may show themselves immediately or they may have a delayed onset, that

is, show themselves some weeks, months or years after the experience. The symptoms may become cyclical – they can reappear and disappear at random. Without treatment, these reactions or symptoms may last for decades.

It is important to remember that people react and express themselves differently. The criteria given in Table 1 are mere guidelines to assist in identifying and treating post-traumatic reactions. Such reactions are normal reactions to abnormal events; they are not a sign of mental illness. PTSD should not necessarily be equated with the severity of that person's disturbance or the text-book appearance of the symptoms. More general post-traumatic reactions which are not classifiable as PTSD can be as disturbing as those which are.

Children showing the following uncommon stress responses need to be referred for professional help immediately:

1. Seeing things
2. Hearing voices
3. Feeling depressed for a very long time
4. Feeling afraid of unreal things
5. Getting over-active and excited
6. Body injury or pain that is very bad or lasts a long time
7. Getting involved in sexually abusive behaviour
8. Drinking too much (alcoholism)

### Criteria for Post-traumatic Stress Disorder Diagnosis

*Firstly, the nature and the degree of trauma is defined.*

A. The person must have experienced an event that is outside the range of usual human experience and that would be markedly distressing to almost anyone, eg serious threat to one's life or physical integrity; serious threat or harm to one's children, spouse, or other close relatives and friends; sudden destruction of one's home or community, or seeing another person who has recently been or is being, seriously injured or killed as a result of an accident or physical violence.

*Three main groups of symptoms are described.*

B. The person persistently re-experiences the traumatic event in at least one of the following ways:

1. Recurrent or intrusive distressing recollections of the event (in young children, repetitive play in which themes of trauma are expressed)
2. Recurrent distressing dreams of the event

3. Sudden acting or feeling as if the traumatic event were recurring, including a sense of reliving the experience, illusions, hallucinations and dissociative (flashbacks) episodes, even those that occur upon waking or when intoxicated.
4. Intense psychological distress at exposure to events that symbolise or resemble an aspect of the traumatic event, including anniversaries of the trauma.

C. The person persistently avoids stimuli associated with the trauma or has a 'numbing' of general responsiveness (not present before the trauma), as indicated by at least three of the following:

1. Efforts to avoid thoughts or feelings associated with the trauma.
2. Efforts to avoid activities or situations that arouse recollections of the trauma
3. Inability to recall an important aspect of the trauma (psychological amnesia)
4. Markedly diminished interest in significant activities (in young children, loss of recently acquired developmental skills such as toilet training or language skills)
5. Feeling of detachment or estrangement from others
6. Restricted range of affect (emotion), for example, inability to have loving feelings
7. Sense of a foreshortened future, for example, no expectation of a career, marriage, children, or a long life.

D. The person has persistent symptoms of increased arousal (not present before the trauma) as indicated by at least two of the following:

1. Difficulty falling or staying asleep
2. Irritability or outbursts of anger
3. Difficulty concentrating
4. Hyper-vigilance
5. Exaggerated startle response
6. Physiological reactivity on exposure to events that symbolise or resemble an aspect of the traumatic event, for example, a woman who was raped in an elevator breaks out in a sweat when entering any elevator.

#### 4.1 Developmentally age appropriate responses

Studies done on stress and on the psychology of children show that the child's developmental age is important in determining both their vulnerability to particular stressors and the way that they react.

*0 – 5 years:* The main developmental orientation of pre-schoolers is towards their families. Because they are so emotionally and physically dependent upon the adults who care for them, they can be expected to react most strongly to stressors which influence these adults and which can result in any alteration to the stability or functioning of the family.

So in political conflict, the type of event to which preschool children may be most vulnerable include death, disappearance or detention of a parent.

Although these very young children have an in-built protection because of their limited capacity for understanding threat in abstract terms, they may pick up feelings of distress and anxiety from their parents and turn these into terrifying fantasies about their own injury and death.

Reactions to stress at this age include very disruptive behaviour, e.g. becoming very naughty and aggressive. Children can act much younger than their age (regression) by, for example, becoming very dependent and always clinging to their mothers, wetting their beds again and suffering fear of the dark.

*6 – 11 years:* Children in the middle phase of childhood have a better understanding of what it means to be threatened, both for themselves and for others, but are still not able to really make sense of the situation around them.

They are able to look beyond themselves and their family, into the broader society, but they are not yet independent enough to be able to change the things around them in order to make the situation safer and lessen their fears.

Thus they may experience anxieties related to the realistic threats of the loss of prized possessions, the loss of and the threats facing family and friends.

Because these children are more socially oriented, the emotional problems they may have in reaction to stress are related to social relationships. They may withdraw from social interactions and isolate themselves from any social contact. Any deep fears and anxieties experienced at this age may result in more serious emotional disturbances, like depression, for example.

*12 – 18 years:* Adolescents have increasing needs for independence from their families and seek to rediscover their identities through their friendship groups. They are fully capable of understanding the meaning of both current and future threats and violent situations and are able to get involved in the situations which are potentially violent. The new independence teenagers have in forming relationships with people other than family members means that they can get involved in activities which may lead them into situations for which they are emotionally unprepared, like involvement in political activity which may result in court-cases and detention.

However, as discussed earlier, involvement in such political activity gives a sense of meaning to threatening circumstances which may protect the teenagers against the effects of stress.

Stress reactions in teenagers take the form of depression, with isolation or social withdrawal. Teenagers may also show anti-social behaviour.

Children's development depends on their relations with the people to whom they are closest. The teacher has an important role in the life of a pupil. A school environment that gives affection and security, new experiences and responsibilities, and recognition and praise, can contribute a great deal to the pupils's development.

#### 4.2 Emotional and behavioural responses

1. *Lack of ability to trust and to love.* Violent acts directed against children send the message that people are not to be trusted because they may harm you in a very fundamental way. A child who has committed violence also believes this because if they can do this, so can anybody else. The implications of this are sad and politically very serious – a person who is unable to trust is generally unable to create lasting and respectful relationships. This is true, not only in terms of love relationships, but also in friendships, political alliances and working relationships.
2. *Loss of self-esteem and feelings of personal power.* Children report that the feelings of helplessness and inability to change the violent situation, makes some of them want to avoid all future situations which may result in conflict and possibly violence. The long-term effect of this may be that young people feel that they do not have much internal strength and the power to control their own lives, and so feel generally weakened in their ability to cope and succeed in the future.
3. *Dehumanisation and desensitisation.* As children are constantly exposed to violence and deteriorating social conditions, so they become emotionally insensitive or desensitised to acts of violence. Constantly seeing dead bodies on the TV and movie screens, and in our lives, results in children losing their fear of the results of violence and gradually losing their respect for the value of life. This especially comes about in a social context where the value of certain people's lives is not respected by those in power – the lives of the "masses", whether these masses be poor or black.
4. *The "culture of violence".* Studies show that children learn to believe that aggressive attitudes and violent behaviour are normal and acceptable in an environment where violence is viewed as an acceptable way to get and maintain power and to solve problems. In fact it pays to adopt this attitude and this behaviour because the only people with power, the people who look good, have a good time and make a lot of money are just the sort who have a 'bad attitude' – the gangsters, some of the whites, some of the rich businessmen and some of the politicians. Now this is not to say that children who see a lot of violence on TV and/or on their streets will automatically adopt violent behaviour themselves. There is an enormous difference between what we see around us, what we believe in and what behaviour we chose to adopt. Studies show that children tend to adopt violent behaviour themselves when they have been exposed to many forms of

violence over a period of time. Especially when their parents have been inflicting violence on others, and especially when this occurs within the home.

5. *Children becoming violent*. Children are also perpetrators of violence. The young comrades of the political struggle and the housebreakers and car thieves of the criminal gangs, are both perpetrators and victims of violence. The increased availability of firearms is helping make children the perpetrators of violent crimes at a much earlier age than before. A disturbing trend which is emerging in South Africa is that young boys are increasingly getting involved in sexual crimes, especially gang rapes. School teachers are spending increasing amounts of time attending to pupils' disruptive and inappropriate behaviour in the classroom and on the playgrounds. Aggressive behaviour in schools ranges from bullying to stabbings during gang fights, the intimidation of school teachers and different forms of sexual abuse.
6. *Self-destructive behaviour*. Childhood experiences of violence, abuse and neglect can also lead not only to outwardly directed aggressive behaviour, but also to self-destructive behaviour, for example, suicide, drug and alcohol abuse, promiscuity which may result in emotional and physical damage and depression and social withdrawal.

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