Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

https://www.vera.org/blog/how-violence-becomes-normal

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

We tell a story in this country about the normalization of violence. We look at arrest recordsparticularly for adolescents and young adultsand see groups of young people who commit more and more violent crimes over time. The story we tell to explain this trend is one of children being hardened into violent adult criminals. We have come to believe that each offense paves the way for the next, that the punishment for the lower level ones is an inadequate deterrent, that the people who commit these crimes are hardened in the process (or that they were inherently hard to begin with), and that it is inevitable they will go on to commit more and more violence. This story has shaped the way we view violence, the people who commit it, and the policies we have developed in response. And there is something essential missing from it.

In 2006, James Nash and Jong Sung Kim published a study funded by the U.S. Department of Justice that looked at Trajectories of Violent Offending and Risk. Consistent with other research, the study found a relationship between violent offending and what they termed beliefs legitimizing aggression and bonding with delinquent peers. The question this study and many others like it raisesand that often goes unexploredis what causes a change in a young persons beliefs legitimizing aggression? What compels a young person to bond with delinquent peers? In my view, the factor I propose we all too often fail to consider is the young persons own experience of victimization.

While there is a great deal of research linking a childs maltreatment and exposure to violence to future violent behavior, there is far less research examining the ties between the ongoing experience of violence and the decision to commit greater and greater harm.Common Justice, a demonstration project of the Vera Institute of Justice, is a Brooklyn-based program for serious felonies that offers services to victims and an alternative to incarceration for those responsible for crime. We work with 16- to 24-year-old defendants and those they have harmed. Because we aim to reduce the likelihood of these defendants causing further harm, we have to understand why violence happens and how to stop it. We do what we can to address the major factors known to be linked to violent behavior, including poverty and inadequate housing, as well as individual factors like capacity for consequential thinking and school engagement and performance. And just as essentially, we also find ourselves in a constant battle to combat the normalization of violence. And in our effort to understand how that normalization occurs in the first place, we have been compelled to ask: What if part of what makes violence normal is surviving it?

At Common Justice, we do an exercise with our participants about the normalization of violence. The exercise charts their experience of witnessing, surviving, and committing violence. The exercise also asks participants to reflect on how their beliefs about violence and its seriousness have changed over time. In five years of doing this exercise, we have learned two key lessons.

First, every single one of our participants has reported witnessing and or surviving violence before committing it for the first time, and most have reported ongoing experiences of surviving harm interwoven with their experience of causing it. In other words, the experience of committing harm and the experience of surviving harm advance concurrently. A young person may ditch school one day and be beaten up while outside, for instance. He may then affiliate with a person or group of young people he believes can protect him from further harm (or bond with delinquent peers). He may participate in hurting someone with that person or group. He may then be retaliated against for his actions, survive a serious assault, and then decide to carry a weapon. On his rap sheet, he will have advanced from truancy to a serious violent felony. As a victim, he is a survivor of multiple potentially traumatic assaults over a short period. And of course both of these realities require a response.

The second lesson is that the experience of surviving harm often is the most significant factor in contributing to our participants diminished sense of the seriousness of violence. This may be surprising to some. But when we think about masculinity, about whose victimization we are socialized to value, and about adolescent development, it makes sense. As a society, we do not always recognize and take seriously the pain, fear, and anxiety experienced by certain people when they are harmed particularly people in low income communities, people of color, and young men. We raise men in particular to be tough, fearless, and unfazed by what they endureindeed, we consider many of these qualities to be benchmarks of boys reaching manhood. When a young man or anyone whose victimization we do not take seriously is hurt, absent a social context that validates the legitimacy of his or her responses to it, the person might turn to a common coping strategy: minimizing. Those harmed may tell themselves: It doesnt matter. Its okay. It happens to everyone. Its not a big deal. And that strategy may prove at least partially effective in helping them manage some of the symptoms of trauma they may be experiencing. However, once we determine that something is not a big deal, it becomes something we can justify doing to each other.

In conversations with participants at Common Justice, we have come to believe that this coping strategy of minimization, as much as any other factor, contributes to the normalization of serious harm or, in other words, to the development of beliefs legitimizing aggression. At this stage, it is only an anecdotal observation, but if it is true, what would it mean for our practice as a field?

It would mean we would value victims services in part as a crime prevention strategy. We would recognize that people who are harmed who do not get well are more likely to harm others (and this is supported consistently in the research). So we would invest in the healing of all those harmed regardless of their race, class, or gendernot just for ethical reasons, but for the public safety. It would mean we would address the trauma and violence experienced by those who go on to commit harm not just out of compassion, but because we would understand that it is only by doing so that we can help ensure they will not harm others. We would do more research on the impact of victimization on attitudes toward violence, and then would fund the development and implementation of interventions designed to help

replace the coping strategy of minimization with healthier strategies. However, it would not mean excusing violence. Having compassion for the harm someone has survived and holding them accountable for the harm they caused are not mutually exclusive (and at Common Justice, we would go a step farther and say they are interdependent). Thus, in this new world, if someone is hurt, whether it is a gang member a convicted felon or drug dealer, we would still say it was wrong, because we would work to become a culture that insisted that violence is wrong and it matters every single time.

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