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Bethany L. Letiecq and Sally A. Koblinsky

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What is This?
Parenting in Violent Neighborhoods
African American Fathers Share Strategies for Keeping Children Safe

BETHANY L. LETIECQ
Montana State University
SALLY A. KOBLINSKY
University of Maryland

This qualitative study represents one of the first efforts to examine how African American fathers protect their children from community violence. Eighteen African American biological and "social" fathers of preschoolers in the Washington, DC, metropolitan area participated in focus groups addressing parenting in violent neighborhoods. Fathers described seven protective strategies reflecting three major themes: monitoring children, educating children about safety, and improving community life. These strategies are discussed within the context of African American values, traditions, and neighborhood contextual factors.

Keywords: African American fathers; community violence; young children

In growing numbers of communities across the United States, families are living in neighborhoods plagued by violence, crime, and drug activity (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2000). African American families are disproportionately represented in these violent neighborhoods (Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997), where parents and children are directly and indirectly exposed to robberies, physical assaults, drive-by shootings, and murders (Hill, Hawkins, Raposo, & Carr, 1995; Horn & Trickett, 1998; Osofsky, 1995; Veenema, 2001). Children’s exposure to chronic community violence, which may occur concurrently with...
family and school violence (e.g., bullying), may adversely affect their development. Some children may develop aggressive, impulsive, self-protective behaviors that interfere with their acquisition of values such as cooperation and empathy (Garbarino, 1993; Gorman-Smith & Tolan, 1998). Other children’s preoccupation with violent events may distract them from learning, limiting their ability to develop the self-discipline needed for school success (Farver, Natera, & Frosch, 1999; Slaby, Roedell, Arezzo, & Hendrix, 1995).

Community violence may not only impair children’s development but may also have a negative impact on parenting efficacy and parenting skills. Parents may struggle to protect their children and to help them deal with violence-related stress (Cicchetti & Rizley, 1981; Randolph, Koblinsky, & Roberts, 1996). Moreover, parents living in dangerous neighborhoods may have difficulty marshaling the energy necessary to be warm, consistent, and nurturing—practices that have been linked to positive developmental outcomes in young children (Pinderhughes, Nix, Foster, & Jones, 2001).

Although recent studies have begun to identify the strategies parents use to personally cope with community violence and to mediate the effects of violence on young children, most of the research involves only mothers or female caregivers. Little is known about the strategies used by fathers—especially African American fathers—to protect their children from violence. This gap in existing research is somewhat surprising given that fathers have traditionally played the role of family protector. Moreover, research has suggested that fathers contribute significantly to the cognitive and socioemotional development of their children (e.g., Black, Dubowitz, & Starr, 1999; Dubowitz et al., 2001; Lamb, 1997; London, Cabrera, Shannon, & Tamis-LeMonda, 2002). Given the dearth of research on fathers’ protective strategies and the significance of fathers in children’s development, the purpose of the current study was to explore how African American fathers parent their young children in violent neighborhoods.

**REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

**THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

One of the most widely used conceptual frameworks for child development is the social ecology model (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). This contextual model examines how child outcomes are influenced by characteristics of
the individual, family, community, and culture, as well as the complex interactions among these variables. Some theorists argue that traditional ecological models minimize the role of social history, social location, majority/minority status, and discrimination in interpreting behavior, limiting their utility for researching ethnic minority families (Garcia Coll et al., 1996). Therefore, more recent models have addressed the centrality of cultural form and meaning in examining parenting and child outcomes (Garcia Coll et al.). Research on African American families, for example, should consider the values, historical experiences, and cultural strengths that contribute to the families’ adaptive behaviors and set them apart from the dominant European culture (Hill, 1993; Randolph & Koblinsky, 2001).

A number of scholars have developed Africentric models for understanding African American parenting behavior (Nobles, 1985; Randolph & Koblinsky, 2001). These models recognize that there are aspects of African history, traditions, and beliefs that have survived through time and continue to influence the way African Americans raise their children. For example, African Americans attach primary importance to family relationships, with particular focus on children; respect and seek counsel from elders; value education; hold strong spiritual values; and adopt a communal orientation that emphasizes group over individual goals (Akoto, 1992; Billingsley, 1992; Carter, 1997). Knowledge of these Africentric values and traditions provides an important context for understanding parenting roles and family functioning in contemporary African American life (McAdoo, 1993). Therefore, research on African American fathers should recognize how these men are influenced by their shared culture and sociohistorical background, how they operate as members of larger kin networks and communities, and how their values shape the ways in which they nurture and protect their children (Allen & Connor, 1997; McAdoo, 1993).

COMMUNITY VIOLENCE

African American families are 10 times more likely than their European American counterparts to live in neighborhoods where at least 30% of residents are poor (Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, & Klebanov, 1994) and where there are high levels of joblessness (Chase-Lansdale & Gordon, 1996). This “concentrated disadvantage”—or lack of personal, financial, and institutional resources—was found to be the strongest predictor of community violence in one Chicago-based study (Sampson et al., 1997) and may contribute to African American families’ greater vulnerability to
violent crime. Such problems are exacerbated by the growing illicit drug trade and the ease with which handguns are available to residents of many inner-city neighborhoods (Children’s Defense Fund, 1998).

One major challenge facing African American parents in impoverished, high violence neighborhoods is protecting their children from community violence exposure. A growing body of research reveals that low-income, urban children as young as the preschool years are frequent witnesses to and occasional victims of community violence. Although there are no national studies of children’s community violence exposure, researchers have investigated preschool children’s exposure in a variety of geographic settings, including Boston (Taylor, Zuckerman, Harik, & Groves, 1994), Chicago (Garbarino, Kostelny, & Dubrow, 1991), New Orleans (Osofsky, Wewers, Hann, & Fick, 1993), and Baltimore and Washington, DC (Holland, Koblinsky, & Anderson, 1995). In one study of primarily low-income African American families interviewed at a Boston pediatric clinic, Taylor et al. (1994) found that 10% of the children were reported by their mothers to have witnessed a shooting or stabbing by 5 years of age and nearly one half of the children had heard gunshots. In another Baltimore-Washington, DC, area study of predominantly African American families in poor neighborhoods, mothers reported that their preschool children routinely heard gunfire and had been directly threatened or been a victim of violence (including bullying) an average of twice within the past year (Holland et al., 1995).

PARENTS AS PROTECTORS

Parents are the most salient figures in the lives of most young children and have the greatest potential to protect them from the ill effects of community violence. Ecological models suggest that when parents are supportive and protective, they facilitate effective child coping and positive development; when parents are absent or stressed, children are developmentally at risk (Belsky, 1980; Cicchetti & Lynch, 1993; Pynoos, Steinberg, & Goenjian, 1996). Parents living in violent communities may experience even greater levels of community violence than their children (Lorion & Saltzman, 1993) and may become angry, frightened, and traumatized as a result of such exposure. Parents may also experience depression, anxiety, denial, and reduced feelings of self-efficacy as a result of their inability to provide a safe environment for their families (e.g., Garbarino et al., 1991; Lorion & Saltzman, 1993; Osofsky et al., 1993).

Despite the stressors associated with living in violent neighborhoods, many parents exhibit coping and parenting behaviors that may buffer chil-
dren from adverse effects of violence exposure. Although much of the re-
search on parental protective strategies has focused on parents of ele-
mentary-age children and adolescents (e.g., Hill et al., 1995; Myers, 1998),
there exists a growing body of research—mainly qualitative in nature—
investigating mothers’ efforts to protect their preschool children from
community violence. These studies reveal several common behavioral
coping strategies used by mothers, including keeping children physically
close, providing constant supervision/chaperonage, teaching practical
household safety skills (e.g., not sitting by windows), and restricting
neighborhood activities, such as the use of community playgrounds

Although most prior research reveals that African American mothers
are more likely to isolate themselves from negative neighborhood influ-
ences than to adopt more assertive parenting strategies (Holland, 1996;
Jarrett et al., 2000; Koblinisky, Roberts, Letiecq, & Randolph, 1998), one
small qualitative study of African American families in Philadelphia
found that a few mothers had “the courage to protect what’s mine” by tell-
ing drug dealers to take their business elsewhere (Mohr, Fantuzzo, & Ab-
dul-Kabir, 2001). Some mothers also report reliance on informal neigh-
boredhood leaders and local institutions—such as Head Start programs,
recreational centers, and local churches—to assist them in keeping their
children safe (Jarrett et al., 2000; Mohr et al., 2001). Finally, many moth-
ers reported turning to spiritual or cognitive strategies, such as prayer and
positive thinking, in an effort to protect their children from harm
(Holland, 1996; Mohr et al., 2001; Koblinisky et al., 1998).

LIMITED RESEARCH ON AFRICAN AMERICAN FATHERS

Although researchers are beginning to systematically study the protec-
tive and coping strategies used by African American mothers in high vio-
ence neighborhoods, to date, few published studies focus on African
American fathers (for an exception, see Letiecq & Koblinisky, 2003). Cur-
rently, approximately 40% of African American fathers live in the same
home as their children, including 4% who are the sole parent of their chil-
dren (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Moreover, research reveals than many
African American fathers in never-married, divorced, and separated
homes do maintain some level of contact with their children (McAdoo,
1992). In one study of urban African American families, approximately
one half of nonresidential fathers had regular contact and provided some
financial support during their children’s preschool years (Coley & Chase-
Landsdale, 1999).
As a group, African American fathers experience more stressors than other fathers, including higher rates of poverty, unemployment, incarceration, homelessness, poor health, and morbidity (National Urban League, 1998; Perlo, 1996). Yet research also suggests that many low-income African American fathers play an active role in the lives of their young children, regardless of whether they live in their children’s home (McAdoo & McAdoo, 1998). More information is needed about how African American fathers parent their children, and particularly about how they attempt to shelter children from community violence. Studies should also consider the role of cultural and neighborhood contextual factors in understanding fathering behavior. To increase knowledge in these areas, the current study adopted a cultural ecological framework to investigate how African American fathers parent their preschool children in low-income neighborhoods characterized by high community violence.

METHOD

SAMPLE AND COMMUNITY CHARACTERISTICS

A total of 18 African American biological and “social” fathers participated in three focus groups. Ten participants were biological fathers, and the remaining eight participants fell into the social father category: three were stepfathers, two were grandfathers, two were uncles, and one was a close family friend who was highly involved in the life of a Head Start child. Eleven fathers resided in the same home as the child, and seven lived in the same general neighborhood. Fathers’ ages ranged from 24 to 47 years, with a mean age of 32 years. All fathers were involved in the caregiving of at least one child currently enrolled in Head Start, a comprehensive early childhood education program serving low-income families. The intentional inclusion of social fathers in the current study recognizes that these “fictive” fathers have historically played an important role in African American families, reflecting a culture with strong traditions of role flexibility and concern for children regardless of biological connections (Billingsley, 1968).

Two of the focus groups took place in southeast Washington, DC, an area that has experienced high levels of community violence according to the Uniform Crime Report and Violent Crime Index (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1998). In comparison to the 50 states, the District of Columbia has had the highest teen violent death rate and the highest child death rate because of homicide since 1985 (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 1999).
The third focus group was conducted in a Maryland county adjoining the District of Columbia that also had high rates of community violence. Specifically, in 1998, this county had the fifth highest death rate because of homicide, suicide, and violent deaths of all 24 counties in Maryland, and between 1990 and 1998, the county’s juvenile violent crime arrest rate increased 25% (Advocates for Children and Youth, 2000). The targeted neighborhood in this county was identified by county police as a “hot spot” for violent crime based on data measuring murder/negligent manslaughter, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault.

An environmental scan of the targeted neighborhoods confirmed the adverse effects of violence and drugs on community life. Targeted neighborhoods had many apartments with barred windows, boarded-up abandoned buildings, graffiti-covered walls, and deteriorating “crack houses” frequented by drug addicts. During the day, loiterers and panhandlers were seen hanging out on street corners, often holding brown bags concealing cans of alcohol; at night, drug dealers and prostitutes took to the streets. Small convenience stores, liquor stores, a few fast-food restaurants, and check-cashing establishments were the only businesses in the target neighborhoods.

PROCEDURE

Focus groups were held at three Head Start centers, which were purposively chosen because of their location in the high violence neighborhoods described above. Head Start teachers and staff recruited biological and social fathers with children currently enrolled in one of the three Head Start programs. When the focus group sessions were scheduled, the teachers/staff telephoned interested fathers and invited them to participate.

All three focus groups were cofacilitated by the lead author, a White woman, and an African American Head Start grandfather, who was a member of the study’s advisory committee and a resident of one of the targeted high-violence neighborhoods. The cofacilitators discussed the risks and benefits of participation and assured the fathers that their responses would be confidential (i.e., no names would be tied to participant statements in written reports). Following the suggestions of Krueger (1994), the cofacilitators used a focus group guide to facilitate the discussion of a series of issues, including fathers’ feelings about neighborhood safety, their personal exposure to violent events, the ways they cope with neighborhood danger, and the strategies they use to protect their children and families from neighborhood violence. Two African American male undergraduate students also assisted with the groups, administering the par-
participant consent forms and recording verbatim fathers’ responses to the focus group questions. Each focus group was audiotaped and lasted approximately 2 hours. Focus group participants received a $25 stipend.

DATA ANALYSIS

Transcriptions of the audiotape recordings were checked against the student recorders’ notes to verify their accuracy and to clarify any confusing dialogue (e.g., when multiple fathers spoke at once). Using the inductive method of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the transcriptions were then content analyzed by a multiracial team of raters to identify ways in which fathers attempted to protect their children from community violence. The raters first independently identified all possible strategies reported by fathers; then, following recommendations of Berg (1998) and Tesch (1990), the data were further analyzed and yielded seven protective strategies that captured the diversity of fathers’ responses. These seven strategies reflected three major themes: (a) monitoring children, (b) educating children about safety, and (c) improving community life. The seven protective strategies within these thematic areas are presented below.

RESULTS

MONITORING CHILDREN

Constant child supervision. One strategy employed by virtually all focus group fathers to shield their children from neighborhood dangers was constant, careful supervision. Many fathers spoke about the importance of watching their preschoolers everywhere—in the home, on the front steps, in the yard, and in the public parks. Several noted that their children were never allowed to play outside after dark. Many fathers expressed a need to know where their children were at all times just in case something “went down in the neighborhood” and they needed to “grab their kids up quick.” For example, one father said, “I always believe that they need to be supervised all the time. Regardless. I mean, if you let them go outside, then you should be sittin’ out there. Right there with them.”

For some fathers, the strategy of supervision was broader than watching their child on the front steps or public playground but also involved monitoring their preschoolers’ exposure to media violence. Several fathers discussed their efforts to reduce their child’s exposure to violent con-
tent in cartoons, television dramas, movies, and video games. One focus group father said, “I try to monitor the TV very much. Some programs that I even like to see, right... I go up to my room and watch it. I won’t let them come in and see it—the shooting and stuff like that.”

**Restricting neighborhood contact.** Many fathers attempted to insulate preschoolers from the dangerous “goings-on” of their neighborhood by confining children to their homes during much of the time they were out of preschool. Such fathers described how they shied away from interacting with neighbors, avoided making eye contact with other men on the street, and isolated themselves and their families from community life. For example, one father said,

I don’t get involved. It’s not like it used to be. I go out there and say something and you know... I could wind up shot... I go into my house, now, and I make sure the kids are okay. I get all the kids in one room, and I’m not going out there because the simple fact is that if he has a gun, I don’t have one.

Focus group fathers lamented the constant threat of violence that contributed to family isolation. Some described the fear that community involvement would lead to retribution from adults involved in criminal activity. One father noted that the grandparents and other older adults who frequented the porches and street corners of his youth had been driven indoors by the threat of violence. Such fathers regretted the need to confine their preschoolers to their homes but acknowledged that they would rather be safe and alive with their children than “dead on the street” because they tried to break up a random fight or stop a dealer from selling drugs in front of their apartment.

**EDUCATING CHILDREN ABOUT SAFETY**

**Teaching home safety.** Teaching home safety skills was another common strategy adopted by African American fathers in violent neighborhoods. Fathers described attempting to teach children as young as age 3 to avoid opening front doors for anyone, to stay away from the windows (especially at night), to lay on the floor if they heard gunfire, and to dial 911 in emergencies. As one father remarked,

I would say [my biggest fear for my child’s safety is] getting hit by a stray bullet or something. You know, being somewhere, maybe the wrong place
at the wrong time. . . . You let your kid sit in the window, you let them play around the window. I got a fear that they’re gonna get hit . . . and I live on the third floor! And it’s crazy, man, we don’t even let the kids play in the house. If something happens to that kid, you’re going to say, “Damn I wish it wouldn’t have happened like that.” [But] it happens, everyday.

Some fathers maintained a regular routine of teaching and rehearsing safety skills with their young children. Fathers felt that such preparation was essential to ensuring their preschoolers’ security and good health and described the importance of raising children who were “always prepared for trouble.”

**Teaching neighborhood survival tactics.** Some fathers went beyond instructing preschoolers on household safety to teaching neighborhood survival strategies. These fathers schooled children about how to avoid drug dealers and gang members, how to bypass drug houses and abandoned buildings, which blocks and parks were dangerous, and which houses and shops children should go to when trouble occurred. For example, one father stated,

And these kids that hang back there, you know, the drug dealers, have offered my children drugs (to run or sell). You know, and my kids know better because I sit with them and teach them just about everyday. . . . We, as adults, have to be on the alert and make sure we teach our children accordingly. . . . If we don’t teach them . . . once they step outside the homes, they’re susceptible to anything.

Some fathers also taught young children about the real-life consequences of street violence by pointing out fights, injured victims, illicit drug deals, and even dead bodies in the streets. A few fathers reported purposely watching violent television shows and R-rated films with preschoolers in an effort to prepare them for witnessing and responding safely to violent events. As one father commented,

But why hide violence? Teach it in this preschool right here. Have a TV. . . . When you hide it and when they get out there and see it, it’s going to be a shock to them. But if you start teaching it to them now and so forth, explain it to them, they’ll be ready. Me and my son will sit down [to watch a movie with violent content] . . . He’ll say dad who’s the good one and who’s the bad one. That’s how I teach him . . . I’m not going to hide the violent part because it’s out here.
Other fathers also used personal experiences to emphasize their children’s vulnerability to violence in their own neighborhood. As one father shared,

I told him (son) I got shot between the bus stop and the payphone. And my son was like, “Daddy, why did you get that bullet hole in your back?” I said, “I got shot. You know, and guns ain’t nothing to play with. . . . So that’s why I say you have to be careful where you are, where you are going, and, uh, you just have to be careful everywhere.

Although some fathers acknowledged that teaching neighborhood survival tactics might increase preschoolers’ fear and mistrust of their parent’s protective powers, they also felt it essential that children learn “street smarts” at an early age to cope with the very real threats to children’s safety.

Teaching children to handle conflict. Another example of how fathers used education as a protective strategy was through their teaching preschoolers how to handle peer conflict. Many fathers reported instructing their children to resolve conflict through peaceful, nonviolent behavior, such as walking away from fights with peers, or seeking out parents and teachers for help with problems. One father, concerned about his daughter’s aggressive behavior, stated, “Her first instinct is pow—to pop somebody. I talked to her about that, and she’s going to have to stop or one day, you know, you going to cause somebody to get hurt . . . you or that person that you hit.”

In contrast, a few fathers discussed the need to teach their children how to confront trouble-making peers so they would not be bullied or harmed. These fathers felt that sons and daughters, from their earliest years, should learn how to defend themselves when provoked by others. As one father said, “I don’t want nobody to be hittin’ on my daughter. . . . I tell her, ‘you stand up for your rights, you hit them back.’”

Several fathers reported that they had enrolled their preschool children in Tai Kwan Do classes, not as a means for teaching children how to fight, but as a means for teaching self-discipline, self-control, and self-defense. Fathers noted that such classes had the added benefit of providing their children with exercise and opportunities for peer interaction in neighborhoods where public playgrounds and parks were off limits, especially during the evening hours.
IMPROVING COMMUNITY LIFE

Direct confrontation of neighborhood troublemakers. One strategy employed by fathers to combat community violence and enhance children’s safety was direct confrontation of neighborhood troublemakers. Fathers who employed this strategy stressed their personal need to challenge neighborhood drug dealers and other “thugs” so that they would be “respected” and would not appear “weak” or “scared” to community members. For example, one focus group father stated,

Now, I got on the basketball court with my team [of young children] and I said, “Look, when I come over here with my teams, ain’t no weed gonna be smoked, ain’t no cussing gonna be going on.” I said, “We come to run ball.” And they give you respect if you give them respect, too. You see the situation and you carry yourself accordingly.

During the focus groups, many fathers shared their ambivalence about how best to protect their children and families, discussing whether it was better to maintain a low-profile or project a strong, assertive image. Almost all fathers expressed little faith in the protective services of the police. Many fathers did not feel comfortable “packing a weapon” or having a gun in the house, especially with young children around. However, some fathers mentioned that owning a gun—and carrying it in the street—made them feel safer and better prepared to protect themselves and their children if something “bad was going down.”

Community activism. A number of fathers sought to enhance children’s safety through their own efforts by engaging in community activism. These fathers joined Neighborhood Watch groups, block patrols, Head Start parent councils, voter registration drives, and community clean-up campaigns in an attempt to increase neighborhood order and reduce crime and violence. One father also described how he had organized several community activities for children, including bible study, youth choir, and a play. Although some fathers discussed the challenges of planning events in their communities, citing apathy and a lack of caring as major hurdles, one particularly active father proclaimed,

If I make a difference from 8 in the morning to 5 in the evening and he makes his from 5 in the evening . . . We as a community have made a difference. I can’t be here 24-7, but if we as a community do what we are supposed to do, maybe we can make that difference.
DISCUSSION

This exploratory study, which involved a small purposive sample of African American fathers actively involved in young children’s lives, provides a first look at the strategies that fathers employ to protect preschoolers from community violence. This qualitative research is unique within the parenting literature in identifying ways that low-income fathers in violent, inner-city neighborhoods act to increase their young children’s safety. Readers must be cautious in generalizing findings to the larger population of African American fathers; however, findings provide a framework for the future study of fathering in violent environments. Moreover, the current study sheds light on possible differences between African American fathers’ and mothers’ protective strategies, with implications for practitioners and policy makers.

Current findings reveal that African American fathers employ a repertoire of strategies to protect their children, with strategies reflecting recognized African American cultural values and traditions. The focus group data support the value of role flexibility within African American families (e.g., Burton, 1991; Liebow, 1967; Stack, 1974), as biological and social fathers who participated in this study maintained strong emotional connections with their preschoolers and actively monitored their activities. Consistent with Africentric values ascribing primacy to family relationships, particularly with respect to children and dependent members (Carter, 1997), the fathers in the current study devoted significant energy to supervising and managing their young children’s behavior. Fathers shielded their preschoolers from potentially dangerous youth and adults, as well as perilous neighborhood areas, by carefully monitoring their preschoolers’ activities and restricting children’s involvement with neighborhood life. This high valuing of children was further evidenced by fathers’ adoption of strict rules and practices that governed the places children could frequent, the times they could be outdoors, and even the types of television programs they could watch. Many fathers also assumed the vital caregiving responsibility of knowing their preschoolers’ whereabouts every hour of the day.

Fathers’ second major protective approach, teaching children about safety, reflects another Africentric belief that education can improve the quality of individual and family life (Carter, 1997). African American fathers in the current study were highly involved in the informal teaching of their preschoolers, providing lessons about safety in their homes and neighborhoods. Many fathers also attempted to develop preschoolers’
prosocial skills, such as empathy and cooperation, by teaching their children peaceful alternatives to peer conflict. In directly teaching children how to handle conflict, and enrolling children in martial arts classes focusing on self-discipline, fathers emphasized the value of education in creating the self-control and problem-solving ability that might protect children in incendiary situations.

The third major protective approach of African American fathers in the current study centered on improving community life. Such behavior supports the value of communalism, which has traditionally sustained African American families despite economic hardship (Nobles & Goddard, 1993; Taylor, Chatters, Tucker, & Lewis, 1990). Some fathers adopted a confrontational approach to the problem of neighborhood violence, challenging troublemakers, and chasing drug dealers away from their blocks. These fathers projected a masculine image of being strong, tough, and “in control,” an image they felt was essential to protecting their children and families from these negative influences. A number of fathers also attempted to build or restore neighborhood social bonds through participation in neighborhood crime watch, church/Sunday School programs, playground cleanups, and voter registration drives. Such community activism served to strengthen informal community organization and social control, two factors that have been found to facilitate successful child development (Jarrett, 1995).

Fathers’ efforts to restore order and cohesion in target neighborhoods was especially noteworthy given the extent to which violence had undermined African American traditions of communalism and engagement of community resources to assist in parenting (Dilworth-Anderson & Marshall, 1996; Stack, 1974). Many African American fathers lamented the very real threats of victimization and retribution (as a result of reporting crime) that made isolating families and restricting neighborhood contact a crucial protective strategy. Community violence likewise undercut African American customs of venerating elders and involving them in collective parenting approaches (García Coll, Meyer, & Brillon, 1995; Taylor et al., 1990). As in previous studies of community violence (e.g., Jarrett et al., 2000), neighborhood crime and drug activity reduced the power and authority of grandparents and elders and restricted their informal teaching and social control of neighborhood children.

The African American fathers in the current study were similar to African American mothers in previous investigations (e.g., Garbarino et al., 1991; Holland, 1996; Jarrett et al., 2000; Koblinsky et al., 1998; Mohr et al., 2001) in their use of child monitoring and educational strategies.
However, fathers also employed parenting strategies rarely used by mothers, including community activism, confronting troublemakers, enrolling children in martial arts courses, and teaching preschoolers explicit, real-life consequences of violent behavior. The latter strategies may reflect traditional male role expectations that fathers act assertively to “protect their families.” Unlike mothers (Holland, 1996; Mohr et al., 2001), fathers failed to mention prayer or positive thinking as strategies they used to enhance children’s safety, suggesting that fathers may rely more on active coping methods than on spiritual or cognitive strategies.

**LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

Although current findings reveal a number of adaptive and unique strategies used by African American fathers to protect young children from community violence, several factors limit interpretation of the findings and their generalization to other populations. First, the current study employed a small sample of volunteer biological and social fathers. There was considerable within-group variation in fathers’ responses, with some fathers focusing more on withdrawal from neighborhood contact while other fathers opted for more direct engagement in neighborhood/community affairs. The use of a small sample and focus group methodology (where all fathers did not respond to every question) precluded meaningful comparisons of fathers with different demographic characteristics (e.g., younger vs. older fathers, fathers residing inside and outside the home). However, future research should consider variation in the sociodemographic factors of African American fathers (e.g., marital status, residential status, amount of contact with children, education, income) and their children (e.g., age, gender).

Future research on parenting in violent neighborhoods should also investigate fathers’ protective strategies as a function of neighborhood characteristics, such as the level of community violence and the availability of community resources and support systems. Hill et al. (1995), for example, found that mothers who pursued community activism were better educated and residents of moderate (vs. high) violence neighborhoods. It seems likely that fathers may appraise the level of immediate danger threatening their families, as well as the odds of enlisting other adults in violence interventions, before they adopt more assertive, activist protective strategies. Continued use of qualitative studies, as well as quantitative approaches, may enhance future understanding of parenting processes within violent environments.
IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS AND POLICY MAKERS

Despite the current study’s small, purposive sample, the current findings provide some valuable insights for practitioners and policy makers seeking to buffer families from community violence. The African American fathers in the current sample cared deeply about their young children’s safety. The current study suggests that many would benefit from joining supportive groups to thwart the growing isolationism in their neighborhoods and to rebuild networks of community support. Efforts to initiate these groups might appeal to fathers’ keen interest in improving community safety rather than focusing more narrowly on parent education. Involving fathers in antiviolence campaigns and neighborhood improvement activities, together with children’s educational and recreational activities, may enhance fathers’ male support networks and increase their parenting efficacy. Such support groups may also provide additional adult community members to share in the collective parenting that formerly characterized many impoverished African American neighborhoods.

Current findings also revealed that some fathers attempt to teach their preschoolers about the real-life consequences of community violence by making children aware of injured and even deceased victims in their neighborhoods. Although such efforts are intended to prepare children to react calmly if and when violence erupts, they may also create fear, anxiety, and perceptions of a hostile, threatening world (Colder, Mott, Levy, & Flay, 2000). In addition, some fathers may tax children’s developmental abilities when they attempt to teach a preschooler how to evade strangers at the door or how to make a 911 emergency call. Parent educators may help fathers to deliver developmentally appropriate safety information to their children, and identify ways to alert children to danger without excessive use of scare tactics. Educators may further assist fathers in identifying local community resources (e.g., church, arts, sports, and camp programs) that facilitate children’s development of trust, autonomy, and independence in an environment that often demands restrictive parenting practices (Jarrett, 1995; McLoyd, 1990). Educators and practitioners are likely to be most effective in working with African American fathers if they employ Africentric principles (e.g., communalism, collective parenting, spirituality) that draw on family strengths and community pride (see Nobles & Goddard, 1993; Randolph, Damond, & Washington, 1995).

Finally, although the current study reveals that many fathers made heroic efforts to protect their young children, it is vital that antiviolence policies and programs work to strengthen the economic infrastructure of low-income urban communities. Providing education, job training, a living
wage, legitimate employment, as well as revitalized youth and community services may reduce neighborhood crime and the demands on parents who are trying to protect their children from physical and psychological harm. Community-level interventions, in addition to those at the individual and family levels, will help fathers and other caregivers to rear their children in a safer, more nurturing environment.

REFERENCES


