The Effects of Police Killings on African American Adolescents’ Internalized Behaviors

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Statement of the Problem

Currently, police brutality and killings within the United States can be accessed within one’s hands. Today, we see these incidents publicized on news outlets as well as social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Within a majority of these videos, an officer is taped shooting an unarmed African American, which results in their death. There is a disproportionate amount of these killings compared to white counterparts in which African Americans are almost four times as likely to be unarmed and shot by police on average (Ross, 2015). Unless there is a dramatic change within the police force, these numbers are bound to increase leaving more African American youth without a mother or father. Police related killings range from one to eight people each day within the United States and African American shooting casualties are twice as likely as whites to have been unarmed (Weitzer, 2015). Unfortunately, many families are left behind to struggle with the repercussions of such actions and are not offered support. Not many life events measure up to the stress of losing a parent in adolescence (Wilcox et al., 2010). Family systems are altered and stress within each family increases which has negative impacts on youth. These negative implications for adolescents have the potential to carry over to school and affect their behaviors. This issue affects the normal development process emotionally, socially, and cognitively of each adolescent. If adolescents fail to grieve properly, then they are susceptible to both problems immediately succeeding the death of their parent and later in adulthood (Dehlin & Reg, 2009). This review examines the effects on African American adolescents’ ages 13 through 17 internalized behavior following the death of a parent by a police-involved shooting. This age group is important to focus on because adolescents are forming their identity at this time, and the loss of a parent changes an individual (Koepke & Denissen, 2012). There is little to no research available as to how this group of African American
adolescents is affected in a school setting. It is vital for parents, professionals, and social scientists to have a good understanding of this issue in order to help African American youth cope with the loss of a parent, decrease the risk of mental problems, and create a support system that promotes continued healthy growth of each adolescent.

**Theoretical Framework**

*Family Stress Theory*

Family Stress Theory examines the reasons certain family systems adapt and thrive in stressful situations while other family systems deteriorate under comparable conditions (Beckett, 2000). Stress within a family system could result in increased amounts of resilience or crumble under the stressor event. The ABC-X Model, first introduced by Hill, encompasses variables such as the stressor event, family resources, family perception of the stressor event, and the crisis (Siebler, 2007). The current McCubbin and Patterson’s Double ABC-X Model introduces additional variables that focus on both pre-crisis and post-crisis (Beckett, 2000). This current Double ABC-X Model was expanded to include pileup, existing and new family resources, adaptation, perceptions of all these variables, and time (Siebler, 2007).

Family Stress Theory is applicable in the context of this review through the family system’s ability to either adapt or deteriorate in the event of a parent being shot and killed in a police-involved incident. The initial stressor event of the Double ABC-X Model would be the death of a parent due to a police shooting. Existing family resources would be affected by the loss of income. The family’s perception of the initial stressor event may be defined as debilitating. This could cause the family to struggle financially, emotionally, and mentally in which they may not be able to revert to life before the killing. The crisis in relation to this review is the loss of the parent figure within the family systems. Recovery may be beyond the family’s
grasp as bills begin to build up (pileup). The addition of government assistance could help supplement the loss of family income. The post-crisis perception of the event may result in the existing parent getting an additional job to lessen the financial strain. This would alter the family system and cause existing members to assume new roles. This adaptation of the family has the potential to negatively affect an adolescent’s adjustment to school. Social support within this family system has the potential to make this transition smoother as an adolescent adjusts.

*Attachment Theory*

Attachment Theory focuses on the type of relationship between an infant and primary caregiver (Siebler, 2007). In most instances, the primary caregiver is the infant’s parent(s). The type of relationship formed as an infant with their primary caregiver is strengthened or weakened as a child matures into adulthood (Siebler, 2007). As this parent-child attachment solidifies, it influences a child’s future romantic/peer relationships made in adolescence through adulthood. Once a parent/primary caregiver dies, the attachment is severed, leaving the adolescent to adjust. Because this attachment is lost as a result of a police-involved shooting, an adolescent has the potential to suffer from separation stress, psychiatric disorder, or emotional problems (Rostila & Saarela, 2011).

Ultimately this ties into Family Stress Theory because the adolescent is going to adapt to their remaining attachments in this time of distress. Depending on the type of relationship between the other existing parent/primary caregiver, the adolescent could seek continued support (Siebler, 2007). The remaining support system in an adolescent’s life, such as friends, could also buffer the intensity of the stressor event.

*Review of Literature*

*The Importance of Parent-Adolescent Relationships*
As a child matures into adolescence, their relationship with their parent changes. A substantial amount of evidence supports the role parents continue to play in the development of their adolescent children (Hair, Moore, Garrett, Ling, & Cleveland, 2008). The role parents play has the potential to alleviate some of the risks associated with delinquency and other negative behaviors. According to the research of Hair et al. (2008), the impact of a positive parent-adolescent relationship is dependent on parental monitoring, parental supportiveness, and family routines. This implication focuses on a parent’s overall presence in their adolescent’s life. These three identified themes within Hair’s et al. (2008), study help to infer reduced occurrences of internalizing problems, lower levels of depression, encourage an adolescent’s sense of identity, and increase overall mental well-being. While this study encompassed various races and ethnicities, a more focused sample of African American parent-adolescent relationships would provide a detailed conclusion in terms of the overall theme of this review. Findings in Stanik, Riina, and McHale’s (2013) research indicated a gender difference between African American maternal (but not paternal) parenting of their adolescent children. For instance, maternal warmth of African American mothers was linked to less depressive symptoms and a reduced amount of risky behaviors for sons, while the greater paternal warmth of African American fathers was associated with a smaller amount of risky behavior in both sons and daughters (Stanik et al., 2013). A major strength of this study was the inclusion of African American fathers because previous studies tended to focus solely on single African American mothers and child relationships. There is clear and strong evidence that supports the importance of parent-adolescent relationships.

*Loss of Parent to Violence*
In general, loss of a parent has negative implications on the behaviors of adolescents. Adolescents who face the loss of a parent are at an increased risk of depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, anger, shock, concern, lower self-esteem, and irritability (Masterson, 2012; Melhem, Walker, Moritz, & Brent, 2008; Sikkelbroek, Bodden, Reitz, Vollebergh, & Baar, 2016). These symptoms fall under the various forms of internalized behaviors adolescents may experience. In this study, lower levels of Perceived Survival Expectations (PSE), were linked to hopelessness and acting thoughtlessly without regards to consequences (Ngyuen et al., 2012). A connection is made between Ngyuen’s et al. (2012) and Sikkelbroek’s et al. (2016) research in which the death of a parent could lead to internalized feelings of hopelessness, which is linked to symptoms of depression.

Research by Masterson (2012), examines the lived experiences of school for adolescents following the death of a parent. In this study, three core themes arose from this study: adolescents who had lost a parent did not want to be treated differently, adolescents would like others to acknowledge the parent death with respect, and the lived experience in school after the death of a parent is an intensely personal experience for each individual adolescent (Masterson, 2012). This study is relevant to this review because it focused on students’ lived experiences.

As previously discussed, the loss of a parent also results in the loss of income. If this income is not supplemented or replaced, the family has the potential to fall lower in their socioeconomic status. According to the research of Sikkelbroek et al. (2016), lower socioeconomic status forecasts more internalizing issues in adolescents. This suggests a predisposition for adolescent’s internalizing behaviors and further need for social support.

*Police Mistrust, Brutality, and Shootings in African American Communities*
Police mistrust of law enforcement is a recurring theme within African American communities. This shapes the mentalities and perceptions of African American youths on a daily basis. There has been a history of mistrust within the African American population, and it still resonates in communities today. African American women are more likely to be sexualized, while African American men are more likely to be criminalized (Gilbert & Ray, 2015). This dates back to the introduction of slavery within the United States. According to Gilbert and Ray (2015), there are three main threats to black male identity following the abolishment of slavery. These threats exacerbate the continual distrust and disconnection in African American communities between police. The first threat was a new form of enslavement through the convict lease system, which entailed the long sentences of imprisonment of countless freed African American slaves on counts of minor violations (Gilbert & Ray, 2015). The second threat to African American males was the socially sanctioned lynchings used to deem their deaths as justifiable (Gilbert & Ray, 2015). The third threat is what African American males face in the current era. This threat permits law enforcement to utilize legal sanctions to control African American male bodies by means of stop and frisk, traffic stops, and zero-tolerance policies (Gilbert & Ray, 2015). Throughout the years (from 1971-2014), a majority of blacks continued to have a distrust of police, disapproval of police force, dissatisfaction, or other negative perceptions of the police regardless of the survey location in the United States (Peck, 2015). Peck’s (2015) article suggests a clear divide between the White perception and Black perception of police in the United Stated that is constant throughout time. It is as if Blacks and Whites are living in separate worlds within the United States. Research by Weitzer (2015) suggests the constant series of police-involved incidents within the African American community in such a condensed time period has the ability to blemish and damage the reputations of police
nationwide. This should warrant questions within Americans as to why this might be and how to enhance the relations between Black communities and law enforcement.

The police encounters experienced within African American communities centralize around the common themes of aggressiveness, danger, police misconduct, police violence, verbal abuse, physical abuse, and corruption (Brunson, 2007; Brunson & Weitzer, 2008: Nordberg, Crawford, Praetorius, & Hatcher, 2015). These negative confrontations with police affect African Americans of all ages. This resonates with this review because African American parents are at risk of these encounters. These confrontations also have the risk of escalating and resulting in the death of African American men and women. According to Gilbert and Ray (2015), whites, potentially police officers, are more likely to quickly pull the trigger of a gun on an unarmed, black man, compared to an unarmed, white man. Not only are the African American youth susceptible to losing a parent under these circumstances, but they are also a potential target of these encounters. In Brunson and Weitzer’s (2008) study, adolescents as young as 13 years old experienced similar confrontations mentioned above. This is a perpetuating cycle in the lives of African Americans, and unless changed, will continue.

**Implications and Significance**

Practical implications of this area of research indicates African American adolescents are at a disadvantage for the loss of a parent to the hands of law enforcement in a police-related shooting. It suggests these youths are also at risk for similar confrontations. Not to mention, once this parent is lost, these same adolescents are at risk of their family losing socioeconomic status. These are only predispositions African American youth face. The information in this review could potentially benefit others to change public policy, further police reform throughout the nation, and call attention to this group of adolescents. This review could also educate individuals
who are unaware of these events and provide extra support to the families going through such a loss. Not to mention, this review could be evidence these issues have existed throughout time, currently exist, and will continue to remain a problem unless a change occurs. This review helps connect African American adolescents, police shootings and killings, and the internalized behaviors this population of youth are at risk to. This has the potential to enhance awareness around me and spread the word on these injustices, their effects, and those who are at most risk. If I ever have the opportunity to complete additional research on this topic, data would be gathered through questionnaires and the target population would focus on African American youth. This information could be utilized in my own professional development to potentially create my own study and further my research to present to public officials in order to be an advocate for change.

**Limitations and Suggestions**

Unfortunately, there is limited research on the topic of this review. Suggestions for future research would be to include more African American fathers when conducting research on African American families. Most of the research I found had to be discarded on grounds of solely focusing on single, African American mothers. Also, further research should be completed on the effects of youths’ behaviors based on the mode of parent death. Most the research found focuses on parent suicide and lacks information about other forms of parental death.
References


