Understanding the relationship between ethnicity and youth violence requires an analysis of specific developmental contexts that can vary by ethnicity. One of the most important developmental contexts for children is the community where they grow up. In the United States and elsewhere, children from certain ethnic groups have disproportionately grown up in neighborhoods characterized by high levels of segregation and disadvantage, as indicated by poverty and inequality (Evans, 2004; Hernandez, 2004; Massey & Denton, 1993; Wilson, 1996). Several aspects of these disadvantaged contexts can interfere with successful adaptations to prosocial behavioral expectations and facilitate the learning, use, and escalation of aggressive, violent, and delinquent behavior during childhood and into adulthood (Sampson & Laub, 2004).

Ethnic minority youth often grow up in ecological contexts that have fewer resources to foster the development of protective factors that reduce risk for violence compared with their nonminority peers. Otherwise stated, a child's ethnicity can increase the likelihood that he or she will be raised
in a particular "ecological niche" that will hinder rather than promote successful development. An ecological niche refers to the sociospatial location where specific groups of people reside. It forms a child's developmental environment by providing a stage where social interactions occur, offering a normative or regulatory structure that includes costs and benefits of distinct courses of action, and providing opportunities for learning, development, and social interaction. This ecological niche can influence both individual propensities for aggression as well as the circumstances under which aggression is learned over time (Guerra & Huesmann, 2004). The niche provides a broad context for development that includes proximal sources of social influence (such as family and peers) nested within it, and yet it is situated within a larger, more distal historical, political, national, and global context.

This chapter examines the intersection of ethnicity and the ecology of development in the genesis of violence among minority youth in the United States. First, we review studies that show how elevated rates of violence by ethnic minority youth reflect their disproportionate exposure to problematic ecologies of development. We discuss research that links these elevated violence rates not only to economic disadvantage but also to the myriad of accompanying social transformations that have changed the quality of life in many communities. As Sampson and Wilson (1995) argued, it is these structural differences among communities rather than ethnicity that produce heightened rates of violence and other problems. We emphasize the role of resource scarcity, concentrated disadvantage, and danger, and how they are disproportionately more likely to occur in poor, urban neighborhoods where many ethnic minority children live.

These structural differences clearly affect the course of individual development for children growing up in these contexts. We also discuss the processes and mechanisms by which these structural differences can increase the likelihood that an individual child will engage in aggressive and violent behavior. We review individual biological and psychosocial predictors of violence and examine how neighborhood effects can influence risk across different developmental periods. We emphasize the socialization, learning, and developmental processes involved in violence that occur over time from before birth through adolescence. This discussion highlights the linkages between both social structural and individual explanations of violence. Rather than asking what it is about the nature of communities that influences violence, we examine how individual development unfolds within a specific ecological niche, and how this unfolding affects behaviors such as violence. This approach highlights the different contexts within which ethnic minority children are raised and how these developmental ecologies contribute to violence.

SOCIAL TRANSFORMATIONS AND THE DISADVANTAGED ECOLOGICAL NICHE

Many researchers have documented the massive transformations that have restructured the landscape of urban America during the past few decades (Berry & Kasarda, 1977; Hagan, 2004; Hernandez, 2004; Kasarda, 1989; Massey & Eggers, 1990; Massey, Gross, & Shibuya, 1994; Wilson, 1987, 1996). Although these researchers differ in both their methodologies and theoretical arguments (for a review, see Massey & Fischer, 2000), they largely agree that the transformations have created ecological niches for ethnic minorities that are scarred by multiple forms of disadvantage. The decades since the 1970s have witnessed a significant deindustrialization of the U.S. economy, resulting in an exodus of manufacturing jobs out of the country or into the suburbs. The decline of such work has been associated with greater unemployment, prolonged joblessness, and detachment from conventional work and related values and skills within urban settings. Other transformations have included the movement of middle-class families into the suburbs, retention of low-income families in the inner city because of declining housing values and rents, and increasing segregation (Wilson, 1987, 1996). Massey and Fischer (2000) summarized these structural changes.

The structural transformations of the U.S. economy from goods production to service provision generate a strong demand for workers with high and low levels of schooling; but offered few opportunities for those with modest education and training. Central cities lost hundreds of thousands of high-paying, unionized manufacturing jobs and these were replaced by non-union service positions that paid high salaries to an expanding class of managers and professionals, but low wages to displaced factory workers and new job seekers who lacked educational credentials. In the post-industrial economy that emerged after 1973, labor unions withered, the middle class bifurcated, income inequality grew and poverty deepened. This new stratification in the socioeconomic sphere was accompanied by a growing spatial separation between classes in the spatial sphere. As inequality rose so did the degree of class segregation, as affluent and poor families increasingly came to inhabit different social spaces. These trends undermined the socioeconomic well-being of all racial and ethnic groups in the United States. (p. 670)

Massey and Fischer (2000) further asserted that income stagnated, inequality increased, and geographic separation intensified for all ethnic minorities, but especially for African Americans living in large cities. In short, these social transformations have resulted in the de facto segregation of ethnic minority populations in ecological niches of urban society.
disadvantage. To illustrate, Kawaida (1993) found that as of 1990, 83% of poor, inner-city African Americans in the United States lived in neighborhoods that were at least 25% poor. A more striking illustration is that Sampson and Wilson (1995) analyzed census data for the 171 largest cities in the United States "to get some idea of the concentrated dislocations by race" (p. 129) in terms of poverty and families with children headed by a single parent. Here is how they summarize their findings.

In not one city over 100,000 in the United States do blacks live in ecological equality with Whites when it comes to these basic features of economic and family organization. Accordingly, social differences in poverty and family disruption are so strong that the "worst" urban contexts in which Whites reside are considerably better than the average context of black communities. (Sampson & Wilson, 1995, p. 129)

The social transformations and accompanying forms of concentrated disadvantage described have placed a heavy burden on ethnic minorities in the United States. Much of the early work on community disadvantage by Wilson and colleagues (Sampson & Wilson, 1995; Wilson, 1987) focused particularly on social isolation and its impact for African Americans. However, social transformations and disadvantage are experienced across many ethnic minority groups. For instance, recent work examining the effects of burgeoning immigrant populations has identified a somewhat distinct set of factors that increase disadvantage and isolation of ethnic minority immigrant groups, including overcrowded housing, linguistic barriers, low-wage work without benefits, lack of familiarity with the educational system, and citizenship status (e.g., Hernández, 2004; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001).

Still, two issues must be addressed before proceeding with this discussion. First, it is important to clarify the meaning of the term "disadvantage." Second, it is important to elaborate further on the implications that disadvantage has for the relation between ethnicity and youth violence. Consider the first issue. Claiming neighborhoods, social spaces, or ecological niches are disadvantaged can have pejorative connotations, suggesting a blanket attribution of deficits to an entire area or social location. Such a claim could be viewed as a form of environmental labeling, insensitive to the diverse features of life in those settings. It is a conceptual gloss that can blind observers to the positive features of an ecological niche that may support people in making successful adaptations to their life circumstances. Hence, the term disadvantage is used here to refer to the variable properties of social spaces or ecological niches that reduce the life chances of people in those settings that these niches interfere with the healthy adaptations that facilitate constructive developmental pathways. Ecological niches can be more or less disadvantaged along multiple dimensions, which we discuss below, having behavioral consequences that may be moderated by other features of the setting or individuals within those settings possessing strengths or assets.

Second, interpretations with pejorative connotations too often accompany reported findings that ethnic minorities, particularly African Americans, have higher rates of serious violence compared with non-Hispanic Whites. A case in point is the subculture of violence thesis, alleging that ethnic minorities are carriers of a violent culture, which accounts for their higher involvement in violent behavior (Wolfgang & Ferracuti, 1982). Besides bordering on a blatant tautology, such an explanation amounts to a cultural indictment that minimizes the structural location and circumstances of ethnic minorities and how their ecological niche can influence cultural beliefs and practices, adaptive to the circumstances of living. Causal priority is thus given to the massive transformations structuring disadvantage in the ecological niches in which ethnic minorities have become increasingly situated. To the extent that cultural beliefs and practices incorporate violence, they are a function of the structural dynamics confronted by ethnic minorities. These beliefs and practices are adaptive phenomena, not internalized norms that assume a life and character of their own and thus persist independent of their structural roots (for a recent study of the intersection of structural and cultural explanations of violence, see Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003).

Disadvantage can be manifested in multiple forms across ecological niches. Although poverty is clearly a marker for disadvantage, it does not adequately capture the dimensions of disadvantage. Furthermore, the effects of poverty on youth violence are more evident when considering the mechanisms by which poverty and associated features can affect violence. Indeed, this recognition is one of the advances in violence research that has often associated disadvantage merely with poverty (Elliott et al., 1996; Kovandzic, Vieraitis, & Yeates, 1998; Krivo, Peterson, Rizzo, & Reynolds, 1998; Peterson & Krivo, 1999). We highlight three dimensions of disadvantage that are central to the relation between ethnicity and youth violence: resource scarcity, concentrated disadvantage, and danger.

Resource Scarcity

Broadly defined, resources refer to assets of an ecological niche that can be mobilized to promote human development. They can be physical or material resources, human resources, or social resources. This is compatible with the distinction between physical, human, and social capital (Coleman, 1988; Field, 2003; Portes, 1998; Putnam, 2000; Warren, Thompson, & Siegert, 2001; Woolcock, 1998). Physical capital includes obvious assets such as income and quality of the environment (e.g., housing stock, parks, and recreation centers). Human capital includes acquired personal
competencies that enhance the chances of achievement, making healthy adaptations, and meeting the performance requirements of social settings, such as family, school, and work. Education and training as well as the development of a positive identity, self-regulation skills, social problem-solving and social relationship skills, prosocial goal orientation, and a system of prosocial beliefs would be examples of human capital. Social capital consists of the interconnections among people within an ecological niche and between them and resources in the larger community that provide the foundation for reciprocal interaction, the development of mutual trust, and action to promote personal well-being and the common good.

Resource scarcity among poor ethnic minority families living in the inner city has been well-documented, particularly in terms of physical capital. In terms of developmental implications, health risk conditions and access to health care are particularly critical. Several studies have shown that health risk conditions are higher for inner-city children and families. One of the most frequently discussed health risks for children is lead poisoning, with children in poverty, particularly African American children, at elevated risk for lead exposure (Sherman, 1994). Additional research has shown that economic, linguistic, and cultural barriers also significantly affect the use of health care services among minority families (Guendelman & Schwalbe, 1996; Lessard & Ku, 2003) and that the health status of minority children is often compromised (Garcia Coll, 1990; Takahama, 2004). Once physical resources are compromised, the development of human and social resources becomes problematic. Human resources would include the prevalence of people in the ecological niche with the skills and knowledge necessary to achieve or to help others achieve, either through their direct supportive involvement or indirectly by serving as role models. Social resources refer to the availability of social networks, "making possible the achievement of certain ends that in [their] absence would not be possible" (Coleman, 1990, p. 390). These social resources are closely linked to child health, as well as to child neglect and abuse—prevalence estimates of child neglect and abuse reveal elevated rates among the poor, urban minorities, with African American children five times more likely than White children to die from neglect and abuse (National Research Council, 1993). This conception suggests that social resources include the social organizational characteristics of an ecological niche that can also be mobilized to support families and their children. This notion has been extended in the conceptualization of "collective efficacy," which embraces the resource potential of organizational networks but infuses it with action-oriented expectations relating to mutual trust and a willingness to intervene for the common good, particularly in the active support and social control of children ( Sampson, 2004; Sampson, Morenoff, & Gannon-Rowley, 2002; Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). Social resources, therefore, provide the safety net and supportive mechanisms inherent in strong organizational ties within an ecological niche. Unfortunately, such ties never develop or are ravaged by the disorganizing influences of the massive transformations discussed earlier and their consequences for diminishing the physical resources of ecological niches. Resource scarcity, particularly as reflected in types of neighborhoods and stress on family structure, threatens the life chances of ethnic minority youth and thus increases their risk of violence (Sampson, Morenoff, & Raudenbush, 2003).

Concentrated Disadvantage

Research on the structural transformations during the past three decades has shown that disadvantage has deepened, fallen heavily on ethnic minorities, and has become increasingly concentrated (Hernandez, 2004). Concentration has a dual meaning. On the one hand, it denotes the density or dispersion of an ethnic population in geographic space. On the other hand, it denotes the extent to which that population is separated from and perhaps even devalued by the broader society. This second meaning is similar to the notion of "social isolation," referring to "the lack of contact or of sustained interaction with individuals and institutions that represent mainstream society" (Sampson & Wilson, 1995, p. 135). These scholars consider social isolation as a consequence of concentrated poverty.

However, the degree of concentration can also be viewed as a variable characteristic of ecological niches that is clearly correlated with the nature and extent of resource scarcity yet analytically distinct. For example, some inner-city African American communities are characterized by circumscribed spaces with intense resource scarcity, whereas others are more dispersed yet with equally scarce resources, as in the rural south. Many Latino communities in the Southwest also suffer scarce resources but are not as geographically concentrated (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). More important, the degree of concentration is a key feature in understanding the development of adaptive strategies to disadvantage, particularly the use of alternative means to surviving in an austere and potentially hostile environment. Thus, it is the combination of resource scarcity with intense concentration that must be considered in understanding patterns of violence (Anderson, 1992, 1999; Canada, 1995; McCoid, 1997).

Concentration and poverty too often exacerbate the perception among ethnic minorities that they are marginalized from the broader society. Density, residential segregation, and social exclusion accentuate the devaluation of these groups. Residents may feel that their voices are not heard and their needs are ignored. Proximity can create a collective identity of the disfranchised. When one looks closely at the human costs of concentrated disadvantage for ethnic minorities, one often finds a sense of separateness.
lack of self-esteem, and a low level of personal self-efficacy to change things or make them better (McMahon & Watts, 2002).

Although ethnic minority youth are more likely than nonminority youth to live in disadvantaged communities, studies that have compared violence rates in neighborhoods with a relatively high prevalence of both minority and nonminority disadvantage have largely found that disadvantage has the same pattern of effects in both communities. Furthermore, violence rates are lower in minority neighborhoods with low disadvantage when compared with either minority or nonminority neighborhoods with extreme disadvantage (Krivo et al., 1998). In other words, when structural conditions are controlled, violence rates are more comparable across ethnic groups. However, ethnic minority youth in the United States are more likely to live under conditions of extreme and concentrated disadvantage associated with higher rates of violence.

Danger

Danger is often overlooked as an important dimension of disadvantage. This is a serious oversight because it plays a significant role in shaping the day-to-day cultural beliefs and practices within an ecological niche. Participation in dangerous life situations heightens the risk of violent posturing and violent behavior. Such settings also increase levels of fear and create a need for responses that help youth manage this fear (Vigil, 1988). Dangerous settings are particularly common in urban, ecological niches suffering from resource scarcity and concentrated poverty (Krivo & Peterson, 1996). In other words, when structural conditions are controlled, violence rates are more comparable across ethnic groups. However, ethnic minority youth in the United States are more likely to live under conditions of extreme and concentrated disadvantage associated with higher rates of violence.

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For example, in their research in inner-city neighborhoods in New York City, Fagan and Wilkinson (1998a) reported that adolescents regularly discussed the lack of personal safety in their communities and a strong sense of danger that permeates the public landscape. As respondents noted, expectations of violence are high, and behavior on the streets is guided by the knowledge that violence can erupt at any moment. This creates an ecology of danger—"where social interactions are perceived as threatening or lethal, and where individuals are seen as harboring hostile intent and the willingness to inflict harm" (p. 130).

As a result, possessing a firearm plays an important role in personal safety as both a preemptive and defensive strategy. Participants in the Fagan and Wilkinson (1998a) study reported that most young males can and did have guns, and that guns are available to just about anyone who has the means to buy, borrow, or steal them. A number of surveys and interview studies support these findings. For example, in a large study of gun access among inner-city juveniles in high schools and correctional facilities, Sheley and Wright (1995) found that 84% of inmates (before incarceration) and 22% of students said that they possessed guns; 74% of inmates and 41% of students said they could acquire a gun on the street or from a family member with no trouble at all. For those who purchased guns, average cost was less than $100, and guns could be acquired even more cheaply through informal networks. Access to guns is highest among ethnic minority, urban adolescent, and young adult males.

Although adolescents frequently mention self-protection as a primary reason for gun carrying, the presence of guns on the street also increases (rather than decreases) the likelihood of violence (Blumstein, 2002). Guns raise the stakes in conflict—individuals who show guns must also be willing to use guns, limiting the number of choices for resolving conflicts. Furthermore, carrying guns fosters a cognitive and behavioral readiness to aggress that can lead to proactive as well as reactive forms of violence. As Shapiro, Domum, Burke, Welker, and Cloough (1997) reported, adolescents who carry guns tend to believe that guns are exciting and provide power and safety. Carrying guns is also related to overall levels of comfort with physical aggression and the belief among youth that any sign of "disrespect" must be counteracted with aggressive retaliation. In summary, guns are functional in dangerous settings but simultaneously contribute to the perpetuation of danger and likelihood of violence in these settings.

In terms of the developmental and learning implications of danger, there is also an increased likelihood that children will be exposed to and witness neighborhood violence in these settings from a young age (Bell & Jenkins, 1991; Osofsky, Wewers, Hann, & Pick, 1993). During the past few decades, studies have consistently demonstrated that children in inner-city neighborhoods are exposed to extremely high rates of violence. Many of these studies examine rates of exposure within specific groups of children and adolescents (e.g., inner-city youth) and demonstrate high levels of violence exposure, particularly for males and particularly for inner-city youth (Farrell & Bruce, 1997). Short-term longitudinal research also has revealed a link between witnessing community violence and subsequent aggressive behavior. For example, Gorman-Smith and Tolan (1998) found that exposure to community violence predicted subsequent aggression among inner-city elementary and middle school boys. Furthermore, recent studies have found that community violence exposure also contributes to the development of beliefs supporting aggression that, in turn, increase the likelihood of aggressive and violent behavior (Guerra, Huesmann, & Spindler, 2004). Thus, violence exposure is a correlate of living under conditions of danger with implications for future beliefs and behavior. We now turn to a discussion of how these dimensions of disadvantage are linked to the development and learning of aggression among ethnic minority youth.
AN ECOLOGICAL APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING
PREDICTORS OF YOUTH VIOLENCE FOR
ETHNIC MINORITY YOUTH

Structural characteristics of neighborhoods and communities typically have been linked with differences in rates of violence between communities that vary on these characteristics. Additional variation within communities (e.g., not all parents lack social networks) has also been put forth as an explanation for different levels of violence within a community, particularly because most youth are not involved in violent acts even within the most distressed communities. A somewhat different research perspective involves the identification of predictors of risk that vary between individuals such as attention difficulties (Moffitt, 1990), hormonal levels (Olweus, Mattsson, Scholling, & Low, 1988), peer difficulties (Coie & Dodge, 1997), and poor parenting (Eron, Huesmann, & Zelli, 1991), to name a few. Although there are clearly multiple risk factors for violence, no one causal factor by itself explains more than a small portion of individual differences. Furthermore, lists or matrices of risk factors do not illuminate the linkages between individual and contextual risk factors and the mechanisms of influence on aggression and violence over time.

How can one better understand the interconnectedness between these individual and contextual factors and how they are affected by ethnicity? One strategy is to examine how individual development unfolds within a specific ecological niche, including how environments facilitate or inhibit development and risk. Although developmental researchers have become increasingly aware of the transactional nature of individual–environmental interactions (Sameroff & Fiese, 1990), the specific ecological niches occupied by many ethnic minority children have not been systematically assessed in terms of their impact on development. As Garcia Coll and colleagues (1996) noted, “most of the prevalent conceptual frameworks do not emphasize the social stratification system, or the social positions that comprise the scaffolding or structure of the system (i.e., social class, ethnicity, and race) and the processes and consequences that these relative positions engender for a child’s development” (p. 1892). Indeed, traditional paradigms may offer little insight into the developmental adaptations of ethnic minority children (Spencer, 1990). As French, Kim, and Pillado (chap. 2, this volume) note, the minority experience in the United States presents a unique and additional context, reflecting historical and political conditions that influence development and behavior for all ethnic minority groups and for members of ethnic minority groups who have experienced a unique history of racism and oppression.

Similarly, although a large literature is available on the effects of poverty and concentrated disadvantage on community indicators of youth and adult violence, little research has focused directly on the effects of these structural characteristics on children’s development. Sociological investigations that have examined potential mediators of neighborhood structural characteristics on developmental outcomes (including violence) generally have focused on a single proposed mechanism or set of social mechanisms that affect the lives of children. For example, as discussed previously, Sampson and colleagues (Sampson, 1997; Sampson, Morenoff, & Earls, 1999; Sampson, Morenoff, & Raudenbush, 2005) have examined the importance of spatial dynamics in generating collective efficacy for childrearing. Collective efficacy operates as a type of informal social control, demonstrated in such acts as monitoring play groups or confronting people who are threatening public space in some way. Thus, collective efficacy represents one mediating mechanism by which community context can influence children’s development.

In the present chapter, we look more broadly at some of the primary processes by which ecological contexts influence children’s development and behavior as well as specific mediating mechanisms that occur in different proximal environments (e.g., peers, families, schools) during different developmental periods. Although the general processes involved in the learning of aggression should not vary significantly by setting, what is learned and opportunities for learning can vary greatly across different contexts. In particular, we emphasize the role of resource scarcity, concentrated disadvantage, and danger on children’s socialization over time, and how these dimensions of disadvantage relate to the learning of aggression and violence. We emphasize two distinct but related processes linked to the disadvantaged ecological niches of many ethnic minority children.

First, these contexts increase the chance that development will be compromised from birth through adolescence. Although disadvantage theoretically can affect all children regardless of their ethnicity, in the United States at this time, ethnic minority children are more likely to experience such disadvantage. In turn, this creates conditions that do not facilitate and are likely to inhibit the healthy development of children. This can occur through a variety of mediating mechanisms such as lack of adequate prenatal care, lack of access to care, lead exposure in substandard housing, family structure, lack of role models, consequences of stress, and low levels of parental monitoring and supervision. Not only is optimal development problematic, but any type of “downward slide” is likely to continue without adequate remediation. This is quite important in the etiology of violence because many of the prominent risk factors represent inadequate developmental adaptations at different stages (e.g., lack of secure attachment relationship with primary caregiver during infancy, Sampson & Laub, 2004). Although the relation between risk factors and violence should not vary by ethnicity, the likelihood of these risk factors emerging and/or
spinning a web of cumulative risk is much higher for ethnic minority children growing up under conditions of disadvantage.

Second, there is an increased likelihood that violence will emerge as a normalized type of social currency to navigate these difficult contexts (Ng-Mak, Safringer, Feldman, & Steeue, 2002). As recent evolutionary theorizing suggests, a defining characteristic of humans is our ability to adjust our behavior quickly to the demands of the situation and to choose between multiple possible courses of action. Indeed, much emphasis has been placed on the importance of “calibration” of response systems (such as aggression) to match the needs and demands of the environment (Malamuth & Heilman, 1998). However, contexts can also vary greatly in terms of the adaptive value of aggression. As Buss and Schackelford (1997) pointed out, “In principle, the mechanisms producing aggression could remain dormant for the entire life of an individual, if the relevant contexts are not encountered” (p. 612). In this fashion, resource scarcity, concentrated disadvantage, and danger can lead to the emergence of a cultural structure where aggression and violence are more likely to be adaptive under certain conditions.

The specific mechanisms of influence of dimensions of disadvantage are also likely to vary in incidence during infancy, childhood, and adolescence. However, given that early aggression and related behaviors during childhood are among the strongest predictors of later violent and delinquent behavior (Huesmann, Eron, Lefkowitz, & Walder, 1984; Moffitt, 1993, 2004), it is critically important to examine these predictors across development, and determine how they unfold in certain contexts. Let us now turn to a more detailed description of the influence of structural characteristics on the development and learning of aggression and violence.

Infancy and the Preschool Years

Environmental factors associated with disadvantaged ecological niches can compromise development and affect both innate and acquired propensities for aggression from the very earliest stages of development—prenatal care can be inadequate, low birth weight is more prevalent, nutrition is often poor, and the incidence of fetal exposure to toxins is greater. These factors can contribute to an array of nervous system problems including hyperactivity, poor attention, verbal skill defects, problems with self-control, low IQ, and poor school performance (Evans, 2004). For example, malnourished infants appear to have greater attention difficulties, are more easily distracted, and are less socially skilled. Even if nutrition improves during the preschool years, these characteristics tend to endure, and the damage done by malnutrition is significantly higher in disadvantaged urban contexts (Barrett & Frank, 1987). In turn, nervous system problems have been linked with aggressive and delinquent behavior in childhood and adolescence through a variety of mechanisms (Moffitt & Henry, 1991). For example, problems with hyperactivity and inattention, particularly when reaching clinical levels as seen in children with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), have been shown to set the stage for a chain of events beginning with early aggression and culminating in more serious forms of juvenile violence (Loebel, Green, Keenan, & Lahey, 1985; Moffitt, 2004).

To a certain extent, neuropsychological problems can contribute directly to aggression. Clearly, characteristics such as low self-control will increase the likelihood of aggression under conditions of provocation or anger. Similarly, low verbal skills can compromise a child’s ability to negotiate solutions to problems with others and increase the likelihood of aggression. In addition, these (and other) negative child characteristics may also elicit problematic social interactions from caregivers, especially under conditions of economic disadvantage and high levels of stress (Tarter, Hegedus, Winsten, & Alterman, 1984). In other words, the challenges of dealing with a difficult child also can set in motion a sequence of problematic adult-child interactions that continue to compromise development during childhood and beyond. This can occur in the classroom, as teachers struggle to cope with children who talk out of turn or act out, and culminate in poor school performance. It can also occur in the home environment, particularly among parents with limited skills and resources, who themselves are coping with the daily challenges of disadvantage. Along the way, the mastery of many important developmental tasks can be compromised, further increasing the likelihood of behaviors such as aggression (Shaw, Gillick, Ingoldsby, & Naging, 2003).

Consider the importance of the infant-caregiver attachment relationship. In this context, attachment refers to a cumulative process of reciprocal interchanges between a child and a caregiver during infancy and beyond. An important outcome of this interchange is the development of a close and trusting relationship. This positive emotional exchange has been linked to the development of empathy and emotional sensitivity in relationships. It has also been found to correlate with specific neurochemical and structural processes involved in early brain development (Schore, 1994). When the attachment process goes awry, emotional development can be severely affected. If these early relationships provide a working model for later interactions, as Bowlby (1988) has proposed, then children with insecure attachments will be forced to navigate the social world without a template for successful relationships. Studies examining the relationship between early attachment problems and children’s aggression have supported this conclusion, with avoidant attachment measured in infancy significantly predicting school-age aggressive behavior in poor, urban settings (Renken, Egeland, Marvinney, Mangelsdorf, & Straus, 1989).
The ability to develop positive emotional relationships and healthy social interactions is perhaps most significantly compromised for children who are victims of severe abuse and neglect. As mentioned previously, rates of abuse and neglect are highest among inner-city ethnic minority children. Child abuse is the fourth leading cause of death for children ages 1 to 4 and the second leading cause of death for African American children in that age group (National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information, 2004). Although there are multiple causes of abuse and neglect, it is quite easy to understand how conditions of disadvantage can contribute to this behavior. Clearly, resource scarcity increases levels of stress, and this is exacerbated for parents who are both young and single. Social support may be harder to access, and role models for effective parenting may be absent. This is even more problematic for young parents who were themselves raised under harsh conditions, with high levels of physical punishment or abuse. As Widom (1989, 1998) detailed in her “violence begets violence” studies, parents tend to raise their children as they have been raised — being the victim of abuse predicts later abusive behavior toward one’s children. Furthermore, such victimization predicts aggression and violence during childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Studies have documented this relation as early as the preschool years. For instance, Howes and Eldredge (1985) found that abused and neglected children attending a day care center were more likely than their nonabused counterparts to respond to peer aggression with retaliation. Other studies extending into elementary school have found that abused and neglected children are more likely to respond to aggression with aggression, while failing to respond to friendly social interactions (Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1990; Jacobson & Straker, 1982). The relation between early abuse and later violent criminal behavior is also strong, especially when serious violence is considered. In a longitudinal study examining predictors of youth violence and delinquency, Smith and Thornberry (1995) reported that abuse during childhood (from official records) significantly predicted serious violence and delinquency during middle school and high school.

High levels of neighborhood violence can compromise early development in several ways. To begin with, even if resources (e.g., health care, counseling) are available, parents may be afraid to venture out on a regular basis. Danger also limits opportunities for positive engagement with one’s children and with other parents, such as meeting at the park or playground. Instead, parents are more likely to stay at home and keep their children inside with them. When children do venture outside, witnessing violence, particularly from an early age, can quickly overload the brain’s alarm system, creating children who are hypervigilant to stress and who overreact to environmental cues (Pynoos, Steinberg, & Ornitz, 1977). Recent studies of early brain development have shown that the blueprint for responding to danger and stress is written early in development, and early overstimulation of the alarm system through violence exposure can set the stage for later aggression (Perry, 1997).

For example, early stress and violence exposure may lead to the development of what has been labeled persistent fear response (Perry, 1999). Because fear is necessary for human survival, the brain is uniquely designed to process and store information related to potential threats, and to organize responding accordingly. However, chronic stress or repeated exposure to violence can alter the biological system. Chronic activation of the fear response system can actually interfere with development of other parts of the brain involved in cognition and memory. Early trauma can also interfere with brain development and result in extreme anxiety, depression, and difficulty forming attachments (Schore, 1994). Chronic activation of the neural pathways involved in the fear response can also remain permanently etched on the brain in a manner that shapes future perceptions and responses. In this way, early brain development under hostile conditions can shape the brain’s architecture in a way that may be difficult to alter, even if environmental conditions change (Shore, 1997).

Childhood

Many of the factors related to risk during infancy and the preschool years carry forward into childhood. Lack of access to health and other resources, poor parenting because of high stress levels and lack of role models, abuse and neglect, and exposure to neighborhood violence continue to affect children’s development in a similar fashion. Neural connections are being formed and pruned during the elementary school years, and characteristic patterns of thought and behavior begin to emerge. Once established, these patterns contribute to a high level of stability in aggression from childhood through adolescence and adulthood (Huesmann et al., 1984).

Children are learning cognitive scripts for behavior that guide information processing and responding. As they develop characteristic styles of thinking across a restricted range of increasingly familiar contexts, these scripted responses become highly automatic. More aggressive children learn more aggressive scripts and rely on them more regularly (Guerra & Huesmann, 2004). In particular, aggressive scripts can be seen as an adaptive response to social interactions marred by potential danger. Given the heightened likelihood of victimization in disadvantaged settings, it may be wise to “be prepared” in terms of readiness to fight or defend oneself.

Childhood also marks the child’s formal entry into the school system. The school experience adds a new dimension to risk for aggression in terms of academic progress, peer relations, and the sense of connectedness or “bonding” the child develops to school as a conventional social institution.
for parents to work together to access needed services. In the case of immi-
& Burkham, cumulative disadvantage starts earlier and rolls faster in this context (Lee
grant ethnic minority families, language and cultural issues may hinder
guidance. Parents with little formal education may also feel unprepared and
sion may be a reaction to early learning problems. That is, children may
less able to help their children. Inadequate social capital can make it harder
minority children may also be low. In a subtle fashion, children may actually
(2000). Clearly, children from disadvan-
taged settings who begin school with emotional, behavioral, or neuropsycho-
logical problems are less likely to succeed from the start. The snowball of
cumulative disadvantage starts earlier and rolls faster in this context (Lee &
Burkham, 2002).
Resource scarcity may severely limit the ability of schools to offer any
type of special help or remediation. Teacher expectations for poor, ethnic
minority children may also be low. In a subtle fashion, children may actually
be learning that they cannot succeed (Woolfolk, 1995). Parents are also
less able to help their children. Inadequate social capital can make it harder
for parents to work together to access needed services. In the case of immi-
grant ethnic minority families, language and cultural issues may hinder
the child's development as well as the parent's ability to provide effective
guidance. Parents with little formal education may also feel unprepared and
anxious when dealing with school issues (Takanashi, 2004).
The lack of opportunities and resources clearly limits the achievement
of ethnic minority children growing up in disadvantaged settings. These
differential achievement patterns have been documented in a number of
studies and reports. Although this achievement gap appears to be narrowing,
ethnic minority youth still complete fewer years of school and score lower
on most standardized achievement tests than White youth (Ogbu, 1992).
This difference is more striking for African American students (Bruschi &
Anderson, 1994). However, it is important to note that neighborhood effects
loom large in these differences, particularly poverty and the prevalence of
single-parent families (Swernberg & Darling, 1994).
Underachievement and aggression are also likely to co-occur. The
causal sequence appears to be reciprocal over time during the school years
(Hinshaw, 1992; Huebmann, Eron, & Yarmel, 1987). On one hand, aggression
may be a reaction to early learning problems. That is, children may
become frustrated with not being able to learn the material presented to
them and act out aggressively. On the other hand, academic achievement
can be impeded by aggression. Aggressive children may have fewer learning
opportunities if classmates and teachers avoid them because of their behavior.
Aggressive children may also have greater difficulty with self-control and
engage in more inappropriate behavior that interferes with learning.
This problem is compounded for ethnic minority youth. Aggression
not only leads to academic underachievement but increases the likeli-
hood of school dropout. One study of urban, African American children
reported that first grade aggressive behavior predicted higher rates of high
school drop out (Ensminger & Shueareck, 1992). It has been argued that
early aggression may propel a cycle of problems that inhibits a child's ability
to learn. This behavior, if unchecked, may lead to confrontations with
teachers and authority figures, and set in motion a cycle of failure. Over
time, this failure can alienate a child from school, particularly for disadvan-
taged ethnic minority children growing up in a context of alienation and
isolation.
As a consequence, some ethnic minority students may become part
of a resistance culture. Students reject the behaviors that would make them
successful in school—things such as studying, cooperating with teachers,
and coming to class. Such a stance allows them to show others they are
not "selling out" and helps to maintain status within the peer groups. In
some African American peer networks, achieving in school is frowned on
because it signals that students are "acting White" (Rodkin, Farmer, Pearl,
& Van Acker, 2000). Other studies have found that ethnic minority youth,
particularly boys, often value students who are low achievers rather than
high achievers (Taylor, Graham, & Hadley, 1997; Woolfolk, 1995). Peer
group networks often encourage skipping classes or dropping out, even when
students and their parents value academic success (Horowitz, 1983). Thus,
a type of resistance peer network forms that is held together by opposition
to school and what it represents for conventional status. This may be
particularly problematic as children enter adolescence, when they begin to
think more about who they are and where they are going.

Adolescence

Although adolescent violence often represents another step in a contin-
uing sequence of misbehavior from the early years, it is during this develop-
mental period that such behavior becomes more frequent and more extreme.
As epidemiological data indicate, serious violence begins to escalate during
the early adolescent years and peaks during midadolescence and early adult-
hood, particularly for ethnic minority youth. Furthermore, juveniles are
most likely to be implicated in serious crimes such as homicide, including
those that involve multiple perpetrators, are gang-related, and involve felo-
lies (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2003).
What is it about adolescence that contributes to this surge in violence
and other problem behaviors? What is it about adolescence for poor, ethnic
minority youth that further increases the likelihood of violence? What are
the particular developmental tasks of adolescence that contribute to youth
violence? Stated differently, what is it about adolescence as a stage of
development that facilitates involvement in violence? How does this play
out differently for ethnic minority youth? Furthermore, how do these develop-
mental process interact with contextual influences, including families,
peers, and neighborhoods? Finally, what are the unique experiences of ethnic
minority youth growing up in disadvantaged ecological niches that can
adversely impact their development and contribute to violence in this age group?
First, adolescence is a time of rapid biological and social changes. Biological changes during puberty are marked and often dramatic, including a rapid acceleration in growth, development of primary and secondary sex characteristics, changes in body shape and composition, and an increase in physical strength and fitness. Among boys, testosterone concentration can increase as much as twentyfold during adolescence (Pfaadt & Winter, 1974). These biological changes are part of a complex process that physically transforms the child into an adult. Increases in physical growth, strength, and testosterone can also transform the child into a more physically capable aggressor, as well as affect others’ perceptions, particularly if this maturation occurs relatively early. Early maturation and accompanying physical change is also more common within some ethnic minority groups, suggesting that this may represent a unique characteristic of minority versus nonminority youth that can contribute to higher levels of aggression. For example, in a study of African American children, Spencer, Dobbs, and Swanson (1988) found that boys tended to be taller, heavier, and often mature earlier than their White peers. They suggest that both early maturation and increased size might interfere with age-appropriate social interactions and create the impression that these youth are a threat to others, increasing the likelihood of problematic social exchanges and aggressive behavior.

Adolescence also has been described as an “emotional rollercoaster” of despair about self and identity (Larson & Richards, 1994). In a now classic work, Erikson (1968) described adolescence as a period of time that focuses on autonomy and the search for identity. This involves the search for a stable sense of self that provides adolescents with a direction guided by knowledge of who and what they are and where they are going—giving both meaning and purpose to their lives as they enter adulthood (Brinthaupt & Lipka, 2002; Harter, 2003). As French, Kim, and Pillado (chap. 2, this volume) discuss, identity development for ethnic minority adolescents also involves understanding the meaning of membership in their ethnic group, such that ethnicity becomes part of the identity search. As they point out, perceptions of being stigmatized or undervalued because of one’s ethnicity may interfere with the development of a healthy identity.

The search for identity evolves in a context that includes both the past and the present. Youth can easily become ensnared in the consequences of earlier problems that effectively narrow (or even close) the gates of opportunity. A history of academic and social problems can limit a teenager’s ability to cope with the changing demands of adolescence—a type of cumulative disadvantage that might increase the likelihood that children with early behavior problems or “early starters” continue and escalate this behavior during adolescence (Moffitt, 2004). Furthermore, an ongoing lack of resources can severely curtail the current and future options available for youth. Consider the lack of meaningful employment in many inner city communities. There is little incentive for school success when future opportunities consist largely of unstable, low-paying jobs or no jobs at all. In contrast, gainful employment seems to protect ethnic minority youth from a delinquent career. For instance, Elliott (1994) found that although twice as many African Americans as Whites continue their violent careers into early adulthood, this difference disappears for those who are employed.

In addition to lack of resources linked to past, present, or future disadvantage, marginalization can influence identity development and violence by compromising the ability of parents and other adults to serve as role models, mentors, and monitors for youth during this process. Indeed, related studies have shown that the proportion of affluent neighbors has a positive impact on adolescent development (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, Kato, & Sealand, 1993). Additional evidence for the importance of adults as role models and mentors and the significance of youth–adult relationships is found in an intriguing study by Schwartz (1987). He focused on the nature of the relationships between adolescents and adults in authority in neighborhoods that varied on multiple dimensions. In comparing an affluent, White suburban area, an inner-city Mexican community, and a lower-class Italian neighborhood in the same city, he reported striking differences in the ability of adults to exercise authority. Adults who lacked status and power within the larger society and were not perceived as valuable role models were afforded less authority. This was particularly evident in the Mexican community—the perceived marginalization of Mexican adults within the larger society decreased their ability to serve as role models and mentors, leaving youth more vulnerable to peer pressure. As Schwartz (1987) noted, “What is missing . . . is the kind of intergenerational alliance between nonfamilial authority figures who would support a redefinition of a youth’s identity that could override the assessment of his peers” (p. 223).

Just as parents and adults may be less able to serve as positive role models for youth, certain neighborhood conditions appear to compromise their ability to monitor both their children and the children in the neighborhood. One of the most robust findings in the delinquency literature is that low parental monitoring is associated with higher levels of delinquent behavior (Dishion & Kavanagh, 2003; Loebel & Stouthamer-Loebel, 1986). At the neighborhood level, this monitoring may also be important and vary as a function of concentrated disadvantage. For instance, Sampson and colleagues found that certain components of concentrated disadvantage, namely concentrated influence, low population density, and residential stability, indirectly affected youth crime through their effects on collective efficacy. Collective efficacy includes both mentoring and monitoring, as seen in “shared expectations and mutual engagement by adults in the active support and social control of children” (Sampson, Morenoff, & Earls, 1999, p. 635).
Marginalization can also lead to a sense of hopelessness and rage as youth recognize the limited opportunities available to poor, ethnic minorities. Coupled with an increasing awareness of danger on the streets, the lure of violence can increase. Exposed to the potential danger within an ecological niche, youth may perceive violence as instrumental for self-protection, deterring others through threatened or actual preemptive violence, protecting turf, or retaliating against those who have violated one’s self, setting, or others within it (Fagan & Wilkinson, 1998a, 1998b). Furthermore, adolescents who perceive the setting as “aversive” with no avenue of escape or legal means of eliminating or neutralizing “noxious stimuli” may engage in anger-based violence and delinquency (Agrawal, 2001).

Previous research on youth violence has documented how it can instill a sense of power in those otherwise feeling powerless, achieving and verifying personal and public images of status based on respect as perceived by self or others. Such images are typically created and sustained through resources such as conventional opportunities for achievement (e.g., prosocial peers and activities, successful engagement in school, a nurturing and supportive family, etc.). Building status through conventional activities allows youth to have feelings of accomplishment and a strong grounding in their positive self-images. However, when conventional opportunities are unavailable, violence often becomes an alternative means of building and protecting those images (Fagan & Wilkinson, 1998a, 1998b). Threats of violence, the occurrence of violence, and pervasive hostility foster the development of toughness as a posture toward the ecology of danger. Whether through blocked conventional opportunities for personal attainment or blocked methods of escaping or modifying an aversive condition, youth may substitute violence as an alternative method of navigating daily life. Violence may come to be seen as an acceptable currency for social interactions that is tolerated and even respected as a sign of toughness and resilience (Ng-Mak et al., 2002). In many cases, this respect for violence may be instilled in youth from an early age by parents who realize the need for street smarts. For example, recounting his mother’s admonition to his 6-year-old brother after his jacket had been stolen by another boy, Canada (1995) recalled her words: “You go out there and get your brother’s jacket or when you get back I’m going to give you a beating that will be ten times as bad as that little thief could do to you ... both of you better bring that jacket back here” (p. 5).

A number of writers have described how displays of toughness become necessary for self-preservation and positioning one’s self in a dominance hierarchy (Anderson, 1990, 1999; Canada, 1995; Guerra, 1997). These displays demonstrate a predisposition to violence in affirming one’s self and involve a variety of symbolic forms of “impression management,” ranging from physical posturing and facial expressions to verbal expression and other methods of conveying toughness, including carrying and “flashing” handguns. As Fagan and Wilkinson (1998b) pointed out, although such patterns are commonplace in inner-city settings, “toughness has always been highly regarded and a source of considerable status among male adolescents in a wide range of adolescent subcultures, from street-corner groups to gangs” (p. 65). Toughness can also form the core of a youth’s developing identity that must then be preserved at all costs. This involves not only defensive aggression when attacked but often escalates into an ongoing spiral of revenge or “pay back” (Anderson, 1999).

When opportunities and avenues for exploration of personal identity are limited, groups may provide a particularly salient basis for identity formation (Hogg, 2003). In an ecological niche with few opportunities for belonging to conventional groups, gangs can provide a group-based identity, often solidified through conflict (Sanchez-Jankowski, 1991). Such conflict tends to reinforce group cohesion and push the gang identity on the group. This identity is further established through rigid rites of passage, informal and formal rules, and the use of graffiti as a symbolic form of gang conflict.

Ethnic segregation also facilitates the development of a coherent identity as part of both an ethnic group and a gang. Although some exceptions have been noted, in general, gangs are individuals with similar ethnic and racial backgrounds. This ethnic categorization is further refined by geographic affiliation, either regional (e.g., northern versus southern California), by neighborhood, or even by the block where one lives. For the most part, gang violence on the streets is usually within ethnic groups but between subgroups based on territory. In dangerous and disadvantaged neighborhoods, violence becomes a currency for social exchange and forms the basis for group identity that can be “represented” through a variety of mechanisms (and must usually be defended at all costs). Although gangs vary in activities (e.g., degree of criminal orientation, involvement in drug markets, connection with gang “nations”), overall they are responsible for a high percentage of urban youth violence (Miller, 2001).

**CONCLUSION**

Although we have described various mechanisms by which individual and contextual factors operate to increase risk for violence within the ecological niche of ethnic minority youth, it is also true that most youth in disadvantaged settings do not engage in serious forms of violence. By all accounts, it is still a relatively low base rate behavior. Things “go right” for youth even though they may face significant individual or contextual challenges in their lives (Katz, 1997; Lackey & Williams, 1995). Given
multiple adversities and their cumulative effects, it is striking that violence is still the exception rather than the rule in most neighborhoods.

Several reasons for the apparent resilience of many children to adverse settings have been proposed, ranging from individual characteristics to variations among disadvantaged communities themselves in structural and cultural conditions (Sampson, 1997, 2004). Clearly, not all children begin life with the same biological birth certificate. Similarly, just as poverty, disadvantage, and social climate vary within and across neighborhoods, the capacity of families, adults, and social institutions to foster children's development in those settings also varies greatly. As we have argued, being poor and part of an ethnic minority in the United States often carries with it a larger package of adversities that influences children's development from infancy through adolescence. These adversities, rather than just poverty or ethnicity, increase the likelihood of aggressive responses as children calibrate their behavior to the contextual demands they face. Thus, the link between ethnicity and youth violence is a link between the ecological niches of many ethnic minority youth and the adaptive function of violence in those niches. Attempts to prevent or intervene to prevent youth violence in a multicultural society must respond to this ecology of development and provide supports and opportunities that minimize adversity and foster developmental competencies from birth onward.

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