



# COMMUNITY VIOLENCE: REACTIONS AND ACTIONS IN DANGEROUS TIMES

**I**f you're like most youth across America, your life has been affected by violence outside your home. You might live in a place where fights, gangs, weapons, drug violence, rapes, and substance abuse seem "normal." Or maybe you live in a neighborhood you thought was safe until a terrible event shocked the whole community. You yourself might have been hurt by community violence, or someone you know, maybe even a relative or best friend. Maybe you've been bullied or threatened in person or with texts or tweets or pictures ("cyber" bullying). And now maybe you feel all alone, with very little hope. You think no one else has gone

through what you have, and that you're powerless to change anything or even keep yourself safe.

### Can you relate?

If you can relate to community violence, here's an important message. You are not alone. And it doesn't matter how tough or cool you are, when terrible things happen it can affect how you feel, think, and act. But you can go forward despite your experiences. Community violence doesn't have to dominate your life if you understand your reactions to it, how to keep yourself safe, and how to make positive choices in dangerous times.

**You are not alone. As many as 96% of youth have experienced or witnessed community violence.**

### WHAT SOLDIERS HAVE TAUGHT US

We know from soldiers that the trauma of violence can affect how they think, feel, and act away from battle. When they returned from combat, these men and women began to learn that what they were feeling—fear, anger, sadness—was normal and expected, considering what they had seen and lived through. They showed us that with the right kinds of information and support, they could move forward despite violent experiences. You can too.

### How does community violence affect you?

Obviously, getting shot or assaulted can change your life and health forever. But just living with community violence around you can be enough to rob you of your sense of safety. It can put you into "survival mode," making you always worried and ready to gear up for fight or flight. It can change your mood, your outlook, and your sense of control.

## Here are ways that youth have described the impact of violence in their lives:

- I don't know who to trust anymore.
- I'm afraid all the time. On edge...like something's going to happen to me and I can't be caught off guard.
- I have to watch what's going on around me when I'm out in the neighborhood.
- I'll do anything to stay safe. That's why I carry a gun or knife, like my friends do.
- I don't expect to graduate school. I'll probably die young anyway.
- Yeah, being in a gang makes me feel safe. But now they want me to get back at somebody in another gang...What happens then?
- If I stay in my house I feel safe...but who knows, someone could break in or bullets could come flying through the window.
- I worry most about my little brother and sister getting shot.
- My friends say I'm different since the shooting.
- It's hard for me to sleep because I have nightmares about that fight.
- Sometimes thoughts pop up in my head and I'm right back to the night my world changed.
- Sometimes I can see, feel, smell, and hear the whole thing going down again.
- It's hard for me to pay attention in class or doing my homework.
- I'm "out of it" all the time...but I need to focus on surviving so I won't be shot.
- My stomach and head always hurt, even though the doc says I'm good.
- I'm more tempted to get drunk or high to numb it all.
- I feel angry even when nobody is messing with me.
- I get jumpy or nervous at the smallest things or little sounds.
- Just can't stop thinking about all the violence, how it's never going to end and that I can't help my family stay safe.

## LOOKING OUT FOR YOUR SAFETY

Keeping yourself safe is at the top of the list when it comes to dealing with violence in your community. Leaders from the neighborhoods, schools, churches, and law enforcement are looking for ways to prevent violence and increase safety. But there are important steps you can take every day to look out for yourself.

Be aware of your surroundings.  
Walk or drive on main, well-lit streets with lots of traffic.

Go with a friend or group...  
being with others is a good idea if things turn dangerous. But make sure you have the kind of friends who will not put you in danger.

Know the "hot spots" and "safe spots" in the neighborhood.

Keep your phone charged and with you, or know where to find one if you need it. Dial 911 in an emergency!

Know who to call or where to go if you are in trouble.

Avoid joining a gang, even if it may help you feel safer at first. Same goes for drinking, using drugs, and carrying a weapon. They all put you and the community at more risk of harm.

Don't share passwords. Secure your private information and photos on social networks.

Avoid taking the same route all the time as much as possible.

Don't be a bully or a victim of bullying. If you are threatened physically or verbally, tell an adult you trust.

### How do you deal with what you're feeling?

Many of your feelings and behaviors may be normal responses to trauma or violence. Some reactions, like nightmares or drinking, may become bigger problems that threaten to rule your life. Support, counseling, and your own positive choices can help you get a handle on these problems and give you back control of your emotions and reactions.

## Trauma doesn't stay bottled up very well.

Start by letting it out! Trauma doesn't stay bottled up very well, so open up to yourself and others. Telling your personal story can be a big help toward overcoming troubling reactions to violence. Maybe you've already talked to your friends about something you all went through or think about. Who better to relate to than folks who share your experience! But even though they may be there for you, friends can only do so much. That's where a trusted adult comes in as an important source of guidance and support.

## Telling your story to a trusted adult is not "snitching."



Confiding to a parent or family member, a teacher, a counselor, or a minister can help reduce your fears and pressures. You might learn new coping skills and safety steps or get reassurances that you're not "going crazy" or stuck forever in your situation. This person might also point you toward a therapist with special training in helping youth heal from trauma and violence. Telling your story to a trusted adult is not the same thing as "snitching". In fact, whatever you say to a counselor or therapist stays just between the two of you.

Here are other things you can do to actively deal with your feelings:

- Keep a private journal or diary. You can write or draw to express yourself. (Be careful where you leave your journal if you don't want others to see it!)
- Start a group at school for youth to talk about their bad and good experiences and how they can help each other and the community. Make it fun!
- Talk to your younger brothers, sisters, and cousins—not about what happened to you, but about ways you've learned to keep safe.
- Surround yourself with safe people and keep your distance from people doing things you don't like or that put you in danger.
- "Avoid and ignore": it might take more guts to walk away from a fight than to join in.
- Look for fun activities that keep you busy: drawing, songwriting, cooking, getting good at your game, learning new dance steps.
- Volunteer at school, join a club, or find other afterschool activities to do with your friends.
- Check out the Web site [www.dosomething.org](http://www.dosomething.org) or [www.abovetheinfluence.com](http://www.abovetheinfluence.com) and get involved in your community.
- If a "friend" pressures you to join a gang, tell an adult you trust.

## REACHING OUT TO RESOURCES

If you are worried about your safety in the community, you and your family can get help right now from trusted adults and organizations. Keep this list with you.

Covenant House Neline: 1-800-999-9999 or [www.neline.org](http://www.neline.org)

RAINN Sexual Assault Hotline: 1-800-656-HOPE (4673) or [www.rainn.org](http://www.rainn.org)

Samaritans: 1-800-252-TEEN (8336) or [www.samaritanshope.org/index.php/teen-helpline.html](http://www.samaritanshope.org/index.php/teen-helpline.html)

1-800-RUNAWAY (786-2929)

Teenline: 1-800-TLC-TEEN (852-8336) or [www.teenlineonline.org/talk-now/](http://www.teenlineonline.org/talk-now/) or text "TEEN" to 839863

National Child Traumatic Stress Network: [www.nctsn.org/resources/get-help-now](http://www.nctsn.org/resources/get-help-now)



## Community violence doesn't have to dominate your life.

Look around you...other youth are going through what you have. You are not alone and there are people who can support and help you. Then look within yourself. You are a survivor, and you should not be surprised to find that you have the courage and resolve you need to get through tough times.

**Special thanks** to all the youth who shared their experiences and thoughts about community violence during the making of this fact sheet.

Recommended Citation: Community Violence Collaborative Group, National Child Traumatic Stress Network. (2013). Community violence: Reactions and actions in dangerous times. Los Angeles, CA, & Durham, NC: National Center for Child Traumatic Stress.

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[www.NCTSN.org](http://www.NCTSN.org)