Community Violence and Maternal Negative Affect: Compensatory Parenting Practices in an Urban Latin American Context

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Abstract

Territorial violence in Montevideo, Uruguay has increased in recent decades and, although concentrated in specific neighborhoods, may affect the broader urban territory and its population. Despite its growing salience, the psychological and family-level consequences of territorial violence in Montevideo remain largely unexplored. This study examines associations between perceived neighborhood violence, maternal negative affect, social support, and hostile parenting in a community sample of 301 mothers of school-aged children. Regression and mediation models controlling for sociodemographic covariates indicated that higher perceived violence was associated with greater maternal negative affect, which mediated associations with hostile parenting. In contrast to findings commonly reported in the Global North, higher perceived violence showed a direct negative association with hostile practices, suggesting a compensatory caregiving response under conditions of insecurity. Moderation analyses further indicated that social support buffered the association between perceived violence and maternal negative affect.

Keywords: parenting; negative affect; community violence

Introduction

Latin America is currently the most violent region in the world, and unlike other regions, rates of violent crime have continued to rise in recent decades largely independently of political and economic cycles (Rettberg, 2020). This trend has been particularly visible in urban settings, where violence has become a persistent feature of everyday life and an increasingly salient contextual stressor for families (Carrión, 2008; Muggah & Aguirre, 2018; Musto et al., 2025). Beyond public safety concerns, community violence constitutes a chronic environmental condition with potential consequences for adult mental health and family functioning.

Although Uruguay has often been described as an exception within the Latin American context due to its relatively strong welfare institutions and social integration (CEPAL, 2010, 2018), recent decades have been marked by increasing residential socioeconomic segregation and a territorially heterogeneous rise in violence in Montevideo (Kaztman et al., 2004; Aguiar, 2016; Borrás, 2019). Sociological analyses indicate that poverty and community violence are closely intertwined but not fully overlapping phenomena: while they frequently co-occur, territorial violence cannot be reduced to material deprivation alone (Musto et al., 2025). This distinction is critical for understanding how different forms of contextual adversity may operate through partially distinct mechanisms.

From a psychological perspective, the Dimensional Model of Adversity and Psychopathology offers a useful framework for distinguishing between threat-related experiences, such as exposure to violence, and deprivation-related experiences, such as limited access to material and educational resources, which are theorized to involve partially distinct emotional and cognitive processes (McLaughlin et al., 2021). Consistent with this framework, exposure to community violence has been associated with anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress, and heightened emotional distress in adults (Raman et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2020). Chronic exposure to violence is thought to shift emotional and physiological self-regulation toward more reactive patterns under conditions of persistent threat (Carreras et al., 2019; La Barrie et al., 2024). Socioeconomic disadvantage has likewise been linked to poorer maternal mental health and less adaptive parenting practices (McCloskey & Pei, 2019; Pei et al., 2020; Pei et al., 2022). Both threat-related and deprivation-related adversities may therefore constrain caregivers' regulatory capacity, with downstream implications for parenting behavior and family functioning.

Despite this growing body of research, most quantitative psychological evidence on the links between community violence, emotional functioning, and parenting derives from studies conducted in the Global North. A recent review by Thorpe et al. (2024) indicates that the majority of empirical studies in this area have been carried out in the United States and tend to report that higher levels of community or neighborhood violence are associated with increased use of hostile or harsh parenting practices. By contrast, territorial violence in Latin American cities—characterized by spatial concentration, rapid fluctuations, and strong neighborhood effects—has been comparatively underexamined from a quantitative psychological perspective. In particular, little is known about how perceived neighborhood violence relates to maternal negative affect and parenting practices within urban Latin American contexts.

Finally, social support has been identified as a key protective factor capable of buffering the impact of contextual adversity on maternal mental health. Emotional and instrumental support from partners, family, and broader social networks may reduce stress and enhance regulatory capacity in the face of neighborhood violence or socioeconomic strain (Mandell et

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al., 2022; Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2017). In light of this evidence, the present study also examines whether perceived social support moderates the association between perceived neighborhood violence and maternal negative affect.

Against this backdrop, the present study examines the associations between perceived community violence, socioeconomic status, maternal negative affect, and hostile parenting practices in an urban Latin American context. Specifically, it aims (1) to disentangle the unique contributions of community violence and socioeconomic status to maternal negative affect and hostile parenting practices, and (2) to evaluate whether social support networks moderate these associations. By focusing on Montevideo, this study contributes locally grounded quantitative psychological evidence to a literature largely dominated by findings from the Global North.

Methods

Study Design and Participants

A cross-sectional, observational study was conducted with mothers of children living in Montevideo and its metropolitan area, Uruguay. Participants were recruited through advertisements on META platforms, resulting in broad territorial coverage across all neighborhoods of Montevideo and the surrounding metropolitan area. Sociodemographic data included maternal age, educational level, socioeconomic status (SES), and child age and sex. The final sample included 301 participants. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the School of Psychology, and informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Instruments

Socioeconomic status (SES) was assessed using a composite index of household characteristics, educational resources, and health coverage. Scores range from 0 to 100, with lower values indicating lower socioeconomic status (Perera, 2023). Perceived community violence was measured through a self-report questionnaire (Frankenhuis, Roelofs & de Vries, 2018). Maternal negative affect was assessed with the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scales (DASS-21). Hostile parenting practices were measured using the hostile parenting subscale of the MAPS questionnaire (Rodriguez, Shaffer & Parent, 2024). Perceived social support was assessed using the total score of the MSPSS (Zimet et al., 1988). All analyses controlled for maternal age, maternal education, child age, and child sex.

Statistical Analysis

Analyses were conducted in R. Missing data were below 1% and handled using multiple imputation. Four cases were excluded due to imputation failure, and mothers of children younger than 3 years were removed. Continuous predictors were standardized. First, regression models examined associations of SES and perceived community violence with maternal negative affect. Second, mediation models tested whether maternal negative affect mediated the associations between contextual adversity and hostile parenting practices, using structural equation modeling with the WLSMV estimator. Third, moderation analyses tested whether perceived social support buffered the associations between contextual adversity and maternal negative affect.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for continuous variables

Variable	Mean	SD	Range
Mother age	38.14	6.81	23.92-55.16
Number of children	1.93	0.97	1-6
Child age	8.50	2.77	3.09-13.74
Household SES score	40.73	14.47	5-73
Neighborhood violence score	26.35	7.97	7-42
Maternal emotional distress	13.33	11.81	0-58
Perceived social support	66.94	16.58	12-84
Hostile parenting practices	16.78	4.27	7-30

Results

The sample was sociodemographically heterogeneous across multiple dimensions, including socioeconomic status (SES). Based on the SES index, 23.6% of participants were classified as low SES, 54.5% as medium SES, and 21.9% as high SES. Notably, the sample did not include families from the most economically vulnerable sectors. Regarding sibling configuration, 32.9% of children were only children, while the remaining participants were distributed across birth-order positions (31.6% older siblings, 28.9% younger siblings, 4.7% middle siblings, and 2% twins). Maternal educational attainment spanned the full spectrum, from primary education (2.7%) to postgraduate studies (15%), with substantial representation at the secondary (18.6%) and university levels (28.6%). Most mothers were cohabiting with the child's other parent (66.8%), though nearly one third reported being separated or divorced (29.2%). Child sex was evenly distributed (53.2% boys), and maternal employment status varied considerably, with 60.5% working full-time, 20.3% part-time, and 19.3% not currently employed.

Figure 1 illustrates the territorial distribution of participants across Montevideo.

To examine the associations of SES and perceived community violence with maternal negative affect, a series of linear regression models were estimated for each dimension of negative emotionality assessed by the DASS (depression, anxiety, and stress). All models controlled for maternal age, child age, child sex, and maternal education. SES and perceived community violence were each significantly associated with all three outcomes when entered separately, and both variables retained unique explanatory power in the full models. The overall pattern of results was highly consistent across the three DASS dimensions; given this similarity, results pre-

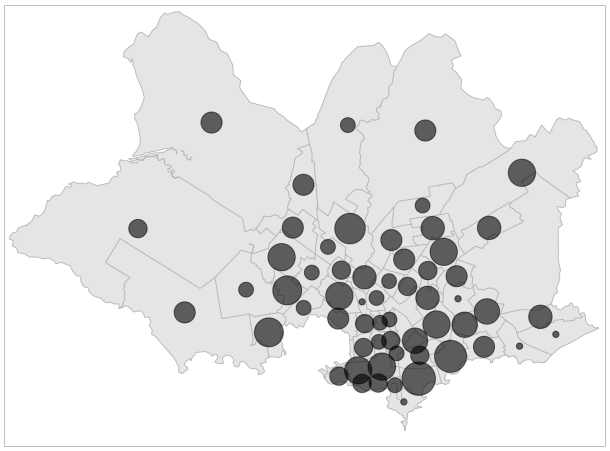


Figure 1: Geographical distribution of participants across Montevideo.

sented in Table 2 correspond to the total negative affect score. Coefficients in Table 2 are from the linear regression models, whereas the mediation path estimates reported below are from the structural equation model; minor differences are therefore expected.

Building on these findings, we next examined whether maternal negative affectivity mediated the association between contextual factors and hostile parenting practices. Mediation models were estimated including both perceived neighborhood violence and household SES as predictors. Figure 2a presents the model highlighting the pathways involving perceived neighborhood violence and figure 2b the pathways involving household SES.

Higher perceived neighborhood violence was significantly associated with higher levels of maternal negative affectivity (b = 0.167, SE = 0.058, p = .004), which in turn was positively associated with hostile parenting practices (b = 0.435, SE = 0.049, p < .001). The indirect effect of perceived neighborhood violence on hostile parenting practices through maternal negative affectivity was significant (b = 0.072, SE = 0.027, p = .008). Importantly, the direct effect of perceived neighborhood violence on hostile parenting practices was negative (b = -0.198, SE = 0.064, p = .002), indicating that higher levels of perceived violence were directly associated with lower reported use of hostile practices. The total effect did not reach conventional levels of statistical significance (b = -0.126, SE = 0.067, p = .061).

For household SES, higher SES was significantly associated with lower maternal negative affectivity (b = -0.216, SE = 0.067, p = .001). Maternal negative affectivity was, in turn, positively associated with hostile parenting practices (b = 0.435, SE = 0.049, p < .001). The indirect effect of SES on hostile parenting practices through maternal negative affectivity was significant (b = -0.094, SE = 0.031, p = .003). However, the direct effect of SES on hostile parenting practices did not reach conventional levels of statistical significance (b = 0.116, SE = 0.065, p = .075), and the total effect was not significant (b = 0.022, SE = 0.070, p = .750). Taken together, the direct effects of both contextual stressors showed contrasting patterns: perceived neighborhood violence was directly associated with lower hostile parenting (b = -0.198, p = .002), whereas the direct association of SES with hostile parenting was not statistically significant (b = 0.116, p = .075). In contrast to perceived neighborhood violence, SES showed a significant indirect association with hostile parenting through maternal negative affect but no significant direct pathway to hostile practices.

Finally, we examined the moderating role of social support in the association between perceived community violence and maternal distress. As expected, social support significantly buffered this association: at high levels of social support (+1 SD), perceived community violence showed little to no association with maternal distress, whereas a strong positive association was observed among mothers reporting low levels of social support (see Figure 3).

Discussion

This study is situated within a historical moment marked by the expansion and reconfiguration of territorial forms of violence, which increasingly extend into urban contexts traditionally considered relatively safe. Contemporary social transformations have contributed to the normalization of violence in everyday life, reshaping the environments in which families raise children. In this context, understanding the specific contribution of territorial violence to caregivers' psychological functioning and family dynamics—beyond the effects of socioeconomic disadvantage—is particularly relevant.

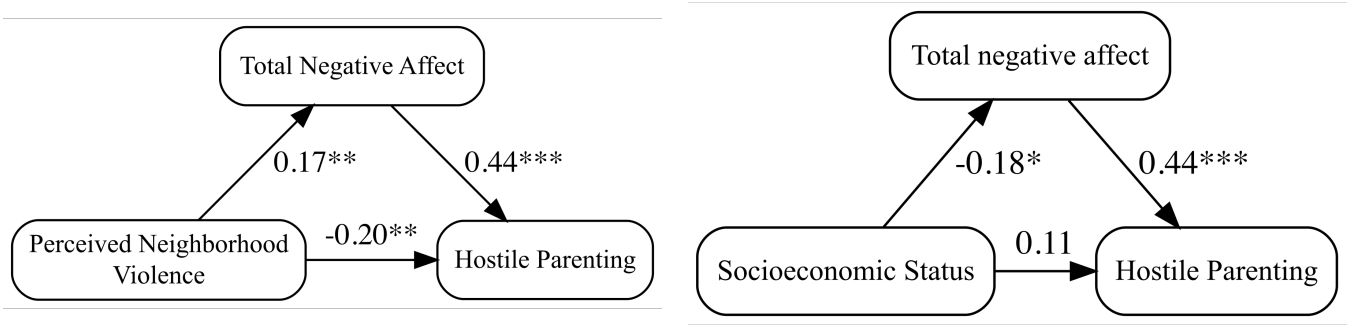
Our findings indicate that both socioeconomic status (SES) and perceived community violence are associated with maternal negative affect, with lower SES and higher perceived violence linked to increased negative affectivity. Although these associations are correlational, the observed pattern underscores the importance of conceptualizing SES and community violence as distinct contextual factors, likely operating through partially independent mechanisms. Whereas SES reflects more stable structural constraints related to material resources, educational opportunities, and long-term socioeconomic positioning, perceived violence captures exposure to ongoing environmental threat and uncertainty. These forms of adversity may differentially shape emotional functioning: structural disadvantage may exert chronic strain through resource limitation and cumulative stress, while perceived violence may activate heightened vigilance and threat-related emotional reactivity. Together, they contribute uniquely—and not merely redundantly—to maternal negative affectivity.

Results further reveal a complex relationship between con-

Table 2: Regression models for DASS total (standardized).

Predictor	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Mother age	b = -0.02, SE = 0.01, p = 0.074	b = -0.02, SE = 0.01, p = 0.082	b = -0.01, SE = 0.01, p = 0.144	b = -0.01, SE = 0.01, p = 0.133
Educational level	F = 5.02, p = < .001	F = 2.62, p = 0.025	F = 1.66, p = 0.145	F = 1.41, p = 0.221
Child age	b = -0.01, SE = 0.02, p = 0.692	b = -0.01, SE = 0.02, p = 0.750	b = -0.02, SE = 0.02, p = 0.391	b = -0.01, SE = 0.02, p = 0.500
Child sex	F = 0.03, p = 0.864	F = 0.16, p = 0.691	F = 0.00, p = 0.982	F = 0.06, p = 0.812
Perceived neighbourhood violence		b = 0.19, SE = 0.06, p = 0.002		b = 0.15, SE = 0.06, p = 0.024
Household SES			b = -0.21, SE = 0.07, p = 0.005	b = -0.16, SE = 0.08, p = 0.045
R^2	**0.117**	**0.144**	**0.141**	**0.156**

Note. Model 1: Sociodemographic variables; Model 2: Sociodemographic variables + Perceived neighborhood violence; Model 3: Sociodemographic variables + SES; Model 4: Complete model.



(a) Perceived neighborhood violence.

(b) Household SES.

Figure 2: Mediation models examining indirect associations with hostile parenting practices through maternal negative affect. Standardized coefficients are shown.

textual conditions and hostile parenting practices. Consistent with stress-based models, higher maternal negative affectivity was associated with greater use of hostile practices, suggesting an indirect pathway through maternal negative affect. In contrast, the direct association between perceived community violence and hostile parenting was negative, pointing to the coexistence of multiple, potentially opposing processes through which environmental adversity may influence parenting behavior. Notably, this pattern contrasts with findings commonly reported in studies conducted in the Global North, where higher levels of community violence are typically associated with increased use of hostile or harsh parenting practices (Thorpe et al., 2024). One possible interpretation is that, beyond stress-related reactivity, higher perceived violence may also elicit a compensatory, more deliberate regulatory effort, whereby caregivers consciously attempt to counteract environmental insecurity by fostering safer and more controlled family environments.

Notably, in this heterogeneous community sample from Montevideo, SES did not show a significant total association with hostile parenting practices. This suggests that within relatively advantaged contexts, socioeconomic variation may be less influential than emotional or relational processes in shaping parenting behaviors.

The present findings are limited by their cross-sectional and self-report nature and by the absence of families from the most economically vulnerable sectors. Future research should examine, using longitudinal and multi-method approaches, how exposure to community violence shapes caregivers' cognitive and emotional regulation and how these processes affect children's development.

Despite their associative nature, these findings emphasize the mental health dimension of community insecurity and its relevance for caregivers' psychological functioning and family dynamics. They also underscore the need for locally grounded psychological evidence, as cultural norms around parenting and context-specific strategies for coping with violence may shape how environmental threat becomes psychologically embedded. This cautions against direct generalization from evidence primarily derived from the Global North.

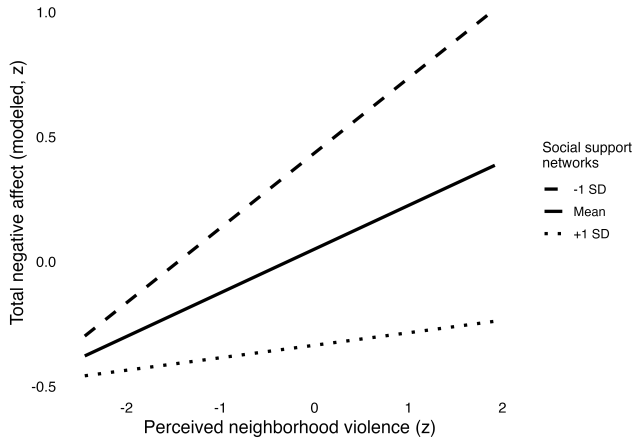


Figure 3: Moderation effect of social support networks on the association between perceived neighborhood violence and maternal negative affectivity.

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