My research program focuses on understanding and reducing the impact of community violence on young adult mental health, trauma symptoms, and functioning. Our knowledge of the association between community violence and young adult outcomes is underdeveloped, which is concerning because young adults are victims of serious crime, such as assault and homicide, more often than any other age group. Young adults of color living in low-resource neighborhoods are particularly affected by urban violence, yet they are some of the least likely to seek mental health services for resulting symptoms. This age is also a sensitive period for the development of mental illness, which can have lifelong consequences on functioning, health, and ultimately, mortality.

Current gap in the empirical literature:
Previous research has demonstrated that violence exposure among young adults is high and is associated with PTSD symptoms. However, studies including this age group have largely used homogenous samples (e.g. primarily male or Caucasian) leaving questions regarding the effects of exposure to community violence on young women as well as young adults of color living in urban areas. Virtually no studies to date have focused on how violence exposure is related to trajectory-setting functional outcomes in young adults, including employment and educational attainment. The field also has limited understanding of how chronic exposure to an unsafe environment, such as growing up in a high-crime neighborhood, often likened to “living in a war zone”, is related to specific PTSD symptomology. My research aims to fill these gaps in the current literature.

My scholarly research encompasses three main areas:
1. Exploring and analyzing the type, extent, and impact of community violence exposure among young adults living in low-resource urban communities, with a particular emphasis on its association with trauma symptoms, employment, and education.
2. Understanding the underlying mechanisms of how community violence impacts outcomes, along with what factors might ameliorate the impact.
3. Building on this understanding to develop interventions in response to exposure to violence in order to improve young adult mental health and functional outcomes.
ANDREA R. COLE, MSW, LCSW, PhD Candidate  Statement of Research

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My dissertation aims to develop our current level of knowledge by integrating a mixed method approach using samples that are grounded in low-resource neighborhoods. Applying structural equation modeling, I examine the complex relationship between exogenous variables (types of violence exposure including hearing about, witnessing, and personal victimization), endogenous variables (PTSD symptoms, employment, and education), and moderators that may be protective. In addition, by testing the recently proposed five-factor model of PTSD symptoms (i.e. re-experiencing, avoidance, numbing, dysphoric arousal, anxious arousal) and collecting qualitative data on young adult perceptions of safety and coping, my research will allow for a better understanding of how prolonged hypervigilance can take a toll. Clarifying the association between chronic trauma and young adult outcomes will allow clinicians to tailor their interventions for these clients, potentially increasing mental health service utilization in this markedly underserved population.

The next steps in my research program include collecting qualitative data from young adults living in low-resource neighborhoods to better understand their experiences with continuous traumatic stress and applying these data to design an intervention that meets the specific needs of this age group. In addition, I plan to expand my population of interest to include adolescents and young adults who are highly exposed to violence in other countries, ultimately building on my conceptual model by integrating migration experiences and stress following violence exposure in the country of origin.