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School Violence

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A safe school is a school where the educational climate fosters a spirit of acceptance for all children. It is a place where students can learn and teachers can teach in an environment free of intimidation and fear of violence. Over the past decade, school shootings have increased anxieties about the safety of our schools. As a result of highly publicized acts of school violence in the media, national attention has recently focused on violence in public schools.

School violence is defined as any action or threat of action resulting in intimidation, coercion, physical harm, or personal injury. While estimates of school violence vary, acts of school violence range from bullying to violent deaths; including self-mutilation, suicide, and homicide. The most prevalent forms of school violence involve verbal and physical harassment, bullying, self-destructive behavior, systemic and structural oppression, and physical fighting.

Prevalence

While recent school shootings such as the tragic event at Virginia Tech University galvanize attention on the issue of school violence, aggression and violence are typically committed by a small number of students. While these events are rare, there appears to be an increase in student homicides in recent years. In a 2001 study of school-associated violent deaths from 1994 to 1999, Anderson and colleagues found 220 school-associated violent deaths. As with the Virgin-

ia Tech tragedy, all but one event involved multiple victims and in many instances the shooter also committed suicide.

Other non-fatal acts of violence have been reported by school officials and students. According to school principals surveyed during the 1999–2000 school year as part of a national study on school crime and safety, 71% of public elementary and secondary schools experienced at least one violent incident during that year. In 2004, another study reported that 56% of elementary school students witnessed another student being beat up and 87% witnessed someone else being hit, slapped, or punched at school in the past year. Approximately 1,466,000 total violent incidents were reported in public schools during the 1999–2000 school years. These incidents included rape, sexual battery, physical attacks, physical fights, threats of physical attack, and robbery.

Risk Factors

These violent incidents may have been triggered by an event such as a threat, betrayal, or loss, but may also have been the end result of a long line of multiply determined risk factors for violence. It is important to identify risk factors of violence to focus on violence prevention efforts. The more risk factors the student is exposed to, the greater chance he or she will engage in violent behavior. Therefore, interventions that target multiple risk factors are impor-

tant and necessary in violence prevention.

Despite the importance of identifying the risk factors of youth violence, there have been relatively few longitudinal studies identifying such predictors. In 2000, Hawkins and colleagues examined predictors of youth violence and found a relationship between individual, family, school, peer, and community factors. Individual factors related to school violence included pregnancy and delivery complications, low resting heart rate, internalizing disorders, hyperactivity, concentration problems, restlessness, risk-taking behavior, aggressiveness, violent behavior, antisocial behavior, and favorable beliefs toward deviant or antisocial behavior. Family factors found to be predictive of violence included parental involvement in crime, child maltreatment, poor family management, low parental involvement, weak family bonding, family conflict, favorable parental attitudes towards substance abuse and violence, and parent-child separation. School factors included academic failure, low bonding in school, truancy, and frequent school transitions. Peer-related factors included delinquent siblings, delinquent peers, and gang involvement. Community factors predictive of violence were poverty, community disorganization, access to drugs and weapons, neighborhood crime, and exposure to violence and racial prejudice.

In 2003, Miller identified that students who lived in neighborhoods with high or mixed levels of crime were more likely to have higher incidents of violence than those students who lived in neighborhoods with low levels of crime. The percentage of male students enrolled in the school was also predictive of violence rates in the school, with higher percentages of males related to higher rates of school violence.

Gender

Gender provides an important context for violence in the schools. Violent behavior is

far more prevalent in males than in females. In fact, males report being victims of violence 10 to 15% more often than females.

When females become violent, it is usually preceded by relation aggression. However, this phenomenon extends to boys as well. Sometimes a bullying interaction can take a dramatic turn from verbal attacks to assault. For example, both the massacres at Columbine High School and at Virginia Tech were preceded by reported incidents of relational aggression towards the perpetrators by their peers. These bullying incidents are important to recognize as risk factors for school violence. In 2001, Anderson and colleagues found that perpetrators of school-associated violent deaths were more likely than victims to have been identified by their peers as having been bullied at school. Practitioners working with students should address bullying early before it erupts in violence.

The School Climate

When violence is prevalent in a school, the climate of the school is adversely affected and the cycle of violence is perpetuated. To decrease rates of school violence, there must be changes in the school environment. The characteristics of the environment or the cultural context in which violence occurs should be targeted for intervention.

Not attending school due to fear of violence is directly related to victimization at school and indirectly related to the school climate. In 2004, The Centers for Disease Control reported that among students nationwide, 5.4% reported not going to school because they felt unsafe at school or unsafe on the way to or from school. In 1998, Elliot, Hamburg, and Williams reported that 20% of students surveyed feared using the restrooms at school and avoided hallways, locker rooms, and stairways because of their fear of violence. In 1993, Olweus reported that anti-bullying programs should

be implemented using a school-wide approach to increase student satisfaction, improve the social climate, and decrease anti-social behavior.

Psychological Consequences

Psychological trauma is evident in witnesses and victims of violence. Persistent victimization from violence leads to higher rates of depression, anxiety, and loneliness compared to nonvictimized children. Students who have experienced violence are more likely to have failed academically, to have less favorable beliefs about their education, and to think their school has a problem with vandalism.

Specific symptoms may develop as a result of exposure to violence. These symptoms may include disruptions in patterns of sleeping and toileting and impulsive acting out. Students may also re-experience the trauma in the form of distressing thoughts or flashbacks of the events. They may also fantasize about actions of intervention or revenge. Witnessing violent events may have severe consequences on student's academics, behaviors, and mental health. Elementary and high school students exposed to high levels of violence at school reported clinical levels of anxiety, depression, dissociation, and posttraumatic stress compared to students exposed to low levels of violence. These outcomes become worse when the violence is persistent and the rates of exposure are high.

Prevention and Intervention

Since the school shootings in the late 1990s, schools have increased efforts to ensure the safety of their students. These measures include increased monitoring and surveillance, as well as increased use of police officers or security guards to prevent students from bringing weapons to school. However, these measures do not address students' rationales for bringing violence into their

schools. For example, the focus on gun violence in schools does not address the real problems and fears facing schools, rather it deflects from what caused students to use the guns in the first place.

Other efforts to deter school violence include harsher and longer sentences for youth offenders, leading to an expanded role for the courts in the schools. However, there is little evidence harsher punishments deter violence and lead to rehabilitation. Additionally, zero-tolerance policies employed by schools may increase the risk of violence for the student and society as a suspended student is more likely to drop out of school and gain more access to unstructured time to be deviant.

Insights into the causes of school violence are necessary to facilitate interventions that can increase the safety of schools and support the success of all students. Strategies need to focus on encouraging a positive school climate and discouraging crime. Although violence intervention programs should primarily address the perpetrators and victims of violence, the programs should also address the needs of the students who witness violence at school.

See also: Bullying ; Conflict resolution; Gangs

Suggested Reading

- Gerler, E. R. (Ed.) (2004). *Handbook of School Violence*. New York: Haworth Reference Press.
- Goldstein, A. P., & Conoley, J. C. (Eds.) (1997). *School Violence Intervention: A Practical Handbook*. New York: Guilford Press.