SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA ACADEMIC CENTER OF EXCELLENCE ON YOUTH VIOLENCE PREVENTION, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, RIVERSIDE

Fact Sheet

SCHOOL VIOLENCE

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Introduction

In recent years there have been a number of highly publicized school shootings. While this type of school violence has raised public awareness and concern, schools still remain a relatively safe place for our children to be. However, any amount of violence can have negative impacts on students, teachers, and society and is unacceptable. As such, schools and communities still face many challenges in creating a safe and healthy learning environment for our nation's youth.

Scope of the Problem

Fatal Crime

School-related death is rare. In fact, from 1992 to 2007 youth ranging in age from 5-19 were at least 50 times more likely to be murdered away from school than at school. In the 2007-2008 school year 43 primary and secondary school-aged youth were victims of a school-associated violent death (including homicide, suicide, and legal intervention) (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009).

Nonfatal Crime

Nonfatal crimes include theft, rape, sexual assault, robbery, aggravated assault and simple assault, which can be detrimental to the learning environment. The rate for violent crime at school was greater than the rate for violent crime away from school in 2007, the first time this has occurred since 1992 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009). In 2007, students aged 12-18 were victims of 1.5 million nonfatal crimes while they were at school versus 1.1 million of such crimes while they were away from school (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009). Accordingly, in 2007, the violent victimization rate at schools was 57 crimes per 1,000 students and the violent victimization rate away from school was 41 crimes per 1,000 students. This trend does not hold true for theft, as more students reported being victims of theft at school as opposed to away from school (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009). In 2007, the theft victimization rate was 31 thefts per 1,000 students at school and 21 thefts per 1,000 students away from school.

<u>Weapons and Fighting</u>

The percentage of students who have been threatened or injured by a weapon has fluctuated in recent years with no clear trend (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). In surveys conducted from 1993 to 2007, seven to nine percent of students reported being threatened or injured with a weapon on school property (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009). In addition, the percentage of students who reported carrying a weapon at school declined during 1993 and 2007 from twelve to six percent. Generally, three times as many males as females reported carrying a weapon either anywhere or at school. In 2007, nine percent of males reported carrying a weapon on school property as opposed to only three percent of females (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009).

Physical fights on school campuses have decreased from 16% in 1993 to 12% in 2007. In general, a higher percentage of males report being involved in fights on school campuses. In 2007, 16% of males (versus 9% of females) reported being involved in such activity. Furthermore, students in lower grades reported being in fights on school campuses more frequently than students in higher grades. For example, in 2007, 17% of ninth graders reported being in a fight on school property compared to 11% of eleventh graders and 9% of twelfth graders (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009).

<u>Perception of Safety</u>

Students tend to feel safer away from school than at school. In 2007, approximately 5% of students aged 12-18 reported being afraid of attack or harm while at school, compared to only 3% of such students reporting being afraid of attack or harm while away from school (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009). However, there are clear differences among ethnic groups as to how safe students feel at school. Higher percentages of Latinos and African Americans reported being afraid at school, compared to Whites and Asians (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009). Students who do not feel safe at school report avoiding one or more places at school (such as hallways, stairs, cafeterias, and restrooms), or avoiding one or more activities (such as attending class) because of fear of attack or harm (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009).

<u>Crimes against Teachers and Classroom Disruption</u>

Like students, teachers may be victims of intimidation and violence in schools. During the 2007-2008 school year, 7% of U.S. teachers reported having been threatened with injury by a student form their school, a decrease from 9% of teachers indicating similar behavior in the 1999-2000 school year (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009). Since 2000, however, the rate of teacher victimization has remained fairly stable, around the aforementioned 7%. In addition, 4% of teachers reported having been physically attacked by a student from their school in the 2007-2008 school year, a figure which also has remained stable over time (National Center for Educational Statistics,

2009). Male teachers were more likely than female teachers to be victims of violent crimes. High school and middle school teachers were more victimized than elementary school teachers.

Classroom disruption continues to be a problem as well. Although not considered violence, misbehavior in the classroom interferes with the learning environment. Over one-third of teachers reported that in the 2007-2008 school year student misbehavior interfered with their teaching, and nearly one-third of teachers in the same time period reported that student tardiness and class cutting also interfered with their teaching (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009).

Risk Factors

Because children and youth spend much of their day at school, the school is a likely context for violence to occur. Although studies have shown that certain characteristics of schools can increase the risk of violent acts, most of the risk factors for school violence are, indeed, the same as those for youth violence. These include individual characteristics, such as age, gender, personality characteristics, and family and peer socialization. As a subset of violent youths, school shooters have a distinct set of risk factors (Dedman, 2000; Gaugham, Cerio, & Myers, 2001).

Age and Gender

Youth are at highest risk of initiation of violent crime between 15 and 16 years of age and at highest risk for participation in violent crime from 16 to 17. After age 17, participation drops greatly. By age 21, participation in serious violent crime drops by 80 percent (Loeber & Stouthhamer-Loeber, 1998). School violence patterns also vary by age and grade. For example, fighting on the school grounds is more prevalent among junior high students than among elementary or high school students while other behaviors, such as weapon use and drug possession, are more prevalent among high school students. In addition, males are more likely than females to be involved in violent school acts (Eisenbraun, 2007) and to engage in physical fighting and weapon carrying (Nickerson and Slater, 2009). Because aggression begins early and is relatively stable over time, it is likely that the 15 to 17 year-olds committing violent crimes in high school were among the more disruptive and aggressive children in elementary school (Loeber & Stouthhamer-Loeber, 1998).

Personality

Characteristics such as hyperactivity, limited attention span, restlessness, impulsivity, and risk-taking have been linked to violent and delinquent behavior in school (Christle, Kristine, & Nelson, 2000; Sandhu, Arora, & Sandhu, 2001). Students who intend to engage in aggressive or bullying behavior are likely to exhibit a need for power and control or to dominate others. In addition, perpetrators of aggressive or violent acts are often irritable and slow to adapt to new situations (Veltkamp and Lawson, 2008).

Community Environment

Many factors that normalize violence also lead to increased risk. Community factors, such as poverty, discrimination, community deterioration, exposure to media violence, and easy access to weapons, can increase the likelihood of youth violence at school (Prevention Institute, 2006).

Family and Home Environment

The most crucial influences on healthy youth development come from the family and home environment. Negative family factors can have profound implications for children and can include harsh physical discipline, substance abuse, parental discord, domestic violence, divorce, child abuse and neglect, incarceration of parents or other family members, and poor parenting practices. Children raised in problematic home environments tend to be stressed, frustrated, alienated, confused, and violent (Loeber & Stouthhamer-Loeber, 1998; Christle, et al., 2000; Sandhu, et al.). Children who were victims of child abuse at home are twice as likely to be involved in aggressive or bullying behavior at school. Parents' attitude toward the child can also influence children's aggressive behavior (Veltkamp and Lawson, 2008).

Peer Group

Youths who display aggressive behaviors tend to associate with others who advocate, support, or promote such behaviors. Some youth groups may be formally identified as gangs or hate groups, but even children not formally affiliated with such a group may adopt its antisocial values (Veltkamp and Lawson, 2008).

School Environment

While violence in schools stems predominantly from sources outside the school, the school environment itself may exacerbate the problem (Hamburg, 1998). For example, an unsafe school environment may precipitate aggressive behavior among students, resulting in a cyclic pattern of violence in the school. Several characteristics of schools are conducive to violent behavior. A school's size, physical condition, racial/ethnic composition, and policies can affect the type and severity of violence present. For example, violence is more prevalent at larger schools, and fights appear to be more common at schools that are dilapidated or contain large amounts of graffiti (Eisenbraun, 2007). In addition, some violence-related school policies and practices may actually foster violence (Edwards & Mullis, 2001). For example, alienated students who crave attention may be encouraged by the presence of metal detectors and cameras to commit violent acts to gain recognition. Furthermore, zero tolerance policies and punitive or coercive punishments tend to alienate and upset students, thus exacerbating violence risk factors. Schools using zero tolerance policies are less safe than schools who have not implemented such policies (Skiba & Peterson, 1999 as cited in Edwards & Mullis, 2001).

Schools that set high standards for interpersonal behavior and respect and apply those standards in a positive manner are less susceptible to incidents of violence than schools that foster a less positive environment via negative attention and/or feedback between staff and students (Veltkamp and Lawson, 2008).

School Shooters

According to a report published by the Federal Bureau of Investigation's National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime (1999) there is no typical profile of the school shooter. Some are loners whereas others have close friends. Some are from single-parent homes whereas others are from intact families. Some have high academic performance while others have poor academic performance. Despite this variability, school shooters do share some characteristics. For example, they typically do not have behavior problems in school. They also share behavior patterns. They typically plan their violence carefully and for a long time, even months or years. In addition, they spend a long time gathering weapons, or considering which weapons to use. They commonly tell other people about their plan or about wanting to kill people. Frequently, they write about their plans and feelings in diaries or poetry. Revenge generally surfaces as the primary motive for school shootings – a response to constant bullying, rejection by teachers, or feelings of being ignored and not cared about. All school shooters to date have been male (see also McGee and DeBarnardo, 1999 and Reddy et al, 2001).

Promising Strategies

Successful school violence prevention and intervention strategies require integrative, proactive approaches. The literature abounds with evidence and discussion in favor of comprehensive multidimensional prevention efforts for school safety (Elliott, Williams, & Hamburg, 1998; Marans & Schaefer, 1998; Christle, et al., 2000; Vera & Reese, 2000; Hurford, Lindskog, & Mallett, 2001; National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center, 2001; Pollack & Sundermann, 2001; Sandhu, et al., 2001; Sink & Rubel, 2001). A Community Guide (2007) meta-analysis of 53 universal school-based violence programs found that across all grade levels, the programs reduced the violent behavior of students by 15%, and that all intervention strategies were associated with some reduction in violent behavior. Elementary and middle school programs sought to reduce antisocial and disruptive behavior by focusing on behavior modification via changing the cognitive and affective mechanisms associated with such violent and/or aggressive behavior. High school programs focused on specific forms of violence (e.g., bullying and dating violence) and trained students to use proper behavioral and social skills in delicate situations.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2010) indicates that strategies also exist at other levels (aside from the school) that seek to reduce violence among youth. Community-level strategies focus on the modification of community characteristics, inclusive of schools settings, which may promote or inhibit violence. Such modifications may be directed at the social environment (e.g., improved classroom management techniques, or promoting cooperative learning practices) or the physical environment

(e.g., access management and surveillance strategies). Similarly, broader efforts to address such environments in the community can also be beneficial to schools (e.g., recreational opportunities, reducing access to alcohol and drugs, etc.). Furthermore, because school violence reflects community violence as well as other social and familial aspects of children's lives, collaboration among schools, parents, communities, social services, and law enforcement agencies is necessary for the efficacy of prevention programs (National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center, 2001; Sandhu et al., 2001).

Two examples of successful school violence prevention programs are LIFT (Linking the Interests of Families and Teachers) and the Perry Preschool Project (Center for the Study of Prevention of Violence, 2006). LIFT is a school based program that targets first through fifth graders and aims to reduce conduct problems, association with delinquent peers, and drug and alcohol use. LIFT uses classroom and playground activities to role play, problem solve, and build social skills. Parenting education is also part of the program. Lift programs decreased physical aggression on the playground and increased positive social skills and classroom behavior in participating children. The Perry Preschool Project targets low socioeconomic families and provides high quality early childhood education in an effort to improve later school and life performance. Program outcomes for Perry Preschool children include less delinquent behavior and fewer arrests by age 19; less antisocial behavior and misconduct during elementary school; higher academic performance and commitment to school; and lower rates of school dropout. These and other validated violence prevention programs are described in detail on the Center for the Study of Prevention of Violence website under "Blueprints for Violence Prevention" (see internet resources at the end of this paper).

Program planners should understand the risk and protective factors for violence and how they are distributed in their target population, know what research finds to be effective, determine the needs of their particular school and community, identify individual students at risk and in need of immediate intervention, develop school-wide policies, implement developmentally and culturally appropriate curricula that develop students' social skills to manager anger, solve problems, and treat others with respect, and include all collaborative partners in program planning and implementation (Elliott, et al., 1998; Marans & Schaefer, 1998; Pollack & Sundermann, 2001, Sandhu et al., 2001). Successful prevention efforts address risk factors and promote protective factors at multiple levels of influence: the individual, the family, the community, and society at large.

Clearly, issues of school and youth violence are complex. Furthermore, the solutions appear to be as multifaceted as the problems. The major components of successful prevention of school violence are proactive, comprehensive, and collaborative and each of these holds within a number of essential elements. Intensive planning that takes into consideration research-based evidence for effectiveness will increase the possibilities for successfully reducing violence in America's schools.

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Related Publications on School Violence

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Internet Resources

American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry: http://www.aacap.org

California Department of Education: http://www.cde.ca.gov

Center for Safe Schools: http://www.safeschools.info

Center for the Prevention of School Violence: http://www.cpsv.org

Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence: http://www.colorodo.edu/cspv/

Comer School Development Program: http://info.med.yale.edu/comer/index.html

Family Education Network: http://www.familyeducation.com

National Resource Center for Safe Schools: http://www.educationnorthwest.org

National School Safety Center: http://www.schoolsafety.us

National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center: http://www.safeyouth.org