Violence in schools: Prevalence, prediction, and prevention

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Abstract

Violence in schools is a pervasive problem and one that requires greater attention from educators, policy makers, and researchers. This review will examine the prevalence and evolution of school violence as well as the risk factors for students, families, and schools. In addition, prevention and intervention strategies will be identified as well as suggestions for future research.

Keywords: At-risk; High-risk behavior; Violence

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The school is in a panic. And I’m in the library. I’ve got students, under the table. Kids! Kids under the table! Kids are screaming … We need police here. … He turned the gun straight at us and shot and my God, the window went out. And the kid standing there with us, I think, I, he got hit. (Sound of gunshots.) Oh God! Oh God! … He’s

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outside of this hall ... He’s in the hall ... There are alarms and things going off, there’s smoke, my God, smoke is like coming ... I’ve got the kids under the tables here, I don’t know what is happening in the rest of the building. (ABCNEWS, 2002)

This is an excerpt from a 911 call that was placed by a teacher during the April, 1999 school shooting at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. It is quite possibly every educators’, parents’, and students’ worst nightmare. This type of sensationalistic and extreme form of school violence often receives a disproportionate amount of media coverage, while other forms of violent behavior that are prevalent on school grounds should be a cause for greater national concern (Heaviside et al., 1998). During the 1996–1997 school year, the National Center for Education Statistics cited 11,000 fights or physical attacks in public schools that involved weapons. An additional 190,000 attacks occurred without weapons. About 115,000 thefts, 7000 robberies, 98,000 incidences of vandalism, and 4000 incidences of rape or other sexual violence also occurred during this one year (Heaviside et al., 1998). Numerous questions have been raised in recent years: Why is violence in schools so prevalent? What are the risk factors for students, families and schools? Why are students resorting to violence and how can educators, parents, and other students catch important warning signs? Finally, and most importantly, what steps can be taken to prevent school violence? This review examines recent literature about school violence in order to provide answers for these and other questions regarding violent school behavior. Future areas of study and potential courses of action also will be addressed.

1. Evolution of school violence

Chewing gum, budging in line, running in the hallway, and making noise were behaviors that led to disciplinary action for youth in the 1940’s. Today’s schools must respond to alcohol and drug abuse, possession of weapons, gang membership, teen pregnancy, and assault (Osofsky & Osofsky, 2001). America’s youth confront a significant change in the types of problems, pressures, and situations they face. School violence is both a cause and a result of these changing times.

The term school violence was not widely used to describe aggressive and violent behavior in schools until 1992. A University of California database that includes five national newspapers only listed 179 citations of school violence prior to 1992. However, the following eight years brought about a 70% increase in these citations. Research articles on school violence began to increase slowly throughout the 1980’s and have shown exponential growth throughout the 1990’s (Furlong & Morrison, 2000). The definition of school violence has evolved over the past 10 years and now has been “conceptualized as a multi-faceted construct that involves both criminal acts and aggression in schools, which inhibit development and learning, as well as harm the school’s climate” (Furlong & Morrison, 2000, p. 71).

Interest in studying school violence first stemmed from the study of youth who committed generalized violence. The concern for youth violence increased during the 1980’s when physicians noticed a sizeable increase in youth victims of homicide (Furlong & Morrison, 2000). As professionals in the medical field began studying youth violence, psychologists and educators took an active role in the most convenient place to observe youth, the school system. Initially, educators’ interest in school violence was less than enthusiastic. From the educators’ perspective, increasing violence on individual campuses was difficult to detect and educators did not want to be placed in a law enforcement role (Furlong & Morrison, 2000). However, youth and school violence are having an increasingly greater impact on overall crime levels in the United States (Osofsky & Osofsky, 2001) and schools are the most logical location to study youth behavior (Furlong & Morrison, 2000).

2. Facts about school and youth violence

The problem of school violence is multi-faceted and can be understood to include violence perpetrators, victims of violence, feelings of fear and insecurity, criminal and antisocial behavior, and the disciplinary system established by the school (Furlong & Morrison, 2000). The National Education Goals asserts that by the year 2000, “all schools in America will be free of drugs and violence and the unauthorized presence of firearms and alcohol, and offer a disciplined environment that is conducive to learning” (United States Congress, 1994). This goal was set in 1994 and although the nation’s public schools may not be completely drug and violence free today, it was this goal that helped further research in school and youth violence.

School and youth violence have had a significant impact on the overall United States crime level in the past several years. In 2002, over 1.6 million youth under the age of 18 were arrested (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2002). Over
16,000 antisocial acts are committed each school day which is equivalent to one act every six seconds (Riley, as cited in Studer, 1996). During the 1996–1997 school year, 57% of the 1234 schools studied reported one or more incidences of violence in which police authorities were contacted. Also during this school term, 1000 crimes were reported per 100,000 students in the public schools. This figure includes 950 less severe crimes (theft, vandalism, assault without a weapon, etc.) and 50 severe crimes (murder, sexual violence, suicide, etc.) (Heaviside et al., 1998). The most severe behaviors, such as drug use, gang involvement, or weapon possession, are not the types of crimes that are escalating the most quickly at the middle school and high school level, but are the crimes with which much of society is concerned. The behaviors that are increasing violence at schools (and thereby leading up to more severe forms of crime) are those that promote incivility between students such as rumor spreading, pushing and shoving, verbal intimidation and threats, and sexual harassment (Skiba & Peterson, 2000).

The violent school environment is having a negative psychological impact on children as well. Noaks and Noaks (2000) examined the level of safety and the fear of crime students experienced in school. A majority of students felt safer in school than they did on their way to and from school. It was reported that 14% of male students and 13% of female students felt their journey to and from school was unsafe. Some students were so afraid of either traveling to or being in school that they stayed home at least once during the past month (Noaks & Noaks, 2000).

More general concerns and worries about crime followed previous patterns with more girls (56%) than boys (41%) reporting fear about being a victim of violence. Specifically, in school settings, 33% of both boys and girls felt afraid of being targeted. Disturbingly, it was found that 16% of girls and 21% of boys reported carrying a weapon for self-protection on a regular basis (Noaks & Noaks, 2000). These figures show that school violence is affecting the lives of many children. Thoughts and worries of victimization affect the minds of typical school-goers.

Beale (2001) has shown that victims of school violence, and specifically bullying, suffer both academically and socially. Victims have a lower self-esteem and suffer from higher levels of anxiety and depression than do their non-victimized peers (Gilmartin, 1987). There seems to be “a double whammy”, as Bulach, Fulbright, and Williams (2003) claim, for victims of school violence. Not only do peers pick on them, but many times these same victims are also ostracized. Importantly, as mentioned earlier, being bullied can be a forerunner to future violence (Osofsky & Osofsky, 2001).

Brockenbrough, Cornell, and Loper (2002) conducted a study on victims of school violence. Their intent was to study the effects that victimization and personal attitudes had on high-risk behaviors. Three groups of students were studied: non-aggressive attitude victims, aggressive attitude non-victims, and non-aggressive attitude non-victims. They found that being both a victim of school violence and having aggressive attitudes, as compared to their non-victimized, aggressive peers, place students at the most risk. Aggressive attitude victims were involved with more high-risk behaviors than their peers, and reported the highest incidences of weapon possession, drug and alcohol use, gang membership, and physical fights at school. These results support the notion that it is not only the attitudes of the students that place them in high-risk categories, but their victimization experiences as well (Brockenbrough et al., 2002).

Victims have a tendency to come from families with particular characteristics. The families of victims tend to be extremely emotionally close and may seem overly enmeshed in each other’s lives (Oliver & Oaks, 1994). Understandably, if a child does not have a supportive social network at school, he or she may look toward the family to provide affection, security, and emotional compassion. However, it has not yet been determined if this closeness if formed prior to or in light of the child becoming a victim (Oliver & Oaks, 1994).

This information may indicate that youth and school violence have large social and psychological costs, some of which will be discussed in more detail. However, it is important to remember that school violence, as with any other type of violence, has high economic costs as well. Bagley and Pritchard (1998) conducted a study on 227 youths who were removed from school and enrolled in special behavioral units. From the ages of 12 to 22, these youths cost the United States more than 10 million dollars, or at least $45,472 an individual. The authors stress that this is an underestimation. The figure includes costs, such as police work, court appearances, property damage, and custody costs, but does not include some professional costs (e.g. as social workers and educational psychologists), mental health and drug rehabilitation treatment, and costs of housing ‘unemployable’ youths (Bagley & Pritchard, 1998). The tax-payers of this country could save a staggering $1.7 million on each high-risk juvenile if he or she was led away from a life of crime (Miller, Cohen, & Wiersema, 1996).

Before we halt the perpetuation of violence in our schools, we must identify those students, families, and schools most at-risk. It should be noted that the literature on school violence is relatively recent and it is clear that additional research is necessary to further examine many, if not most, of the empirically identified risk factors. Nonetheless, early efforts should be lauded for making the initial attempts at identifying the factors most likely to be associated with violence in schools.
3. Risk factors

3.1. At-risk students

Much research has been conducted to identify those students who are most at-risk for committing violence. A multitude of biological, demographic, social, cultural, and individual factors have been identified. First, some general characteristics of at-risk students will be identified followed by a more detailed discussion of particular features including drug use, threats of violence, bullying, and ethnicity.

Biological variables have been shown to affect aggression levels. Increased levels of testosterone and reduced levels of serotonin can increase aggressive behaviors in both men and women (Studer, 1996). Higher testosterone levels may account for men showing more aggressive behaviors than women across cultures (Lipsitt, as cited in Studer, 1996). However, it is important to realize that the environment plays a large role in the occurrence of violent behaviors and biology is only one contributing factor to aggressive behavior (Studer, 1996).

Gender factors into the violence equation as well. Men are more likely to be both perpetrators and victims of violence (Furlong & Morrison, 2000). Multiple studies have confirmed more male than female involvement in violent school acts (Cornell & Loper, 1998). National studies have shown that 90% of the deaths occurring on school campuses have had both a male perpetrator and male victim (Furlong & Morrison, 2000). One issue might be that many of the violent acts committed by and against female students (e.g., sexual harassment, verbal threats) are more difficult to detect than assaultive, high-risk behaviors in which male students may be more likely to engage (Furlong & Morrison, 2000). Nonetheless, the available evidence suggests male students are at greater risk for perpetration and victimization.

School violence patterns vary by students’ age. Some forms of violent behavior, such as fighting on school grounds, are higher among junior high students. Other behaviors, such as drug use and weapon possession at school, reach their peak during the high school years (Furlong & Morrison, 2000). Further, youth violence has two general onset trajectories according to The Department of Health and Human Services (2001). Violent behavior that begins before puberty is considered early trajectory, and violent behavior that begins during adolescence is considered late trajectory. Those youths who become violent before the age of 13 typically commit a greater number of crimes, commit crimes of a more serious nature, and commit crimes for a longer period of time than older youths (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001).

Along with these more stable characteristics, there are many more dynamic risk characteristics that are potential risk factors. These characteristics can serve as warning signs for future violence and include:

| — Poor or deteriorating school performance | — Threats of violence |
| — Sudden change in school attendance | — A victim of violence |
| — Excessive feelings of rejection and isolation | — Feelings of being bullied or persecuted by others |
| — Serious social withdrawal | — Affiliation with gangs |
| — Hypervigilance | — Intolerance for differences |
| — Inability to set goals | — Failure to acknowledge the rights of others |
| — Timidity in expressing an opinion | — Abuse of drugs or alcohol |
| — Expressions of violence in drawings or writings | — Access to or possession of a weapon, specifically handguns |
| — Uncontrollable anger | — Frequency of illness |
| — Sudden mood change | — Ethnic background |

(e.g. Bulach et al., 2003; Morgan as cited in Bulach et al., 2003; Craig, 1992; Osofsky & Osofsky, 2001.).

Some of these characteristics warrant further discussion due to their complexity and large research base. One issue in particular is drug and alcohol abuse. The relationship between substance abuse and school and youth violence has been well documented (Furlong, Casas, Corral, Chung, & Bates, 1997). Furlong et al. (1997) found that self-reports of drug and alcohol use, as well as perception of frequency of use on a school campus, were both strongly related to the amount of school violence. Being an aggressor or a victim of school violence also was highly correlated with substance abuse. Youths who reported being under the influence of drugs while at school at least seven times within a year were 10 times more likely than other students to bring weapons to school (Furlong et al., 1997). Buss, Abdu and Walker (1995) found that students who used alcohol and drugs are more likely to take risks, become involved in fights, and, therefore, perpetrate violence while at school. Furlong et al. (1997 p. 276) state boldly, “the strength of the association between substance use at school and violence occurring at school among secondary students is so strong that it leads us to recommend that all violence prevention
programs include specific components designed for substance abusing students enmeshed in a social delinquency lifestyle”. A strong link between substance abuse and school violence is critical to understanding at-risk students.

Making violent threats also is an important item on the previous list of warning signs. The U.S. Secret Service concluded that prior to most violent incidences in schools, the attacker informed someone, usually a peer, about the plan (Lewis, Brock, & Lazarus, 2002). These troubled youth may make a threat of violence for a number of different reasons. The threat may be a warning of a possible attack, or it may be a plea to stop the pending violence. Threats also can be made to assert power and control over other students or authority figures in the school, or simply a reaction to fear or other anxiety. Threats can be made to seek attention, demand help, taunt, intimidate, punish, manipulate, or express frustration or anger. Nonetheless, all threats should be treated in a timely manner by trained school staff; also, the motivation for the threat and its severity should be assessed (Lewis et al., 2002). It is crucial to understand that there are diverse motivating factors for violent threats when helping at-risk students and preventing violent behavior.

Another critical item on the list of dynamic factors is bullying. “Being picked on, bullied, and/or persecuted adversely affects academic and social development, and is an important precursor to violent behavior in students” (Ososky & Ososky, 2001, p. 288). Bullying can be defined as any type of physical or verbal abuse with the intent to harm or hurt that is directed toward a person who is unable to defend him or herself and is continued for a fairly long period of time (Bulach et al., 2003; Olweus, 1978). Students tend to believe that it is acceptable to ridicule a peer if his or her actions vary from the norm. It also is common for students to believe that a victim is at least partially to blame for his or her own persecution (Oliver & Hoover, 1994).

It may not always be easy for teachers and parents to clearly identify bullying behavior because it varies across gender. In a study conducted by John and Lesley Noaks (2000), a gender difference was found in the types of bullying behaviors directed toward boys and girls. Boys reported verbal threats, name-calling, having items stolen from them, hitting and pushing. Girls, on the other hand, reported gossiping as well as verbal threats and name-calling. Many times school officials respond more quickly to physical bullying because it is more easily identifiable. Emotional and verbal bullying, such as teasing, gossiping, rejecting, taunting, and humiliating, are more difficult to identify and may be seen as tolerable (Bulach et al., 2003).

Bullying appears to perpetuate because it serves a number of social and psychological purposes (Oliver & Hoover, 1994). Some of the participants in Oliver and Hoover’s (1994) study suggested that bullying is meant to “teach” about group values. Since bullying can be seen as a means of conveying group beliefs, it would be expected that those who bully have a higher social status. Both male and female students believed those who bullied enjoyed a higher-ranking social status with female students expressing this belief very strongly. Most participants also believed that bullying made the victims stronger. Another commonly held belief was that teasing was done playfully. Teasing may not be seen as harmful or inappropriate by the perpetrator, but can be interpreted as bullying by the victim. There is clearly a miscommunication among students as well as an embedded, complex social structure, which is allowing for the continuation of bullying (Oliver & Hoover, 1994). Bullying is extremely detrimental to school environments because it is a physical and emotional form of violence that is directed toward weaker students and is perpetuated by social norms. Bullying also is harmful because victims of bullying show a greater likelihood of committing future violence (Osofsky & Osofsky, 2001).

Research has suggested that minorities are the primary perpetrators of violence (Soriano & Soriano, 1994). The National Center for Educational Statistics indicates that schools with a greater number of minority students are more prone to violence. Schools that have greater than 50% minority student enrollment are significantly more likely to experience violent crimes than schools that have less than 5% enrollment by minority students (Heaviside et al., 1998). However, it is crucial to note that “culture or cultural membership are not considered causes of violence but rather, diverse cultures come together in social, economic, and cultural contexts that afford easier access and privilege to some, while excluding others” (Soriano & Soriano, 1994, p. 216). It is not simply the presence of minority students, but the various types of racism, classism, and sexism coming together that lead to school violence (Soriano & Soriano, 1994).

Though it is not simply that minority students are more prone to violence, Soriano and Soriano (1994) suggest that since Latinos and African-Americans are largely represented in the lowest social strata of our society, they are more prone to employ violence. This would carry over to children in schools as well. Again, it is not being a member of a minority group that increases the risk of school violence, but the social ills more commonly found in lower socioeconomic conditions. As may be expected, gang presence is a large indicator of school violence and general disorder (Mayer & Leone, 1999). Vigil (1990) states "the friends one makes on the streets and the activities that are
learned there often carry over into the school setting where friendship bonds and street lessons are reinforced as indifference or hostility to school and authority grows” (p.124). For example, the following 12 risk factors were identified for Latino and Asian membership in a gang (Kreft and Soriano as cited in Soriano & Soriano, 1994).

1. High amounts of family conflict.
2. Poor access to economic resources.
4. Low self-esteem.
5. Inadequate communication skills.
7. Little parental involvement in school.
8. Low expectations by parents and teachers.
9. High occurrences of domestic violence.
10. Family history of gang membership.
11. Alcohol and drug use.
12. Sense of hopelessness.

Of course, these same risk factors also are associated with school violence in general. As will be discussed later, a greater knowledge and awareness of cultural diversity in school systems may decrease the violent acts committed by minority students and upon minority students.

Students may exhibit some of these risk factors and warning signs in any combination and to varying degrees of severity. However, students do not develop in isolation; they are greatly affected by their environment. In the following sections, risk factors within families and school systems that affect student behavior will be discussed.

3.2. At-risk families

The most violent institution in our society, aside from the military and law enforcement agencies, is the family (Myers, 1999). This phenomenon may exist because problems within the family are often resolved using aggressive and violent behaviors (Studer, 1996). Children who are bullies grow up in families that express some distinct characteristics. Lack of structure or family rules and inconsistently observed limits is evident of at-risk families. When the few established rules or limits are not consistently enforced, aggressive behavior may be viewed as permissible (Oliver & Oaks, 1994). Interestingly, changes in a school day, such as an assembly, can act as catalysts for violent behaviors because the established structure is being altered (Craig, 1992). Therefore, when family life is unstable and prone to changes, children may be more apt to commit violence. When rules are inconsistent and unpredictable, children learn to function only after the parental mood has been determined. What these children learn at home is carried over into their school behavior; in a classroom setting, these children may not express their attitudes until after the teacher’s mood has been established (Craig, 1992).

Just as too little parental control can be detrimental, too much control is also harmful. “Rigidity is often found in maintaining the order that is present through the use of domineering, authoritarian childrearing methods, possibly punctuated with excessive physical punishment, and angry emotional outbursts” (Oliver & Oaks, 1994, p. 200). This type of parenting also seems to cultivate inappropriate behavior in children (Oliver & Oaks, 1994).

Several other factors are commonly found in at-risk families. When the caregiver provides a detached or cold emotional environment, which can also show evidence of at least marginal neglect, the child’s risk of becoming more violent in school increases. An at-risk family is often socially isolated, disassociated from the community, and has little support (Oliver & Oaks, 1994; Osofsky & Osofsky, 2001). Parental conflict, disharmony, substance abuse, mental illness, depression, and immaturity are all risk factors (Oliver & Oaks, 1994; Osofsky & Osofsky, 2001). Adolescent parenting as well as parents with lower educational levels tends to have children who are at greater risk for violence. Also, family disruptions including moves, death, incarceration, illness, and divorce are categorized as potentially harmful. At-risk families tend to have a lower socioeconomic status and fail to empower their children (Osofsky & Osofsky, 2001). If a child’s home environment is unstable, the child is at a greater risk of committing violent acts (Oliver & Oaks, 1994; Osofsky & Osofsky, 2001), which are likely to be manifested on the school grounds where the child spends most of his or her day.

3.3. At-risk schools

After looking at individual student characteristics and his or her corresponding home environment, it is crucial to examine the setting the student is in for most of his or her day: the school itself. Several characteristics make schools more conducive to violent student behavior. School size, location, physical condition, ethnic distribution, and policies all play a role in the amount, type and severity of violence (Dwyer, Osher, & Hoffman, 2000; Heaviside et al., 1998).
The National Center for Educational Statistics indicates that violence is more prevalent in large schools as compared to smaller ones. Eighty-nine percent of the large schools surveyed admitted to one or more criminal incidences in a year whereas only 38% of the smaller schools did. Furlong and Morrison (2000) also suggest that school size is an essential factor for determining rates of violence. They imply that given a larger student population, exposure to violent acts on the school campus is greater, thereby, leading to a larger number of incidences (Furlong & Morrison, 2000).

It may seem logical that schools located in a city are more likely to experience criminal behaviors than rural schools, but there is evidence both supporting and opposing this assumption. Furlong and Morrison (2000) found no significant difference between school violence in city, suburban, and nonmetropolitan areas. It also has been found that school violence is higher in city schools as compared to suburban and rural schools (Elam & Rose, 1994). Yet, the National Center for Educational Statistics found significant differences between city and rural schools; however, there was no difference between the suburban and city locations (Heaviside et al., 1998). In light of the conflicting evidence, researchers must conduct additional research before any conclusions can be drawn about the risk of a particular school-based on its location.

School violence has been seen as an “urban” problem for too long; rural and suburban schools have clearly shown that violent behavior in schools is not restricted to urban settings (Dwyer et al., 2000). It is critical to remember that, at this point, no school should be dismissed from the potential of violence based on its location.

Aside from physical location, the physical condition of the school building can influence students’ motivation, attitude, and behavior (Dwyer et al., 2000). The general violence literature, particularly in violent psychiatric wards, has shown that violence may increase if the environmental conditions are not optimal (Kumar, 2001). These results also appear to hold true for school violence. Buildings that have uncomfortable temperatures, are polluted, have a large amount of graffiti, and are in need of repairs have higher incidences of fighting and other forms of violence (Dwyer et al., 2000). The physical, learning atmosphere that is provided for students affects daily conduct.

4. School discipline

Disciplining students for inappropriate behavior is important and must be done to ensure school safety (Skiba & Peterson, 2000). However, Mayer and Leone (1999) found that an unwelcoming and highly inspected school environment leads to more school misconduct as opposed to reducing it. Many techniques recently used to discipline students, such as reliance on security measures and law enforcement, and the use of strip searches, undercover agents, and corporal punishment, have proven ineffective (Hyman & Perone, 1998; Skiba & Peterson, 2000). Even though students may feel threatened by these measures, they may still not clearly understand the rules and the corresponding consequences (Mayer & Leone, 1999).

Skiba and Peterson (2000) report that schools are ineffective overall in disciplining problems of disruption and violence. One of the problem areas they point to is the dependence on security measures. There is little evidence to support the effectiveness of security measures such as metal detectors, identification cards, student and locker searches, school uniforms and the like (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, as cited in Hyman & Perone, 1998).

Hyman and Perone (1998) add that not only is there a dependence on security systems, but there is also an increasing dependence on law enforcement in schools. They fear that if schools become over-dependent on the police, they will be less likely to create educational programs to deal with less severe violent and disruptive behaviors. Over-dependence on law enforcement could also impact the children’s attitudes toward the teachers; students may view the teachers as less of an authority and may be more likely to act out in the absence of the police (Hyman & Perone, 1998).

Strip searches have been shown to have a negative impact on student self-esteem. “Clinical evaluations of the victims of strip searches indicate that they can result in serious emotional damage, including the development of, or increase in, oppositional behavior” (Hyman & Perone, 1998, p. 13). Data suggest that this approach increases student distrust in teachers and police and that these searches can increase student vandalism and aggression toward authority figures (Hyman & Perone, 1998).

The use of undercover agents in schools, much like strip searches, has the potential to inflict emotional harm to students. This emotional harm can lead to increased aggression, violence, and misconduct. In addition to imposing emotional harm, there have also been instances of sexual misconduct reported when employing undercover agents (Hyman & Perone, 1998).

Corporal punishment also has been ineffective at reducing school violence and many believe it models societal violence. This punishment is still allowed in 26 states and it reinforces the conception that it is acceptable for a stronger
person to use physical force upon another in an inferior position (Romeo, 1996). Victims of corporal punishment may have a desire to “get even,” therefore, displacing anger on teachers or other students, thus perpetuating the cycle of violence in the school (Romeo, 1996).

Harsh, callous punishments and disciplinary policies have not been shown to be effective when trying to promote a school atmosphere that is conducive to preventing school violence (Skiba & Peterson, 2000). Therefore, it is now important to turn attention to more effective techniques. An effective school discipline model will avoid both the extremes of a lax environment and a prison-like setting. Research has shown that a school discipline program must be comprehensive, sustained, and include: a) preventive strategies that develop responsible behavior, b) corrective strategies that deal with unacceptable behavior, and c) programs that handle chronic behavioral problems. These strategies and programs should be directed toward childrens’ thoughts, actions, and feelings. The relationships between students, teachers, parents, and the community as well as the classroom environment and curriculum need to be taken into consideration in the development of disciplinary programs (Bear, Cavalier, & Manning, 2002).

The most successful discipline plans have clear, fair, and unbiased rules (Batsche & Knoff, 1994). Mayer and Leone (1999) found that greater awareness of school rules and consequences as well as an understanding of the degree to which the rules were enforced led to less school disorder. The methods of discipline should always be positive and communicated plainly. When negative consequences must be used, they should always be followed with an explanation and positive ways in which socially acceptable behaviors can be used (Hyman & Perone, 1998). To most effectively target violence in schools however, a preventative focus needs to be established with early responses and comprehensive planning (Skiba & Peterson, 2000).

5. Prevention and intervention

“If America’s schools are to break the cycle of violence, educators and policy makers must begin to look beyond stiffer consequences to long-term planning designed to foster nonviolent school communities” (Skiba & Peterson, 2000, p. 343). Although research on school violence is still somewhat limited (Skiba & Peterson, 2000), some effective strategies have been taken in order to prevent and reduce the violence. School-wide prevention strategies and intervention techniques are key to the success of improved social and academic performance in disruptive and violent students (Nelson, 1996). The remainder of this discussion will focus on some of the long-term techniques that can be implemented to break the cycle of school violence, including a team-based approach, the physical school environment, teaching strategies, social skills training, adult involvement, and cultural sensitivity.

Before implementing new policies and procedures, it is beneficial for a school-based team to be created. Teachers, administrators, and professionals such as social workers, school psychologists, and counselors, comprise this team. One of the purposes of the team is to instruct other staff members on standardized and child-focused methods for dealing with behavioral and academic matters. The team can provide monitoring and intervention strategies for those children who they can identify as at-risk for academic or emotional problems. They should identify and synthesize research findings into their school district and also serve as a liaison between the school and parents (Dwyer et al., 2000). The team’s progressive perspective and cooperative actions are critical for the success of new procedures and programs that can decrease school violence.

In addition to a school-based team, Larson, Smith, and Furlong (2002) suggest an additional two tiers of violence prevention organizational structures. The first tier is a community organization that would include law enforcement, business leaders, clergy, medical and mental health employees, media representatives, and well as the school district superintendent, school board representatives, educational staff, parents, and students. The second tier is a school district task force that would include representatives from grade level administration, instructional staff, school security, as well as the superintendent and parent and student representatives. Each of these teams, whether at the community, district, or school level, need to focus on violence prevention planning which includes problem identification, problem analysis, problem response proposals, response implementation, and finally, evaluation of the strategies (Larson et al., 2002). The member diversity in these violence prevention teams is to the advantage of the schools because they foster communication across many different professions, which interact with students.

Steps can be taken to prevent violence in regard to the school building itself. Physical environment has shown to affect student actions, attitude, and motivation (Dwyer et al., 2000). Schools that are clean, free of graffiti, and in good condition are significantly less likely to have instances of students acting out (Mcloughlin, Kubick, & Lewis, 2002). In his research, Nelson (1996) identifies several ways to improve the environmental factors within the school.
Adjusting traffic flow in hallways can decrease the potential for adverse student encounters. Dividing the entrance and exit of the cafeteria, staggering the beginning and ending of the lunch period, keeping time spent in line limited, and increasing staff supervision during high traffic flow times can all help to reduce negative actions between students. Violent acts tend to occur in isolated areas, such as the end of a hallway or a hidden corner on the playground. Faculty should be very aware of these areas and students should be prohibited from them. Adjusting the class schedule, for example, having lunch after recess, can help children stay calm while in the classroom (Nelson, 1996). Limiting access to, or completely closing, the school building and campus during non-school hours also can increase safety in schools (Mcloughlin et al., 2002). If steps can be taken to improve the overall climate of the school and prevent small disruptions, schools may be able to reduce the overall occurrence of the more violent acts (Skiba & Peterson, 2000).

Teacher interaction is an important aspect of a student’s school day and affects student behavior (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2002). Teachers must make a great effort to foster a positive environment in their classroom. It has been shown that positive reinforcement from teachers is effective at decreasing drop-out rates and school suspensions (Meyer, Mitchell, Clementi, & Clement-Robertson, 1993). Also, methods of inclusion, rather than exclusion, should be employed whenever possible when dealing with disruptive students (Skiba & Peterson, 2000). Redirecting the child within the classroom, giving the child a different task to complete in the room, and using a reward system within the classroom to promote good behavior should all be attempted before removing the child from the classroom.

It is important to develop appropriate social skills and beliefs. Appropriate social skills will not only increase the success of a student’s social relationships but also play an important role in successful academic performance and in avoiding negative responses from others (Elliott, McKevitt, & DiPerna, 2002). Several effective social skills programs exist in schools. These successful school-based programs typically include several characteristics and goals (Elliott et al., 2002): (1) Promote positive relationships among students and staff; (2) Openly discuss safety matters; (3) Handle students with respect; (4) Produce avenues in which students can share their concerns; (5) Help children feel comfortable and safe when expressing their feelings; (6) Emphasize good character and citizenship.

There are numerous specific skills that children can learn through social skills programs. Proper anger control techniques should be taught to students, especially those at-risk. Also, assertiveness training can help students stand up for themselves and for others. A distinction between assertive, aggressive, and passive techniques should be emphasized (Studer, 1996). Problem-solving techniques focus on how a problem can be resolved instead of focusing on the end answer. A student’s understanding of his or her own thought-process can be achieved through this training (Studer, 1996). Teaching students more effective ways to communicate may decrease bullying since it is sometimes carried out in order to teach group values. Also, students should be made aware of the miscommunication that occurs frequently in regards to bullying. Many students think that teasing is perpetrated in fun when it is actually very harmful to the target (Oliver & Hoover, 1994). These social skills, taught in combination with each other, may help to reduce violent incidences in schools.

The belief that students, teachers, and parents need to change is the “it’s not going to happen to us” notion. Known as the optimistic bias, this idea is prevalent when addressing school violence. All members of the school community need to take any threats seriously and learn to take protective measures instead of assuming that a severe incidence of school violence could not happen to them (Chapin & Coleman, 2003). Responding quickly and effectively to threats can stop violence before it begins.

Adult involvement in the school and involvement with specific students may prove effective in reducing school violence. Brockenbrough, Cornell and Loper (2002) suggest that connecting aggressive victims to adult mentors in the school may increase the student’s social support and sense of belonging to the school. Osofsky and Osofsky (2001) are involved in several different programs, which are intended to reduce youth violence. One of the programs, The Violence Intervention Program, takes a community approach to solving youth violence. The focus is on the education of police officers about the effects of violence on children and their families. This is done to increase sensitivity and knowledge about violent incidences. The program also educates parents on how to protect their children from violent areas or acts. The program has shown great success in reducing youth violence in its area (Osofsky & Osofsky, 2001). Connecting the community in a collaborative effort of awareness and reduction of youth violence can prove effective in diminishing violence.

As indicated earlier, minority students are more prone to violence (Soriano & Soriano, 1994). As schools become more and more culturally diverse, teachers, school psychologists, and counselors may have an increasingly difficult task of identifying the causes of violence because individuals will be coming together in different cultural, social and economic contexts. These professionals must be prepared to “reframe the concept of violence to include culturally diverse children and families in a socioeconomic context which includes poverty, lack of affordable housing and health care, joblessness,
underfunded and crowded schools, racial stereotypes, and economic exclusion” (Soriano & Soriano, 1994, p. 216). Each student has the right to be understood in his or her own family and culture. Since the importance of kin varies across cultures (Soriano & Soriano, 1994), psychologists and teachers should not only include direct guardians in their parent/teacher conferences, but also should include all members of the family that are involved in raising the child. The degree to which a society is individualistic or collectivistic may determine how self-centered an individual is. Children who grow up feeling as if they do not belong yet still value social relationships may be more apt to join a gang (Vigil, 1990). Also, psychologists must remember that language contains not only cognitive, but also affective elements which makes communication extremely important (Soriano & Soriano, 1994). Communication between staff and students may be improved by clearly establishing rules and guidelines along with corresponding rewards and consequences. It is the teacher’s duty to ensure that the rules are enforced equally to all students. Cultural sensitivity awareness and training must be brought to schools for the teachers, administrators, and psychologists as well as for the students. With an increased awareness and understanding of various cultures, violence in schools may decrease.

6. Conclusion

Violence in America’s schools is a problem that is great in magnitude and national in scope (Heaviside et al., 1998). Students who are at-risk for committing violence possess multiple demographic, social, cultural, and individual characteristics that place them at a greater risk. Gender, age, ethnicity, past victimization, and drug or alcohol use are among many other factors that contribute to violent youth at school (e.g., Furlong & Morrison, 2000; Cornell & Loper, 1998; Osofsky & Osofsky, 2001; Bulach et al., 2003; Craig, 1992; Furlong et al., 1997; Olweus, 1978; Soriano & Soriano, 1994). The familial environment in which a student lives can also influence his or her behavior at school. Among other factors, if parents are too lax or too controlling, their children may be at a greater risk (e.g., Craig, 1992; Oliver & Oaks, 1994). The school itself also needs to be considered when discussing the potential for violence. School size, location, physical condition, ethnic distribution, and policies all play a role in the amount, type and severity of violence (Heaviside et al., 1998, Dwyer et al., 2000).

Victims of violence have been shown to suffer negative consequences both socially and academically (e.g., Beale, 2001; Gilmartin, 1987; Brockenbrough et al., 2002). Ineffective disciplinary techniques that rely on security measures need to be replaced with more effective strategies, such as clearly defined rules and consequences (Hyman & Perone, 1998; Mayer & Leone, 1999; Skiba & Peterson, 2000). Various prevention and intervention programs are suggested, such as creating a school-based team, renovating the school environment, changing teaching strategies, providing social skills training, including adults in school, and providing training and awareness for cultural sensitivity (e.g. Dwyer et al., 2000; Nelson, 1996; Skiba & Peterson, 2000; Studer, 1996; Brockenbrough et al., 2002; Soriano & Soriano, 1994). With the implementation of these various prevention and intervention programs and ideas, school violence may be lessened. Future research is needed to examine the effectiveness of these programs over time and across cultural, gender, and geographic lines. Further work should also focus on threat assessment, the potential for a student to commit a violent act against a known target. It is then critical that this research becomes readily available for policy makers, treatment providers, individuals associated with juvenile justice systems, and the general public (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). Once preventative programs are in place, and more research has been conducted concerning their effectiveness, a better understanding of school violence and ways in which to lessen its impact can be determined.

References


