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, overall levels of school violence actually have declined in recent years. In fact, schools are safer today than they have been for several years (U.S. Department of Education & U.S. Department of Justice, 2000). Nonetheless, 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 2000 youth ranging in age from 5-19 were at least 70 times more likely to be murdered away from school (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). In the 2001-2002 school year 17 school aged-youth were victims of a school-associated violent death (including homicide, suicide, and legal intervention) (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).

Nonfatal Crime

Nonfatal crimes include theft, rape, sexual assault, robbery, aggravated assault and simple assault, which can be detrimental to the learning environment. Nonfatal crimes at school have generally declined between 1992 and 2001 (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). In 1992 the violent victimization rate at schools was 48 crimes per 1,000 students and in 2001 it was 28 crimes per 1,000 students. Students are less likely to be victims of serious violent crimes (e.g., rape, robbery, and aggravated assault) at school than away from school. In 2001, there were about 161,000 victims of serious violence crimes at school and 290,000 victims away from school (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Conversely, theft is more likely to occur at school than away from school. In 2001, about 1.2 million thefts occurred at school and about 913,000 occurred away from school (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).

Weapons and Fighting

Every year there have been reports of individuals being threatened or injured with a weapon on school property. However, the percentage of students who have been threatened or injured by a weapon have fluctuated in recent years with no clear trend (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). In surveys conducted from 1993 to 2001, seven
to nine percent of students reported being threatened or injured with a weapon on school property. In addition, the percentage of students who reported carrying a weapon at school declined during 1993 and 2001 from twelve to six percent. Males (10%) reported carrying a weapon on school property more than females (3%).

Physical fights on school campuses have decreased from sixteen percent in 1993 to 13 percent in 2001 (U.S. Department of Education). Males (18%) reported being involved in physical fights on a school campus more than females (7%). Furthermore, students in lower grades reported being in fights on school campuses more frequently than students in higher grades (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).

Perception of Safety

Students feel safer at school than in the past. In 1995, twelve percent of students reported sometimes or most of the time they did not feel safe at school. In 2001, this number dropped to six percent (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). In addition, clear differences among ethnic groups as to how safe students feel at school. Latinos and African Americans are the most fearful at school. Students who do not feel safe at school report avoiding one or more places at school, such as hallways, stairs, cafeterias, and restrooms.

Crimes Against Teachers and Classroom Disruption

In general, violence in school has declined steadily since the early 1990s. However, from 1997 to 2001 crimes against teachers have remained constant at about 21 violent crimes per 1,000 teachers (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). 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.

In addition, classroom disruption continues to be a problem. Although not considered violence, misbehavior in the classroom interferes with the learning environment. Over 85 percent of students report that their teachers stopped class to deal with disruptive students at least once a week. This number remained constant from 1992 to 1998.

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 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, and certain personality characteristics as well as socialization influences of those closest to the child, particularly family and peers. In addition, although a 2000 report of the U.S. Secret Service states that there is no accurate profile for school shooters (Dedman, 2000; Gaugham, Cerio, & Myers, 2001), the specific set of risk factors for school shooters is somewhat distinct.

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, and by 21 participation in serious violent crime drops by 80 percent. Boys are much more likely to use physical aggression and violence than girls, although some studies have shown that girls are more likely to use indirect forms of aggression such as name-calling and social exclusion. 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 may have been among the more disruptive and aggressive children in elementary school (Loeber & Stouthamer-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).

**Social Environment**

Many factors that normalize violence also lead to increased risk. Societal factors such as exposure to media violence, easy access to weapons, and gang and hate group affiliation can increase the likelihood of youth violence at school.

**Family and Home Environment**

The most crucial influences in healthy youth development come from the family and home environment. Negative factors originating within the family, such as harsh physical discipline; alcohol and drug abuse; parental discord, domestic violence, and divorce; child abuse and neglect; incarceration of parents or other family members; or simply poor parenting practices, have profound implications for children. Children raised in problem home environments tend to be stressed, frustrated, alienated, confused, and violent (Loeber & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1998; Christle, et al., 2000; Sandhu, et al.).

**Peer Group**

Another area of risk for youth is the peer group. Children tend to choose friends who are like themselves and they turn to friends and peers for support and guidance. Thus, already alienated children form peer groups where negative behavior is the norm and the violent or criminal behavior of one or more is likely to be followed by others (Sandhu, et al., 2001).

**School Environment**

Hamburg (1998) states that while violence in schools stems predominantly from sources outside the school, the school environment itself may exacerbate the problem. For example, an unsafe school environment, in and of itself, may precipitate more aggressive behavior among students resulting in a cyclic pattern of violence in the school. In addition, methods and policies implemented in schools to reduce school violence can make matters worse (Edwards & Mullis, 2001). For example, already
alienated students who crave attention may be encouraged by the presence of metal detectors and cameras to commit violent acts simply for the recognition. Furthermore, policies of zero tolerance and punitive or coercive punishment tend to further alienate and upset students. Following 4 years of implementation, reports show that 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).

School Shooters

There is no typical profile of the school shooter. Some are loners and some have close friends. Some are from single-parent homes and some are from intact families. In fact, school shooters typically do not have behavior problems in school. In terms of academic performance, some may be failing and others may be honor students. School shooters do, however, share some similar behavior patterns. For example, although popular belief is that they “snap,” this is generally not the case. Rather, they typically plan carefully and they do so for a long time, maybe months or years. In addition, they spend a long time gathering weapons, or considering which weapons to use. It is also common for school shooters to have told someone something about their plan or to talk about wanting to kill people. Frequently, they write their plans and feelings in diaries or poetry. Revenge generally surfaces as the primary motive for school shootings. Shooters, for example, may be victims of constant bullying, may feel continuously rejected or ignored by teachers, or may feel no one ever listens or cares. Lastly, school shooters have all been males.

Promising Strategies

Evidence indicates that 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). Furthermore, because violence in the schools reflects violence in the community 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).

One such collaborative program is currently being piloted by the Riverside Unified School District (RUSD) in Riverside, California. RUSD’s Healthy People, Healthy Places is an interagency Wellness Center program. RUSD, County Departments of Mental Health and Probation, the Police Department, and the University of California, Riverside have come together to form Wellness Centers at several school sites that provide a variety of personal, mental health, law enforcement, and social services to students and their families. The objective of the Wellness Center model is to provide evidence-based activities to promote mental health and prevent violence and other problem behaviors in school.
Other examples of successful school violence prevention programs are LIFT (Linking the Interests of Families and Teachers) and the Perry Preschool Program (Center for the Study of Prevention of Violence, 2001). LIFT is a school based program that targets first through fifth graders, the focus being reduction of 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 program 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).

Regardless of the particular prevention or intervention selected for a safe school plan, program planners should understand risk and protective factors; know what research finds to be effective; determine the needs of their particular school and community, as well as identify individual students at risk and most in need of immediate intervention; develop school-wide policies and curriculum that support development of social skills and help students manager anger, solve problems, and treat others with respect; ensure that all aspects of prevention plans are developmentally and culturally appropriate; and include all collaborative partners in the planning and implementation of the program (Elliott, et al., 1998; Marans & Schaefer, 1998; Pollack & Sundermann, 2001, Sandhu et al., 2001).

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.

References


**Related Publications on School Violence**


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

California Attorney General's Crime and Violence Prevention Center: http://www.caag.state.ca.us/cvpc

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

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

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.safetyzone.org

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