

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-64418-1 - Violence in American Schools: A New Perspective

Edited by Delbert S. Elliott, Beatrix A. Hamburg and Kirk R. Williams

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I. Introduction

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1. Violence in American Schools: An Overview

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& KIRK R. WILLIAMS

Introduction

Historically, our schools have been relatively safe havens from violence. However, over the past decade there has been an epidemic of youth crime. The violence on the streets and in some of our homes has spilled over into the schools. In recent years, the nation has been deeply shocked by several dramatic, incomprehensible multiple killings of students at school by their classmates. Fortunately such episodes are rare. However, on a daily basis many students, parents, and teachers are aware of threats or bullying and they experience pervasive anxiety about violence. Across the nation there is grave concern that our children are no longer as safe from intimidation, serious injury, or death as they once were while at school or on their way to or from school. This is the issue that we address in this book. Why has the level of youth violence escalated so steeply over the past decade? What are the impacts of this change on the priorities and functioning of the school; on teaching and on the learning and developmental outcomes for our children?

The societal response to this epidemic has been largely limited to increasingly harsh and lengthy sentencing with little evidence that this approach is deterring violence or rehabilitating young offenders. What is needed are new insights into the causes of this epidemic and new intervention strategies for making our schools safer places of learning. There are bodies of knowledge across diverse fields, not typically linked to criminology, that, taken together, have much to contribute to the understanding of these issues. They also point the way to implementing a range of integrated approaches for the prevention of the widespread youth crime and violence that have had such a disturbing ripple effect in our schools.

In this volume, new perspectives, methods, and data are presented from multiple scientific fields: social ecology, child and adolescent development,

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life course studies, criminology, and the field of public health. We believe these integrated approaches to the study of youth violence may be new to some readers. A brief description of each of these areas is given in the latter part of this chapter along with a guide to the location of chapters of the book in which each approach is more fully described and its contribution to the understanding of youth violence is explained.

The Violence Epidemic of the Nineties

Children and teens are often afraid to go to school. Once at school, many are afraid to go into the restrooms or out on the playground. Others live in fear that they will be shot or hurt by classmates who carry weapons to school. This fear is not totally unfounded:

- A 14-year-old honor student in Moses Lake, Washington, walked into a math class armed with a high-powered rifle and two handguns. He opened fire and killed the teacher and two students and critically wounded another student (Staff, 1996).
- In Portland, Connecticut, a junior high school student was suspended for refusing to remove his hat. He subsequently returned to school with an assault rifle, killed the janitor and seriously wounded the principal and a secretary (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 1989).
- Two students, aged 13 and 11, set off the fire alarm at Westside Middle School in Jonesboro, Arkansas, and then ran to the trees near the school. As students and teachers filed out of the building, they opened fire killing a teacher and four students and wounding eleven others (Staff, 1998).
- A teenager in Lynville, Tennessee, angry about a traffic accident, carried a rifle into a crowded school hallway and opened fire. A teacher and a student were killed (Staff, 1996).

The 1978 release of the Safe School Study Report to Congress launched the first shocking statistics regarding violence in American schools. This report indicated that approximately 282,000 students and 5,200 teachers were physically assaulted in secondary schools every month (National Institute of Education, 1978). A 1996 national poll of American adolescents commissioned by Children's Institute International revealed that nearly half (47%) of all teens believe their schools are becoming more violent, and one of every ten reported a fear of being shot or hurt by classmates who carry weapons to school. More than 20% reported being afraid to go to the restrooms because these are unsupervised areas where students are frequently victimized (Children's Institute International, 1996; Harris & Associates, 1993; Walker et al., 1996). In 1993 the National Education Association formally called for a coordinated effort by national, state, and local governments to combat growing violence in the nation's schools.

The increased youth violence in the 1990s is not unique to schools. Between 1984 and 1994, the homicide rate for adolescents doubled and the

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number of nonfatal violent victimizations increased nearly 20%. On a typical day in 1992, seven juveniles were murdered. These dramatic increases in juvenile homicides took place at a time when the homicide rates for most other age groups were declining. The nonfirearm-related rate remained essentially unchanged during this period; the increase was driven almost totally by handgun homicides (Snyder & Sickmund, 1995). Chapter 6 of this volume (Mercy and Rosenberg) discusses this aspect of the violence problem in detail.

The surge in violence during the late '80s and early '90s included more than homicides. Between 1988 and 1991, the rate of juvenile arrests for non-lethal violent crimes (e.g., assaults, robberies, and rapes) increased by 38% (Snyder & Sickmund, 1995). The Monitoring the Future study, involving a national sample of high school seniors, also found an 18% increase in the proportion of students reporting a serious assault on another person between 1984 and 1994 (Maguire & Pastore, 1996). Although this increase was not dramatic in terms of increased episodes (Elliott, 1994a; Osgood et al., 1989), hostile confrontations became much more lethal as the number of youths carrying guns and other weapons increased substantially (Huizinga, 1997). Fights that in earlier years resulted in black eyes, bloody noses, or minor bruises now often involved a death or serious injury. It was primarily urban African American youth who were at increased risk of being murdered during this period. In the 1990s homicide became the second leading cause of death among adolescents and the leading cause of death among African American male adolescents (Fingerhut, 1993; Snyder & Sickmund, 1995).

In addition to the increased lethality of violent confrontations resulting from the use of firearms, there were more seemingly "random" violent events, innocent bystanders killed in drive-by shootings, and assaults on strangers with little provocation (Elliott et al., 1993; Fox, 1996). Plus, violence now erupted in places previously thought to be safe: the post office, McDonald's restaurants, shopping malls, commuter trains, and in the hallways and classrooms of schools. These three features of violence in the 1990s – increased lethality, more random violence, and fewer safe places – largely account for the high levels of fear experienced by both children and adults (Elliott, 1994a).

Violence in and Around Schools

Victimization, Serious Assaults, and Guns

The rate of victimization at school is quite high. In 1991, more than half (56%) of juvenile victimizations occurred at school or on school grounds.

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Few of these youth (20%) reported their victimization to the police, and less than half reported the victimization to either the police or school officials. However, most of this victimization was in the form of theft, vandalism, or threats of violence without a weapon. The peak time for violent victimizations involving juveniles begins at 3:00 P.M., the typical end of the school day for most children and teenagers. For older adolescents, the risk of violent victimization remains relatively high from 3:00–11:00 P.M. and drops dramatically after midnight (Richters, 1993; Snyder & Sickmund, 1995).

The majority of *serious* violent events, like those newspaper accounts cited at the beginning of this chapter, occur either at or near the victim's home or out in the streets in the victim's neighborhood. Indeed, the increases in serious levels of violence in school buildings and on their surrounding grounds are relatively modest compared to those occurring in homes, neighborhoods, and communities. Compared to individual homes and neighborhoods, schools are still *relatively safe* contexts for children. In 1994, only 13% of violent crimes occurred on school grounds and most of these violent events involved minor assaults. Only 7% of serious assaults and 4% of robberies took place at school (Hanke, 1996; Harris et al., 1993; Maguire & Pastore, 1996; Snyder & Sickmund, 1995). In a national study of violent deaths associated with schools between 1992 and 1994, 105 violent deaths were identified, with most victims being students (72%) and males (96%). The overall incidence rate for violent deaths was .09 per 100,000 student years (Kachur et al., 1996). The proportions of deaths occurring during classes or other school activities and before or after official school activities were approximately the same. In fact, youth are three times *less likely* to encounter weapon-related crimes at school than on the streets in their neighborhood (Department of Justice, 1991).

There is clear evidence that weapons are more frequently being carried into schools (California Department of Education, 1990; Callahan & Rivara, 1992; Kingery et al., 1996; Maguire & Pastore, 1995). Between 1987 and 1994, gun carrying at school increased 138% in central Texas. In California the number of guns confiscated doubled between 1985 and 1988. In the Texas study, those who carried guns, compared to those who did not, were much more likely to have been victimized in the prior year, to enter dangerous situations repeatedly, to have used crack cocaine, to have less knowledge about means of avoiding fighting, and to feel a greater obligation to fight under a wider variety of situations (Kingery et al., 1996). In the American Teacher survey (Harris & Associates, 1993), students receiving poor grades were three times as likely to carry a gun to school as those earning good or fair grades.

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The level of nonfatal violence involving injury at school is more substantial when self-reported data are used rather than official arrest data, as much of this violence goes unreported to authorities. A 1995 national self-reported study indicated 5% of high school seniors reported being injured by an armed offender while at school in the past year. The proportions of males and African Americans injured by an armed offender at school during the past year was higher, with the rate for African Americans (6.8%) being two times that of whites, and the proportion of males (7%) being two and a half times that for females. Weapon-related injury rates are higher for high school seniors than younger students, but the general assault rates (with or without weapons) on younger students are substantially higher than might be expected from official police and school disciplinary records (Maguire & Pastore, 1995). In a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention study involving a national sample of 9th through 12th graders in 1993, 9% of males and 5% of females reported being threatened or injured on school property in the last year (Maguire & Pastore, 1995); and in a national survey of 6th to 12th graders, nearly 18% reported being hurt by another student at school (PRIDE, 1996).

These rates of violent victimization and injury are substantially higher in large, inner city high schools. In a study of ten inner city public schools in California, Louisiana, New Jersey, and Illinois (Sheley, McGee, & Wright, 1995), 30% of males and 16% of females reported they had been assaulted at school or on the way to and from school; two-thirds reported they personally knew someone who had been shot or stabbed, or otherwise assaulted while in school. In summary, whether using official records or self-report information, rates of violent victimization and offending have been increasing in the nation's schools over the past decade. The fact that school is a relatively safer context than the home or streets in the neighborhood (Hanke, 1996; Maguire & Pastore, 1996) provides little comfort – the rates are still very high in and around schools. This level of violence is clearly unacceptable.

While the objective risk of becoming a victim of violence may be greater at home and in the neighborhood, the *perceptions* of safety at school do not reflect this difference. In a 1995 national Gallup poll, teenagers reported feeling safest at home, next safest in their neighborhood, and then at school. The places seen as least safe were public transportation, walking to and from a friend's house after dark, and in the area around their school. Nearly half of adolescents reported that their schools are becoming more violent, and only 24% reported that their neighborhoods are becoming more violent. Both the neighborhood and school are now seen as unsafe

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places, with approximately 40% reporting they sometimes feel unsafe in *both* settings (Maguire & Pastore, 1995). In a study of inner city schools, 15% reported they were afraid at school almost all of the time (Sheley, McGee, & Wright, 1992). In the American Teacher national survey (Harris & Associates, 1993), more than half of all students surveyed worried to some degree about being physically attacked in or around school. While a majority of teachers (77%) feel very safe in and around school, this perception varies greatly with the quality of the school; only 44% of teachers who think their school provides a fair or poor education feel safe at school. These teachers also are more likely to report that violence has increased in their school over the past year. Teachers from secondary as compared to elementary schools are also more likely to believe that the levels of school violence have increased (21% vs. 14%). Many (44%) law enforcement officials, especially those in urban areas (59%), also believe that violence has increased in their local public schools.

Violence and the Social Climate of the School

The real or perceived threat of violence at school has clearly influenced the way principals manage, teachers teach, and students learn. In a national survey of secondary school principals (Price & Everett, 1997), one-third reported they had already implemented some type of violence prevention or safe school program; another third indicated they were planning to implement such a program. Most of the remaining principals reported they were either unsure of the need for such a program or of which programs were effective.

In the American Teacher survey (Harris & Associates, 1993), one-third of teachers reported that because of the threat of violence, both teachers and students in their school were less eager to go to school. A much larger proportion (43%) of urban teachers held this opinion. One-third of all teachers and two-thirds of teachers from poor quality schools believed teachers were less likely to challenge or discipline students as a direct result of the threat of violence; half of all teachers reported that students were less likely to pay attention to learning in the classroom. One in four students believed violence has lessened the quality of their education. The effects of violence appear to be even greater for students who are struggling academically. More than one-third of these students reported that the threat of violence has made them want to change schools and makes them less inclined to pay attention in class.

Gang activity is increasingly being carried into the schools. Huff and

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Trump (1996), in a study of youth gangs in Cleveland, Ohio, Denver, Colorado, and south Florida, report that half of their respondents acknowledged that members of their gangs had assaulted teachers; 70% admit their gangs assaulted students; more than 80% said gang members took guns and knives to school; and more than 60% claimed gang members sold drugs at school. Clearly, gangs no longer view the school as a “neutral zone” where gang activity ceases. Gang “turf” issues have infiltrated schools (Parks, 1997).

The real costs of violence go far beyond the individual injury and physical suffering resulting from the violent act, although these costs should not be minimized or trivialized. The fear and trauma in the nation’s schools are having an impact on the entire school context and *all* students in these contexts: on teaching practices; children’s readiness and capacity for learning; hiring and retention of teachers, administrators, and other school staff; the openness and accessibility of the campus; student rights to privacy; the physical building and grounds; and the quality of the learning environment more generally. This is the problem we address in this volume: How can our schools and their local neighborhoods stop the violence? How can we create safe schools for our children?

National, State, and Local Responses to School Violence: An Overview

There has been a dramatic shift in the public’s perception of the seriousness of violence. In 1982 only 3% of adults in a national poll identified crime and violence as the most important problem facing this country; by August of 1994, more than half identified crime and violence as the nation’s most important problem. Throughout the 1990s, violence has been viewed as a more serious problem than the high cost of living, unemployment, poverty and homelessness, and health care. Again in 1994, violence (together with a lack of discipline among students) was identified as the “biggest problem” facing the nation’s public schools. Among America’s high school seniors, violence is the problem these young people worry about most frequently – more than drug abuse, economic problems, poverty, race relations, or nuclear war (Maguire & Pastore, 1996).

The public’s view of the causes of this crisis focuses primarily on deficiencies or dysfunctions in the family, public schools, and the criminal justice system. When respondents in a 1994 national survey were asked to identify which part of society is to blame for the increase in crime, the courts and prison system were most frequently identified, followed closely by the home and school (Maguire & Pastore, 1995). When asked about the

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causes of violence in schools, the number one cause identified was a lack of parental discipline and control; the second was the breakdown in family structure and dysfunctional lifestyles (Maguire & Pastore, 1995). Secondary school principals also identified lack of parental supervision most frequently as the cause of school violence. For principals, the second most frequent cause identified was a lack of parent involvement with the schools (Price & Everett, 1997). But the public is divided when asked about how society should deal with this problem. Nearly equal proportions endorse "three strike" legislation calling for life prison terms without parole and spending tax money on youth prevention and treatment programs (Maguire & Pastore, 1995). Overall, however, there is greater support for the more punitive legal responses involving longer prison sentences; hiring more police; waiving youthful offenders age 13 and older into adult courts and, if convicted, into adult prisons; enacting laws prohibiting the manufacture, sale, and possession of semiautomatic assault rifles; and laws prohibiting the purchase of a gun by youth under 18 or by those with a prior official record.

Government policies at all levels primarily reflect this punitive, legalistic approach to violence prevention and control. At the national and state levels, there have been four major policy and program initiatives introduced as violence prevention or control strategies in the 1990s: (1) the use of judicial waivers, transferring violent juvenile offenders as young as age ten into the adult justice system for trial, sentencing, and incarceration; (2) legislating new gun control policies, e.g., the Brady Act; (3) the development and operation of "boot camps" or "shock incarceration" programs for young offenders, oriented toward instilling discipline and respect for authority through a military-like regimen of physical conditioning, work, and the strict enforcement of rules; and (4) the use of community policing to create police-community partnerships aimed at more efficient community problem solving and reductions in violence, drug abuse, and other community crime problems.

Two of these initiatives are purely reactive: they involve ways in which society responds to violent acts after they occur. Two are more preventive in nature, attempting to prevent the initial occurrence of violent behavior. The justification of judicial waivers and boot camps for juveniles is primarily a "just deserts" philosophy, i.e., youthful offenders should be punished more severely for serious violence. But there is no research evidence to suggest either strategy will have any increased deterrent effect over processing these youth in the juvenile justice system or in traditional correctional settings (MacKenzie & Brame, 1995; MacKenzie, Shaw, & Souryal, 1992;

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Peterson, 1996; Podkopacz & Feld, 1996; Shaw & MacKenzie, 1992). In fact, while the evidence is limited, it suggests that the use of waivers and incarceration in adult prisons as compared to juvenile institutions results in longer processing time and longer pretrial detention, disproportionate use of waivers for minority youth, much lower probability of any treatment while in custody, and an increased risk of subsequent offending when released (Bishop et al., 1996; Elliott, 1994a; Fagan, 1996; Frazier, Bishop, & Lanza-Kaduce, 1997). The research evidence on the effectiveness of community policing and gun control legislation is very limited and inconclusive.

There are some genuine prevention efforts sponsored by both federal and state governments, by private foundations, and by private businesses (National Research Council, 1993), although the investment in these efforts is small compared to the “get tough” approaches identified. At the federal level, the major initiative involves the Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act of 1994. This act provided \$630 million in federal grants during 1995 to the states to implement violence (and drug) prevention programs in and around schools, in order to help the states meet the seventh National Education Goal of the America 2000 initiative. The intent of this legislation was to fund “. . . violence prevention, early intervention, rehabilitation referral, and education in elementary and secondary schools (including intermediate and junior high schools).” State Departments of Education and local school districts are currently developing guidelines and searching for violence prevention programs demonstrated to be effective. Most of the violence prevention programs currently being employed in the schools, e.g., conflict resolution curricula, peer mediation, individual counseling, metal detectors, and locker searches and sweeps, have either not been thoroughly evaluated or have been evaluated and found to be ineffective (Gottfredson, 1997; Lipsey, 1992; Tolan & Guerra, 1994; Webster, 1993). It remains to be seen if any significant reductions in violent offending will result from the Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Community initiative.

When examining the dollars allocated to national and state strategies for addressing the violence crisis, there is a clear priority – get tough on violent offenders and build more prisons to hold them. This suggests that the nation is investing far more resources in building and maintaining prisons than in primary prevention programs. Such investments imply an emphasis on reacting to violent offenders after the fact and removing them from the community, rather than preventing children from becoming violent offenders in the first place and retaining them in the nation’s communities