



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.

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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

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