

Perceptions of School Violence by Elementary and Middle School Personnel

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The incidence of juvenile violence is becoming more and more commonplace across the United States. The number of youths arrested on homicide charges between 1988 and 1992 increased by 101% in Ohio alone (Baker, 1995). While the increasing tide of juvenile violence in the streets is alarming, it is particularly problematic because of insidious encroachment into the public school (Glasser, 1992; Sautter, 1995). According to a National School Board Association survey of 700 schools, school violence is worse now than it was 5 years ago (Baker, 1995). Research has indicated in the 4 years following September 1986, 71 persons had been killed by guns in schools, 201 were severely wounded, and 242 were held hostage at gun-point. It is estimated that more than 100,000 youths are taking guns to school each day (Center to Prevent Handgun Violence [Center], 1990; Stephans, 1994). A 1991 study indicated that one of every 18 students attending high school carried a gun (Schaff 1995).

These acts occurred in 35 states and the District of Columbia (Center, 1990). Research indicates that violent crimes among youth are increasing while other age groups have stabilized (Governor's Task Force, 1993; Portner, 1995; Sautter, 1995). Fox and Pierce (1994) reported that over 90% of the time, males between the ages of 14 and 17 have been both the offender and victim in violent crime.

Research on school violence indicates that school hallways and classrooms are risk areas for violence while the trigger event for the violence varies from gang activity to romantic disputes or theft (Center, 1990). Many education professionals feel that school violence is not caused by the school but reflects behaviors displayed outside school (Stephans, 1994). Societal changes, the breakdown of family relationships, violent role models in the media, and media-modeled violent behavior have been cited as contributing to school violence (Bender & Bruno, 1990; Met Life, 1994; Stephans, 1994).

Resource constraints placed on U.S. schools make it difficult for the schools to adequately address this issue, leaving many to deal with violence in a piecemeal fashion. While many programs to target the causes of school violence are being piloted in middle schools, junior high schools, and senior high schools, there are few programs targeting the elementary school level (Johnson & Johnson, 1995a; Stephans, 1994). Programs ranging from police partnerships to the removal of lockers are being tried, but the results have been inconsistent (Johnson & Johnson, 1995a, 1995b).

Further, the perceptions of elementary and middle school personnel regarding school violence have not been investigated. As these are the professionals who deal directly with these issues, their perceptions are vital to developing a successful program.

The primary purpose of the study presented here was to describe elementary and middle school professionals' experiences with violence. A secondary purpose was to try to identify effective and ineffective programs dealing with school violence at the elementary and middle school level.

METHOD

Participants

The sample was part of a larger sample of school professionals selected in order to investigate violence at all school levels. Teachers, building administrators, and district administrators in 15 school districts of varying sizes, from 12 states, representing all geographical regions of the country, participated. A random sample of 134 teachers, 38 building administrators, 2 district administrators, with 6 indicating other but not specifying their exact function, responded to the survey. Of the 180 respondents, 90 were employed at the preschool/elementary level, and 90 were employed at the middle school/junior high level. Some 54 respondents held a 4-year degree, 114 held a master's degree, 10 held doctoral degrees, and 2 did not indicate their educational level. Fifty-eight men and 121 women responded, and one did not indicate gender. The ethnicity of the respondents was 0.1% Asian, 13% African American, 0.3% Hispanic, 79% Anglo, and 2% failing to respond. Seven were in school districts having fewer than 1,000 students, 11 were from districts of 1,000 to 4,999 students, 14 were from districts of 5,000 to 14,999 students, 8 were from districts ranging from 15,000 to 29,999 students, 14 were from districts of 30,000 to 49,999 students, 24 were from districts of 50,000 or more students and 12 individuals failed to respond to this item.

Instrumentation

A review of the literature, including ERIC and Psych Lit, was undertaken. Recent magazines and newspaper articles on violence were also examined. Areas of interest were located, and general, open-ended questions regarding school violence were developed for use in interviews to construct the survey. Ethnographic interviews were conducted with teachers, site administrators, and district administrators from various sized school districts located in three Midwestern states. Interviews were tape recorded and transcribed.

These data, in conjunction with information obtained from the review of the literature on violence, were used to develop specific survey questions, using either a four-or-five point Likert scale. The questions were designed so that the two lower-weighted options could be combined meaningfully together, as could the two higher-weighted options. For example, the section dealing with influences leading to violence was developed using the scale of Strong Influence, Influential, Little Influence, and No Influence. However, there were some forced-choice and categorical items included in some sections of the survey. The forced choice and categorical items primarily covered demographics and determining whether a violence prevention program had been tried by a school system. Three specific questions were randomly incorporated into the survey to ensure that participants were reading each question and responding appropriately. One repeated question was also included to investigate respondent consistency.

An initial pilot test of the survey instrument was conducted in the presence of one of the researchers with two administrators and two teachers from a mid-sized Midwestern school. Four university faculty members from a small Midwestern university were also part of the pilot testing of the instrument. These sessions were held to ensure question clarity and to determine the time necessary for respondents to complete the questionnaire. These sessions resulted in revisions of survey length, question placement, and directions. The final survey contained 162 items covering eight categories. The eight categories were Teacher/Faculty Personal Safety, Location of Violent Events, Perceptions of Causes of Violence, Strategies for Dealing with Violence (and Perceived Effectiveness), Student Actions Towards Others, Characteristics of Victims, Characteristics of Perpetrators, Demographics, and Administrative Information. The time it took participants to complete the survey ranged from 10 to 22 minutes.

Procedure

Appointments were made with teachers, site administrators, and district administrators to conduct ethnographic interviews to construct the survey. Interviews ranged between one to one and one-half hours in length. All interviews were tape recorded and verbatim transcripts were made. A systematic examination of each interview was conducted using a two-part domain analysis (Spradly, 1979). Survey questions were constructed through the integration of domains and concepts generated from interview responses with information obtained from a review of the literature.

A map of the 48 contiguous United States was divided into Northwest, West, Midwest, South, Southeast, and Northeast. Within each region one large city (over 1,000,000), one mid-size city (30,000 to 200,000) and one small city/town (less than 20,000) were selected. Next, a list containing the names and addresses of a randomly selected set of teachers, building administrators, and district administrators was obtained

from a market research firm and assigned a number. This yielded a target sample of 611 school professionals.

A survey distribution and collection procedure involving multiple mailings was developed using a modified form of Dillman's (1978) approach. A cover letter and surveys were mailed to each participant with a self-addressed stamped envelope. Approximately 26% of the sample responded to the first mailing. Three weeks later a second mailing was sent to those who had not returned the survey materials. A total of 295 surveys were returned.

Four respondents incorrectly answered one or more of the validity items so were removed from the study. The total study sample was 291 (a 48% return rate). Of this sample 180 were elementary or middle school professionals. There were no differences in return rate noted by district size or location. The consistency of responses was calculated via a Pearson-Product Moment correlation using the repeated item. This resulted in a correlation of .90 which suggests that respondents were very consistent in their responses.

The results of the survey were placed into a data file. The main analysis consisted of calculating the percentage of responses obtained for each Likert option for each item on the survey. For example, the section dealing with influences leading to violence was summarized by calculating the percentage of respondents who saw each influence as a Strong Influence, Influential, Little Influence, or No Influence. In many cases the percentage of responses were grouped into two main groups consisting of the two higher responses and two lower responses. For example, the violence influence questions responses were grouped by calculating the percentage who saw an event as either strongly influential or influential.

RESULTS

Personal Safety

In the first section of the survey, the questions focused on the feelings of safety experienced by school personnel, asking the participants to indicate how threatened they were by students, parents, and administrators in various ways using the scale consisting of Very Concerned, Concerned, A Little Concerned or Not Concerned at All. Twenty-four percent of the respondents indicated they were concerned or very concerned about safety while at school. Respondents indicated that they were most concerned about verbal threat/attack from students (36%) and students' parents (32%); 14% were concerned or very concerned about physical threats or attack by students while 21% were concerned or very concerned about physical threats or attack by students' parents. Only 4% of those responding

indicated they were concerned or very concerned about sexual harassment by students, and 3% indicated they were concerned or very concerned about sexual harassment by parents.

Survey participants were asked to evaluate their concerns about personal safety when dealing with faculty members and administrators. The responses from this survey indicated 6% or less were concerned or very concerned about verbal, physical, or sexual threat or attack from this group.

Frequency and Types of Violence

Respondents were asked to indicate the frequency and types of violence they had experienced in the past 2 years. The categories for this section were; none, 1 to 5 times, 6 to 10 times and 10 or more times. Overall, a majority of respondents had experienced some form of violence at least one or more times. Sixty-two percent indicated they had been verbally threatened or intimidated, 26% had been physically threatened or intimidated, 12% had been sexually threatened or intimidated, 66% had been verbally attacked, 11% had been physically attacked, 0.6% had been sexually attacked, and 56% indicated that their room, property and/or school had been seriously vandalized.

The percentages of respondents who had experienced violence six or more times was equally significant. Eighteen percent had been verbally threatened or intimidated, 4% had been physically threatened or intimidated, 1% had been sexually threatened or intimidated, 24% had been verbally attacked, 0.6% had been physically attacked, and 13% had their room, property and/or school vandalized.

Changing Behaviors

The respondents were asked to rate how student and faculty behaviors have changed in school and the classroom over the past two years. Survey participants were asked to rate 19 specific violent behaviors and or changes in students (an "other" category was included) and whether these behaviors/changes have Greatly Increased, Increased, Remained the Same, Decreased, or Were Not a Problem. Of the top 10 most-increased behaviors, all were student-to-student behaviors with the exception of organic problems (F.A.S., crack babies). The top 10 list of behaviors that had increased or greatly increased included: verbal intimidation or threats (61%), increase in biologically damaged children (60%), punching and hitting (50%), rumors among peers/peer escalation of events (46%) (this relates to peers telling someone they heard that so-and-so had said he or she was a such-and-such, etc.), punching and/or hitting (open or closed hand) (42%), sexual harassment including inappropriate sexual behavior (36%), classroom vandalism (34%), kicking (34%), lack of conflict resolution skills/other people skills (30%), and knives/ice picks/razors (23%).

The behaviors rated by at least 10% of the sample as having greatly increased were verbal intimidation (23%), pushing or shoving (19%), punching and/or hitting (open or closed hand) (18%), increase in biologically damaged children (17%), rumors among peers/peer escalation of events (15%), kicking (14%), classroom or building vandalism (14%), and sexual harassment including inappropriate sexual behavior (11%).

Location of Violent Events

The respondents were asked to indicate areas where violent events were most likely to occur. These areas included hallways, cafeterias, classrooms, buses, offices of administrators/counselors, athletic events/extracurricular activities, gym areas, and restrooms. The option for an Other category was included to ensure that any areas not covered in the list could be identified. Participants were instructed to rate these areas using the options of High Risk, Moderate Risk, Low Risk, and No Risk. The five areas most frequently ranked as having the highest risk for school violence were: hallways (31%), buses (29%), restrooms (27%), extracurricular/athletic events (17%), and gym areas (13%). Twenty-six percent of respondents indicated that school classrooms were areas of moderate to high risk for violence.

Violence and Grade Level

The respondents were asked to rate the changes in violent activity, based on their experience, over the past 2 years at each of the various school levels. The ratings ranged from Greatly Increased, Increased, Remained the Same, to Decreased and included a category for Not a Problem. Some 28% of respondents saw violence increasing or greatly increasing at the preschool level; 56% saw violence increasing or greatly increasing at the elementary level, while 71% saw a similar increase at the middle school/junior high level; 66% saw violence as increasing or greatly increasing at the senior high level.

Perceived Causes of Violence

A list of 29 specific influences or causes of violence were identified and listed on the survey. An Other category was included to ensure complete coverage of this area. The respondents were asked to rate each cause or influence from Strongly Influential, Influential, Little Influence to Not Influential. The 10 things most frequently rated as being strongly influential or influential in causing school violence were a lack of rules or family structure (95%), a lack of involvement or parental supervision (95%), violence acted out by parents (94%), drug/alcohol use/abuse (92%), violent movies (90%), violence in TV programs (88%), student's poor self-concept/emotional disturbance (87%), gang activities (83%), violent games (83%), and change in family patterns to nontraditional patterns (83%).

Those events seen by at least 50% of the respondents as a strong influence were lack of family rules and/or structure (74%), violence acted out by parents in the home (73%), lack of family involvement/supervision with children/adolescents' lives (68%), parental drug use/abuse (63%), drug/alcohol use/abuse (58%), gang activities (55%), availability of weapons (52%), and violence in TV programs (50%).

Victims of Violence

Demographic information regarding student victims of violence was solicited from survey participants. Respondents were instructed to base answers on experiences at their individual school site. Responses received indicated that the victims' gender was primarily male (67%). Seventeen percent saw females as the primary victims, and 16% failed to answer. Forty-three percent saw the victim's ethnic background as generally Anglo, 28% saw victims as African American, 9% indicated that victims were generally Hispanic, 0.6% indicated victims were generally Asian, 2% denoted an "other" category, and 17% of respondents failed to answer this section. The age of the victim in relation to the perpetrator was younger or the same age, at 23% and 42% respectfully. Thirty percent indicated that the victim was older than the perpetrator while 4% didn't complete this item. The proportion who perceived the typical victim as being in middle school was 52%, followed by elementary school at 33%, and then high school with 8%. Twenty-three percent of respondents indicated that they thought the victims were involved with gangs, while 42% believed the victims were not in gangs. Fourteen percent indicated that they thought victims were involved with the sale and/or use of drugs, while 41% believed they were not involved with chemicals.

School professionals were asked about the family structure of the victims. Survey results indicated that 52% of the respondents perceived victims as coming from single parent homes, while 34% indicated that they were not familiar with the family structure. Six percent indicated that victims came from two-parent homes, 5% of the respondents indicated that they came from some other type of home structure, and 7% failed to answer this item. The stability and emotional atmosphere of the family of the victim was perceived by 56% of the respondents as being unstable, 5% as being punitive, 3% as being stable, 30% did not know, and 6% failed to complete the item. Sixty-four percent of the respondents indicated that the academic performance of the victims was generally below average, 14% saw it as average, 3% perceived it as being above average, 12% of the respondents didn't know, and 7% failed to complete the item.

Perpetrators of Violence

Survey participants were asked to provide demographic information regarding student perpetrators of violence. As with the identification of victims of violence, respondents were instructed to base their response on their experiences within the school setting. The respondents indicated that the perpetrator's gender was primarily male (86%) while 3% indicated that females were primarily the perpetrators and 11% failed to answer the item. Thirty-five percent saw the ethnic background as generally Anglo, 39% saw perpetrators as generally African American, 9% indicated that they were generally Hispanic, 1% indicated perpetrators were generally Asian, 2% denoted an "other" category, and 14% of respondents failed to answer this section.

The age of the perpetrator compared to the age of the victim was in most cases seen about the same age or older, at 68% and 21% respectfully. Three percent of the respondents indicated that the perpetrator was generally younger than the victim, with 9% of the respondents not completing this item. A large percentage of perpetrators were perceived to be from both the middle (48%) and the elementary school levels (36%), with high school students being generally seen as the perpetrators 10% of the time.

When asked about perpetrator involvement in gangs and drugs, 29% of respondents indicated that they thought the perpetrators were involved in or members of gangs, while 19% indicated that they thought perpetrators were involved with the sale and/or use of drugs. School professionals were asked about the family structure of student perpetrators. Respondents indicated that 55% perceived these students as coming from single parent homes, 6% coming from two-parent homes, 3% coming from punitive homes, 31% indicated that they didn't know about the family structure, and 6% failed to answer the question. The stability and emotional atmosphere of the family of the perpetrator was perceived by 66% of the respondents to be unstable, while 3% perceived it as punitive, 2% as stable, 26% did not know, and 4% failed to complete the item.

Seventy-four percent of the respondents indicated that the academic performance of the perpetrators was perceived to be below average, 10% saw it as average, 0% as being above average, 12% of the respondents didn't know, and 4% failed to complete the item.

Violence Prevention Programs

All respondents were asked to answer yes or no to items concerning whether their schools had used any of the 26 most commonly cited programs found in the interviews and literature review. An Other category

asking them to describe any program their district or school was using that was not included in the list was also provided. (See Table 1.)

Respondents were also asked to rank order the five most effective programs they or their school had personally implemented. Only those participants who had indicated they or their school had used the program were entered into the calculation of this ranking. (See Table 2.)

The respondents were then asked to rank the five least effective things they or the district had personally implemented. Only those participants who had indicated they or their school had used the program were included in the calculation of this ranking. (See Table 3.)

DISCUSSION

Limitations

This study was limited by the scope by the sample that was used. While it incorporated school districts of various sizes and regions, sufficient representation of all schools in the country was not assured. Therefore, error may have been introduced into the findings due to inadequate sampling. Additionally, while the researchers indicated as many possible interpretations of the data in the report as they were able, there may be other plausible explanations for the data which are as yet undiscovered.

Implications

The survey results provided interesting and unique findings regarding the issue of school personnel safety, victim and perpetrator profiles, location of violent events, perceived causes/influences of violence, strategies used to combat the violence in the schools, and their effectiveness.

These results indicate that school personnel fear not only the student's behavior (36%), but also that of the student's parents (30%). Because concern about parent's behavior has not been explored fully in the literature, we suggest more attention to this issue in the future. Additionally, counselors may find dealing with the issues of threat from parents an important dimension that has been overlooked in their schools. While many schools have implemented measures to deal with this concern, such as locked doors, visitor passes, and metal detectors, additional attention to the issue of threats from parents may be warranted. The school counselor is in the unique position to provide this type of in-service training other school professionals.

In examining the causes of school violence, the results of the present study were consistent with other research (Met Life, 1994; Stephans, 1994). School professionals feel much of the cause for school violence is related to social changes. The social changes which seem most important from their perspective were the changes in the family. These changes have been discussed in the literature as well (Heath & McLaughlin, 1987; Hofferth, 1987; Jourdan, 1994). Perceptions that there seemed to be a lack of family rules, decline in family structure, and lack of parental supervision for the children seemed most striking. Other research has shown this to play a role in school violence (Lysted, 1986).

In addition, the role of media violence and the lack of positive role models were also seen as important. Dealing with these issues may require us to examine the role the school plays in society more closely. It may be that the school will need to play a more central role in the socializing of many of these children (Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, Ousten, & Smith, 1979). This could include not only parent education, parent involvement programs, and the before and after school programs, but utilizing the school as the hub for a wider school-community integration of services for children (Hranitz & Eddowes, 1990; Levin & Carlson-Paige, 1995).

For instance, school counselors and teachers may provide not only for the educational needs of children but also for their moral or values needs through classroom activities and changes in how the materials are presented in the regular classroom (Kirschenbaum, 1992). As this study indicated, many school professionals feel unprepared to deal with these issues, and the acquisition of these skills in university training programs may be beneficial. This process may include a more complete integration of school and community resources. Other changes may prove beneficial but would need to take place at the organizational level of the school district. Changes in classroom-management strategies and how responsibility is taught to children may be improved through system level changes rather than through a program (Bien, 1994).

The results of the present study indicate many school professionals feel the resources of the school system have not been directed at school violence in a way that meets their concerns. This may provide an opportunity for school counselors to provide not only prevention programs directed at students but also skills-training programs for faculty members (Baker, 1996; Dinkmeyer, McKay, & Dinkmeyer, 1980; Glasser, 1992). This would increase the districts' awareness of the role school counselors play in the system and serve as a cost-effective means to meet the districts' needs.

This study found many inconsistencies in the effectiveness of various programs used by schools to deal with this issue. The inconsistencies were not explained by examining the various school district sizes or geographical regions. These findings indicate that implementation of a program is not a guarantee that the issue of violence will be addressed adequately in a school system. This observation focuses on the importance that both summative and formative evaluations play in school programs. Again, school counselors have the ability to increase their value to the school district through involvement in this process (Baker, 1996).

While the reason for inconsistencies in perceptions of program effectiveness was not studied, it may be due to the piece-meal approach sometimes taken by schools (Portner, 1995). Some schools seem to approach issues such as school violence with a response best described as: "we will put this program in and it will meet our district's legal responsibility." Other school districts seem to reorganize the districts' system to deal with the issue. Those districts that utilize the system to deal with the issue may find many different programs effective, while those using the piece-meal philosophy may not (Petersen, Pietrzak, & Speaker, 1996; Pietrzak, Petersen, & Speaker, 1996). However, additional research is needed to determine if this observation is really true.

The present study highlights the need to develop an empirical foundation for a holistic or systemic violence prevention model. The significant investment in time and money, not to mention human lives, that this idea entails makes this an important process. The difference in the effectiveness between adopting a systemic approach versus a piece-meal approach has received little attention from researchers to date. However, with the magnitude of the problem indicated by the findings in this present study this seems an important arena worthy of further investigation.

Table 1

Top 10 procedures or strategies implemented by schools (n=180).

Rank	Program	Percentage
1	Poverty issue programs (breakfast programs, book programs)	88
2	Placing teachers in hallways	80
3	Visitor registration or badges	77
4	Before/after school programs	75
5	Programs to increase parental involvement	72
6.5	Dress codes or clothing restrictions	69
6.5	Alternate schools/educational models	69
8.5	Uniform discipline policies	68
8.5	Programs to involve the community through business-school partnerships	68
9.5	Peer mediation/conflict resolution training	67
9.5	Multicultural/diversity awareness programs	67

Note: Numbers represent percentage of respondents that have implemented each strategy.

Table 2

Perceived most effective of the top 10 violence prevention strategies (n=180).

Rank	Program	Percentage
1	Teachers placed/present in the halls	67
2	Security personnel (specifically for in school)	51
3.5	Uniform discipline procedures/policies (or stricter approach)	43
3.5	Before/after school programs (breakfast programs, book programs)	43
5.5	Closed campus (no off-campus lunches)	42
5.5	Alternative schools or educational models	42
7	Peer mediation/conflict resolution training	36
8	Programs to increase parental involvement	35
9	Dress codes or clothing restrictions	34
10	Visitor registration, wearing passes, doors locked	30
11	Poverty issue programs (breakfast programs, book programs)	28

Note: Percentages were calculated by dividing the total top 5 ratings of the most effective by the total number who had actually implemented the strategies. Only those personnel/districts who had actually used the specific strategy were included in this calculation.

Table 3

Perceived least effective of the top 10 violence prevention strategies (n=180)

Rank	Program	Percentage
1	Alternative schools or educational models	71
2	Multicultural/diversity awareness programs	70
3	Programs to increase parental involvement	69
4	Poverty issue programs	68
5	Dress codes or clothing restrictions	47
6	Before/after school programs for students	45
7	Uniform discipline procedures/policies (or stricter approach)	44
8	Dogs (for drugs, explosives, or otherwise)	40
9	Business and school partnership	38
10	Social skills training programs (teacher or students)	37
11	Teacher conflict management training	28

Note: Percentages were calculated by dividing the total top 5 least effective ratings by the total number who had actually implemented the strategies. Only those personnel/districts who had actually used the specific strategy were included in this calculation.

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