

## **Interpersonal Violence Among Youth: A Challenge for School Personnel**

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*Although interpersonal violence in the school setting is not a new phenomenon, the problem has escalated considerably in this last decade. Both urban and rural school systems are being affected. This paper seeks to explore the extent of interpersonal violence and its impact on students and school personnel. The multiple factors that lead to school violence are examined. Select curricula used in school systems to reduce or prevent violence are highlighted. The article emphasizes that student violence is not a problem limited to the school environment, but one that should and must find a solution through cooperation of all the institutions present in the community, family included. Finally, suggestions are presented for developing preventive strategies.*

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**KEY WORDS:** interpersonal violence; student violence; violence prevention.

### **INTRODUCTION**

A 6:00 p.m. local television newscast on Thanksgiving day, November 28, 1991, featured responses from residents of an area in East Tennessee. When a middle-school child was asked what he was thankful for, he replied, "I'm thankful none of my friends got killed this year." His statement expresses the threat and fear felt by many American students. Youth violence is a national epidemic, and no one is spared the consequences of its evils.

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The need is great for school systems to join with public and private organizations to help reduce the incidence of youth violence. Too often schools have looked to the community, especially law enforcement and criminal justice systems, to cope with the problems of youth violence. Yet, the causes are so complex and overwhelming that one or two institutions cannot solve the problems violence creates among American youth. Thus, the focus of this paper will be (a) to describe the extent of interpersonal violence among youth, (b) to discuss multicausations for violence, (c) to profile the impact of violence in the school setting, and (d) to offer school strategies contributing to the prevention of violence.

### EXTENT OF VIOLENCE AMONG YOUTH

Interpersonal violence, or aggressive behavior, is a public health problem that affects the school-aged population and all segments of the American society. For the purpose of this paper, aggressive behavior refers to socially unacceptable ways of behaving that may result in psychological or physical injury to another person or in the damage of property (Herbert, 1989). The term "aggression" is used generically to describe a complex phenomenon ranging from disruptiveness to physical and verbal abuse. In practice, the term aggression is used interchangeably with violence.

The most extreme form of interpersonal violence is homicide, which is defined as death due to injuries purposely inflicted by another person, not including deaths caused by law enforcement officers or legal executions (Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, 1990). Homicide is the tenth leading cause of death in the United States; yet among the 15- to 24-year-old population, it is the second leading cause of death, being surpassed only by unintentional injuries (e.g., motor vehicle deaths and drownings). The homicide rate among young American males is roughly 20 times higher than homicide rates in other industrialized countries (Roper, 1991).

The homicide rate among our nation's youth is increasing significantly. In her 1991 address to the American Public Health Association, Surgeon General Antonia C. Novello (1991b) stated that 3273 deaths occur yearly because of interpersonal violence among youth. She further reported at a "Forum on Youth Violence in Minority Communities: Setting the Agenda for Prevention" that murders are increasing faster among teenagers than among young adults. And, the homicide rate for Black men, ages 15-24 years, has risen 40% since 1984. In fact, homicide is the leading cause of death for Black males 15-24 years of age (Centers for Disease Control, 1990). Further, the homicide rate among Black women is three to four times higher than that among White women.

Many young children also have extensive exposure to violence. Daily in America, 30 children suffer gunshot wounds. Bell and Jerkins, as cited by Novello (1991a), investigated violence in Chicago and reported in an unpublished paper that all the children in a public housing project had a first-hand encounter with a shooting by age five. In one Chicago school, 26% of the children had witnessed a person shot, and 29% had seen a stabbing. In Los Angeles, 10–20% of the homicides in 1982 were witnessed by children; whereas in Detroit, 17% of the children witnessed a homicide in 1985 (Novello, 1991a).

Homicides appear to be concentrated mainly in inner cities among minority youth. The Centers for Disease Control analysis of youth homicide rates showed that five states (New York, Florida, Michigan, Missouri, and California) and the District of Columbia account for more than half of all homicides among 15- to 24-year-old Black males. Yet, we should not assume that homicide is a problem only of large urban areas, because rates have also increased in rural communities (Roper, 1991).

In addition, a home environment fostering violence is a way of life for some children. In fact, the roots of violence may extend to a time before a child's birth. Many American children are born into violence and never witness other ways of expressing intense feelings. That same violent expression is then taken to the school setting to resolve conflict and demonstrate power.

Data from the Centers for Disease Control revealed that 11,000 persons died from 1980–1989 as a result of homicides committed by high school-aged youth using firearms, cutting instruments, or blunt objects (CDC, 1991a). The 1990 national school-based Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), based upon a representative sample of 11,631 students in Grades 9–12 in the 50 states, District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands, found that approximately 1 out of 5 high school students carried a firearm, knife, or club at least once during the 30 days preceding the survey. And, of the students carrying firearms, handguns were the weapon of choice. Males were four times more likely to have possessed a weapon than were females. Knives and razors were carried more often than clubs. Approximately 1 out of 20 students reported carrying a firearm (CDC, 1991b).

Violence is pervasive in American schools. The National School Safety Center reported that approximately 28,200 students are physically attacked in secondary schools each month. Eight percent of urban junior and high school students missed at least 1 day of school a month because of fear. And, approximately 5200 secondary school teachers are physically attacked at school each month. An estimate of repair costs due to school crime is \$200 million (Hranitz and Eddowes, 1990). Although these figures appear staggering, the numbers are probably under reported because school personnel know violence does not reflect well upon the school district.

The National Adolescent Student Health Survey (NASHS) sampled 11,419 students and found that 49% of the boys and 28% of the girls reported having been in at least one physical fight during the past year. Thirty-four percent of respondents had been threatened and 14% had been robbed. Thirteen percent of the respondents reported having been physically attacked while at school or on the school bus. Among the boys, 7% carried a knife daily and 1% carried a handgun daily (CDC, 1989; American School Health Association, 1989). Similarly, the 1990 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) conducted among 11,631 students in Grades 9–12 showed an average of 18 fighting incidences occurring per 100 students each month. The incidence rate was four times higher for males than for females. Also, the survey results showed that fights were most likely to occur among acquaintances (CDC, 1992).

Schools are reflections of neighborhoods in which the youths reside. When a community has a problem with violence, so do the schools within that community. A 1990 report by the Center to Prevent Handgun Violence presented a shocking profile of violence in American schools. In a 4-year period, 1986–1990, 71 people were killed with guns at school, 201 people were severely wounded, and 242 people were held hostage at gunpoint. Youths 14–17 years of age were at greatest risk, especially while in hallways or classrooms, where most forms of violence occurred. Handguns were used in 75% of the gun incidences, and males were the most frequent offenders (93%) and victims (76%). It has been estimated that 400,000 boys carry handguns to school yearly (Center to Prevent Handgun Violence, 1990). The availability and use of handguns and other weapons make the school setting a prime target for settling disputes among youth in a tragic manner. Administrators, educators, students, and parents have reason for concern about the violence in schools. Children cannot learn if they are worried about personal safety and security.

The destiny American children face is the reality that every 36 minutes a child is killed or injured by a gun and that every day 135,000 children bring their guns to school (Gibbs, 1990). According to the U.S. Justice Department, since 1983 juveniles under the age of 18 have committed three times as many murders, two times as many rapes, and five times as many robberies. Reports by the National Council on Crime and Delinquency stated that on any given day, some 100,000 adolescents are confined in correctional institutions. That is nearly twice the number confined in 1965, when there were 6.5 million more people under 18 years of age in America. These alarming statistics have led the U.S. House Committee on Children, Youth, and Families to declare youth crime a “National Emergency” (Staff, 1991).

In the past, the extent of violence in American schools may not have been adequately recognized by some school personnel. For example, in an opinion poll conducted by the Educational Research Service (ERS, 1984), the vast majority of principals and teachers viewed alcohol and drug abuse as serious problems but did not perceive theft, physical attacks, extreme verbal abuse, and vandalism as significant school problems during the academic year 1983–1984. In contrast to this perception, the National Institute of Education's Safe School Study in 1978 reported that 8% of the schools had a serious crime problem. These findings and others resulted in the drafting of national health objectives on the problem of violence. Later in the 1980s, the National Crime Survey stated that although the school-age population had declined since 1982, the number of violent crimes in and around schools had remained high, at about 465,000 violent crimes in 1987. Among those crimes were over 50,000 aggravated assaults and more than 100,000 simple assaults (Menacker, Weldon, and Hurwitz, 1990).

In summation, the figures and surveys make it apparent that American schools are facing serious problems concerning violence among the school-age population. The turmoils of the streets and neighborhoods have spilled over into the classrooms and are affecting the lives, both physically and psychologically, of the students and teachers. More students feel the need to carry weapons to school, either to defend themselves or to use them to resolve their conflicts. The 1950s behavior problems of running in the hallway, chewing gum, and throwing spitballs have largely been replaced by physical assaults and murders. However, the prevalence of violence is not solely a problem within the school. Other segments of society, such as health care providers, law enforcement agencies, the criminal justice system, and social services, are recognizing the deleterious impact of violence on children and youth.

### MULTICAUSATIONS FOR VIOLENCE

Understanding the nature of violence affecting American youth involves more than an analysis of youth behavior, regulations, or law enforcement. Such factors as family disruption, unemployment, poverty, racism, abuse, lack of health care, and low levels of achievement all contribute to personal victimization among American youth. An examination of theoretical models of human aggression may help to explain why certain environmental factors seem to contribute to student violence.

## Causal Models

Emphasizing the fact that man is an animal with an aggressive and violent nature, Fox (1982) contended that violence is a natural occurrence. However, a problem arises when the individual gives meaning to those violent acts. Fox asserted that this meaning emerges in the following fashion:

. . . not [from] our violent nature, or even the nature of violence, but [from] our violent imaginations, and our imaginative use of violence: an imaginative use that no longer bears any close relation to the evolved condition of violence—the conditions in which violence is a contained, normal, explicable and unproblematical aspect of our adaptational history as a species (p. 15).

Therefore, Fox emphasized the need for the development of workable rules to regulate violence.

Perhaps Dollard and his colleagues (Dollard, Miller, Doob, and Mowrer, 1950) came closest to approaching Fox's position, when they postulated that ". . . the occurrence of aggressive behavior always presupposes the existence of frustration and, contrariwise, that the existence of frustration always leads to same form of aggression" (p. 1). According to Dollard, an individual is repeatedly frustrated from birth onward. In reviewing research on the causes of violence in school-age children, we could find little support for Fox's and Dollard's propositions. On the contrary, we found a wealth of research bent on explaining why violence is an aberrant condition.

Downes' (1982) analysis of aggressive behavior identifies five perspectives grounded in mainstream sociological theories that offer causal models, theories of meaning and motives, and assumptions regarding the relationship between the individual and society. These perspectives are grouped under the following headings: strain, labeling, control, culture conflicts, and class conflicts. Under the strain theory, one should consider the works of Merton (1957) and Cohen (1955), which postulate that modern industrial democracies have emphasized certain goals such as "money-success" (Merton) and "social status" (Cohen). The problem, or strain, arises when, in reality, only a few can obtain these goals. This tension, then, results in anomie. For Cohen, who has studied lower-class, urban adolescents' involvement in gangs, the school is seen as a major source of tension. While it encourages children to strive for status and achievement, it then denies their attainment to all but a small minority of students. Thus, the adolescent turns to the gang to find some form of status and achievement.

On the other hand, Cloward and Ohlin (1960) contend that the school is mostly irrelevant to understanding the reasons for gang activities. More important than achievement and status in school is Merton's "money-success," or the pursuit of financial gain in motivating a gang's behavior in the

American inner city. One may assume, then, that the school ground becomes just an extension of the neighborhood, where more opportunities can be found to increase one's financial gains through theft, drug trade, and violence.

Another notion related to the issue of strain is Matza's (1964) proposition that juvenile delinquency is willed behavior and is generally intermittent and mundane. In his view, there is a subculture of delinquency that distorts commonly held societal values, rather than opposing them. So, equating toughness with masculinity, along with searching for excitement and relief from the boredom of routine work, can lead adolescents to unacceptable or unlawful behaviors, such as "joy-riding," petty theft, fights, and occasional vandalism.

The labeling theories examine deviancy in terms of the problems occurring between the individual accused of deviancy and the societal institutions that define and regulate behavior (Downes, 1982). This process ultimately leads to a polarization of the community and to a self-fulfilling prophecy. Those who are labeled delinquent will tend to become so, both because of rejection from society and because they will themselves end up believing that they are, indeed, deviant. Of particular interest is the assertion by some theorists that the media are greatly influential in this process by stereotyping youthful deviants and by projecting an unrealistic vision of normalcy.

Control theorists, such as Fox (1982), assume that violence and aggression are a given, an inherent part of human nature. They assert that violence is a resource that people are likely to use when their attachment to society is unstable or when the controls are weak. Therefore, violence can be minimized by strong controls, increased surveillance, and decreased opportunities for violence.

Culture-conflict theories are based on cultural differences that exist between middle and working classes. The conflict arises because the dominant culture does not recognize the other as a culture in its own right, but instead treats it as a counterculture. Supposedly, these theories can also be applied to the tension-provoking differences between various ethnic cultures. Ianni (1989) and Rodriguez and Zayas (1990) have pointed out that, whereas these cultures are segregated in ethnic neighborhoods, they come in contact with each other in the inner-city schools, and they consequently engage in conflict and violence on the school grounds or in the classrooms.

In a paper on inner-city adolescents, Thompson (1990) disputed the contention that Black Americans' positive self-identity development must be one of bicultural identity. This would require the synthesis of basically incompatible social values derived from the Afro-American and Euro-American

cultural roots. For Thompson, there is little opportunity for the inner-city adolescent to integrate these discordant cultural values. On the contrary, she asserts that several factors, such as virtual segregation from the larger community, failure of the school system, and distorted values pandered by the media, promote in these youths a concept of self-esteem that leads to deviance and delinquency.

The class-conflict theories are loosely based on the Marxist concept of the inevitability of class conflict in a capitalistic society. Thus, the youth will create subcultures or countercultures in an attempt to resolve the tension generated by economic insecurity and community fragmentation (Downes, 1982).

Finally, in his review of studies that hypothesize a psychopathological origin for childhood aggression, Crowell (1986) concludes that aggressive behavior can indeed be viewed as a pattern of childhood maladjustment. As such, it constitutes a form of developmental psychopathology that is somewhat predictive of high-risk for developing antisocial behavior in adolescence and adulthood. He also finds some weak empirical evidence that genetic factors may influence aggressive behavior.

### Causal Factors

The evidence is much stronger that environmental factors can influence the development of a child's aggressive behavior. Among these are the family, peer relationships, teacher's behavior, the school environment, the media, and society.

*Family.* Several years ago, Duke (1980) reviewed the research on school violence. His categories on "who is to blame" still seem relevant. He started with the family background, citing studies that show how the breaking down of the family structure through divorce and separation, single-parent families, combative family environments, deficient parenting skills, and parental permissiveness is associated with low achievement and behavioral problems in school. Writing in an issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*, Zinsmeister (1990) strongly agrees with those reasons, laying most of the blame squarely on the shoulders of "bad parents" and the family breakdown.

A study by Dornbusch *et al.* (1985) found that adolescents, and in particular males, living in a mother-only household showed a greater tendency toward antisocial behavior than did adolescents in two-parent families. Interestingly, the presence of another adult (non-parent) in the household lessened the likelihood of misbehavior. A recent study of school-age children who were maltreated at home showed that abused children demonstrated

severe academic and socioemotional problems. Neglected children, although faring better in socioemotional development, still displayed serious academic delays (Wodarski, Kurtz, Gaudin, and Howing, 1990).

*Peers.* Another factor that may influence childhood violence is the peer group. Supporting this notion is Coleman's (1961) view that American schools have become "adolescent cultures" with their own set of values, language, and moral and behavioral codes. Further, Palonsky (1975) expressed the belief that the peer group's values may fill the void left by an unexciting and irrelevant educational environment. As an example, he stated that if the peer group had defined classes as boring and irrelevant, then failing and cutting classes were considered acceptable and appropriate forms of behavior. Similarly, violent behavior in the classroom has become more of an accepted norm in the adolescent subculture. Acknowledging the role of this subculture, Duke (1980) concluded ". . . there is compelling evidence that the peer group is the primary instrument for teaching adolescents to act in ways school authorities find unacceptable" (p. 36).

Rodriguez and Zayas (1990) asserted that adolescents learn antisocial behavior in a manner consonant with social-learning theory (i.e., by modeling friends' delinquent behavior, receiving reinforcement through peers' approval, and anticipating possible rewards, both social and financial, for their delinquent activities). These group influences are more likely to develop when an adolescent's bonding with family and school is weak.

*Teachers.* Classroom teachers, of course, may also be considered as possible causes of violence in the schools. The reasons range from their classroom management style, either too strict or too permissive, to their way of labeling and tracking students, thereby leading to self-fulfilling prophecies, to their improper use or misunderstanding of reinforcement theories. According to Gordon (1974), author of the "Teacher Effectiveness Training" programs, teachers create a teacher-centered environment that prevents responsible growth in their students. Such an environment is designed for the convenience of the teacher rather than fostering individual expression and maximizing learning. Students are given few opportunities for determining what they will learn and how they will learn academic skills.

Duke (1980) stated that some researchers go one step further, putting the blame on those who teach teachers. He decried the fact that, at least in 1980, very few teacher education programs offered classes in classroom discipline and management. Noting that research has established a direct relationship between school success and discipline problems, Duke appears disturbed that poor teaching may be the cause of students' misbehavior:

If teachers neglect students who need help in developing fundamental skills or fail to enlist outside assistance to help students with learning problems that cannot be handled in the regular classroom context, then they may have to accept much of the blame for the behavioral problems that typically ensue (p. 40).

The implication, of course, is that frustration, triggered by academic failure, can sometimes lead to aggressive and violent behavior.

*School Environment.* The school, as an institution *per se*, cannot expect to escape its share of indictments relative to student violence. Some researchers, such as West (1975) and Sexton (1967), argue that schools provide an environment where competition and individual achievement are stressed to the exclusion of cooperation. In school, failure is inevitable for many students, thus perpetuating dissatisfaction and behavioral problems. The type of school orientation may also have some influence on aggressiveness. Haskins (1985), in a study of elementary school children, reported that those who had attended a cognitively-oriented day-care program, which had structured intellectual/creative and social/emotional curricula, appeared more aggressive than others who had attended regular day care. The effect, he speculates, may have been due to those children's initial difficulty in adapting to the norms of a traditional school setting because of their greater display of assertiveness and independence.

A California study (California Commission for Reform of Intermediate and Secondary Education, 1975) indicated that school violence is, in part, due to ineffective school administrators, inconsistent disciplinary practices, oppressive school rules, inadequate counseling, curriculum irrelevance, and staff bigotry. Gustavsson and Balgopal (1990) claim that the school system itself becomes the perpetrator of violence, especially for minority students, who are more likely to experience corporal punishment, be suspended and expelled, or labeled as behavior-disordered.

*The Media.* An inquiry into the multiplicity of contributors to violence must include some observations regarding the influence of the media, especially television. Pearl (1986) stated that television is a powerful educator and should be considered a socializing agent almost as important as the home, the school, and the neighborhood. By the time a child graduates from high school, she/he will have spent, on the average, many more hours watching television than attending school.

According to Bandura (1986), a major proponent of modeling and social cognitive theories, symbolic modeling through the mass media not only reinforces one's own beliefs, but also causes a change in them by means of vicarious influences. Theoretically, the media disinhibits aggression and, consequently, reduces behavioral restraints by the way violence is portrayed;

that is, as a socially acceptable and highly functional means to solve conflicts. The true physical and psychological cost of violence, which could counteract this symbolic modeling, is seldom portrayed.

Singer and Singer's (1986) study also supports the hypothesis that early heavy viewing of television, particularly fast-paced, high-action, violence-laden programs, is consistently linked to overt aggression, anger, motor restlessness, and poor behavioral adjustment in school. They also found that "high television viewing," coupled with an authoritarian family environment or one that allowed unlimited unsupervised viewing, contributes to fear of an unjust and scary world. Television cartoons feature dehumanized, machine-like characters engaged in destructive acts. By the time an American child is 16 years old, he/she has witnessed an estimated 200,000 acts of violence on television, including 33,000 murders (Toufexis, 1989).

Turner, Hesse, and Peterson-Lewis (1986), in reviewing a number of longitudinal and cross-cultural studies, concluded that television violence is associated with long-term developmental effects on children's aggressive behavior. These findings are also confirmed in a study by Eron and Huesmann (1987), who found that watching violence on television makes children more aggressive and that this, in turn, makes children watch more violence to justify their own behavior. Furthermore, heavy viewing and antisocial behavior will lead to poor socialization and to academic failure. Carlsson-Paige and Levin (1988) indicated that Saturday morning cartoons are pervaded by themes of violence and war. Children tend to imitate these themes in their play, reinforced by the proliferation of weapon-like toys, and ultimately, to believe that physical combat is an acceptable solution to conflict.

*Society.* Finally, the ultimate blame for violence must be put on society as a whole. Surgeon General Novello (1991b) pointed out that in today's society several factors can be found that contribute to violence and homicide. Among these she listed immediate access to firearms, alcohol and substance abuse, drug trafficking, poverty, racial discrimination, and cultural acceptance of violence as a means to solve conflict. In fact, the Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion (1990) reported that most homicides are committed with firearms during an argument and among people acquainted with each other.

The attitude of society in general toward adolescents also can be a contributing factor to violence. In his research, Duke (1980) found that adolescents are treated rather inconsistently, being expected to be, at the same time, both children and adults. He remarked that "a society which babies its adolescents should expect adolescents to behave immaturely" (p. 43). Sometimes society acts to stifle a youth's maturation process. Gustavsson and

Balgopal (1990) affirmed that structural inequities contributing to poverty, unemployment, and inadequate education can be considered forms of violence directed against the inner-city youth, especially minorities.

### **Profile of Violent Youth**

By now it seems obvious that there is no single theory or explanation that will adequately account for student violence. In the same way, it is hard to draw an accurate or universal profile of violent youth. Most acts of interpersonal violence in the school are not premeditated or the result of gang activity; rather they are “spur of the moment” reactions to a particular situation (Ingersoll, 1982). In general, however, there are certain common characteristics that distinguish youth at risk for violence. At-risk youth tend to come from homes characterized by inadequate or absent parental supervision, abusive and erratic discipline, and lack of family structure and cohesiveness. They tolerate frustration poorly and exhibit inadequate and inappropriate coping mechanisms, such as “acting out” behavior. Frequently, the culture they come from considers violence as an acceptable way of resolving conflicts.

Youth prone to violence may also share certain psychological characteristics such as attention deficits and an external locus of control (Farrington, 1988; Mesinger, 1984). Such youngsters are inclined to believe that what happens to them is primarily due to bad luck, fate, or society’s whims. Especially important to understanding violent youth is Bandura’s concept of self-efficacy. Bandura (1986) views the school as a critical setting in which the child should develop cognitive competencies and problem-solving skills. Unfortunately, many of the school practices, such as tracking and impersonal and rigid class structure, turn the educational experiences of the less talented into a sense of inefficacy and low self-esteem. The youngster may react to this perceived inefficacy by rejecting the values espoused in the school’s milieu. And this frustration, as Dollard would have predicted, often turns into aggression. Thus, poor self-concept, low self-worth, and a sense of self-inefficacy should alert a teacher to the possibility of a potentially aggressive student.

### **IMPACT OF VIOLENCE IN SCHOOLS**

Violence, however it is defined, has both an objective and a subjective component. An act of violence can be defined on the basis of federal, state, and local laws, or even on the basis of a specific school district’s rules. On

the other hand, an act of violence can also be viewed subjectively, that is, through the perception and impact it has on an individual student or a teacher, or even on a certain school or community. A single instance of assault, even without a weapon, made by a student on another student or on a teacher in a small rural school will be the talk of the town or will make the local news headlines. The same act may go practically unnoticed, however, in a large inner city. Frequent exposure to a certain stimulus, violence in this case, can lead to desensitization, such that a certain level of violence will not only be tolerated but also accepted as a normal state of affairs.

In a book detailing his longitudinal studies on adolescents in inner-city, suburban, and rural communities, Ianni (1989) pointed out that different rules and roles emerged from each of the different institutions (the family, school, peer group, workplace, media, and criminal justice system). Conflict and confusion occur when the home, the school, the workplace, and other social institutions present different standards and means for attaining adulthood. Unfortunately, the adolescent is left to rationalize these competing and sometimes conflicting ideologies for himself or herself. The ensuing frustration can lead the individual to act violently.

Although a few studies have attempted to highlight the national impact of school violence, the majority of studies have dealt with specific school districts or localities. The prevalent community standards dictate what is considered violence, what impact it will have on the school and the community, how it should be dealt with, and what measures should be instituted to prevent violence.

Two groups that are fundamentally affected by violence are those of students and teachers. In addressing this issue, Menacker *et al.* (1989, 1990) surveyed three Chicago schools with a combined population of about 2400 students. Their survey of teachers and 6th–8th graders revealed, among other things, that almost half of the students did not feel safe at school, 20% of them feared for their personal safety on the school grounds or in the parking lot, and a third of them carried some type of weapon at school. As far as the teachers were concerned, only 38% felt safe in their classroom and only 5% felt safe in the parking lot. Almost half of the teachers were reluctant to confront misbehaving students, fearing for their own safety. An earlier study by Reed (1983) reported that in the first half of the 1980–1981 school year, within the state of California two dozen teachers were assaulted every day, generally by their students, and about 215 youngsters were attacked every day in school. From September to January, a total of 17,145 students in California had reported assaults (Reed, 1983). The Oklahoma City Federation of Teachers found that 66% of middle school and 52% of all city school teachers in Oklahoma City had considered quitting because of physical and verbal abuse received from students (Quarles, 1989).

In addition to the immediate physical repercussions, violence creates a climate of tension, disruption, and stress that undermines effective teaching and learning. Teachers find themselves thrust in the role of police officer, judge, and jury for their students in schools that have become virtual battle zones (Gorski and Pilotto, 1991). In his study of Los Angeles teachers, Bloch (1980) refers to them as battered, noting the high incidence of both physical and mental/emotional illnesses and disability that resulted as a consequence of their exposure to violence in the schools.

Although some types of violence such as vandalism seem to occur in all schools, personal violence, especially aggravated assaults, occurs most often in inner-city, multiracial, and low-income settings. In view of this finding, there has been much debate regarding the relationships between community, family, and school violence. The lay press and the media have alternatively painted the schools as safe havens for children beset by violence in their own homes and neighborhoods, as well as smoldering hotbeds of violence where children and teachers are in constant fear for their physical safety and personal property.

Most likely, violence at school reflects reciprocal influences among school, community, and family. Ianni (1989) emphasized several times that the low level of misbehavior and violence found in suburban schools could be attributed to the fact that schools, the family, the churches, and the community at large, including law enforcement, all share the same basic social and moral values. Conversely, in the inner city, children experience confusion and conflict, because the societal institutions not only have different sets of values and expectations, but often relate to one other in an antagonistic and distrustful manner.

## STRATEGIES FOR PREVENTING VIOLENCE

Youth violence as a public health issue has been addressed as one of the priority areas in the 1990 health objectives for the nation. These objectives were targeted to reduce health disparities between minority and non-minority populations. Eighteen of the 298 objectives in the document *Healthy People 2000* specifically addressed violence and abusive behavior (Mason, 1991). The section in *Healthy People 2000* (Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, 1990) on "Violent and Abusive Behavior" cited six needs to be emphasized in the next decade:

1. Promote cooperation and integration across public health, health care, mental health, criminal justice, social service, education, and other sectors to develop effective prevention strategies.

2. Generate quality data on morbidity and disability associated with violence at the local level.

3. Identify, strengthen, and expand services for victims that address the physical and psychosocial consequences of violent and abusive behavior.

4. Incorporate prevention of alcohol and illicit drug use into violence-prevention policies.

5. Provide more professional education of physicians with respect to identifying and treating victims of violence.

6. Address cultural differences in values and behavioral norms across ethnic and racial groups.

The strategies identified in “Healthy Communities 2000: Model Standards” for translating national health objectives into action focused on violent risk reduction, prevention, community intervention, and community surveillance (American Public Health Association, 1991). The model standards outlined specific objectives regarding weapon-related violent deaths, assault injuries, nonfatal firearm injuries, physical fighting among adolescents, and weapon-carrying by adolescents ages 14–17 years. One attainable target for communities is a reduction in homicide rates among children age three and younger, spouses, and minority men and women 15–34 years of age. By the year 2000, it is hoped that the incidence of weapon-carrying by adolescents aged 14–17 years could also be reduced by 20% (CDC, 1991b).

One problem in evaluating strategies for preventing violence is the lack of instruments that assess violent tendencies among children and youth. In the absence of such measures, teachers may want to pay close attention to classroom behaviors that reflect anger and aggression (e.g., name calling, hitting, throwing objects). However, the linkage between such behaviors and student violence is not yet known. When acts of violence occur at school, it is important to identify the participants and the specific circumstances (e.g., time of day, place, provocation) associated with the violent encounters so that patterns of violence can be delineated.

Although youth violence is very much a community and societal problem, the following sections emphasize preventive strategies that can be implemented in the context of school. These approaches relate to curricula, student discipline, and the school staff. The success of these approaches can be enhanced by mobilizing community participation.

### **Curriculum Approaches**

Schools have available a number of curricula to assist educators in getting the message of antiviolence to the population at risk. The “Violence Prevention Curriculum for Adolescents” (Prothrow-Stith, 1987) is one of

18 teaching modules in a nationally recognized effort for comprehensive school health education offered through the Teenage Health Teaching Modules. This instructional package was developed as part of the Boston Violence Prevention Project (Prothrow-Stith, 1991). Within the 10-session curriculum, students are made aware of homicide, positive approaches for dealing with anger and arguments, fight behavior, and alternatives to fighting. The overall goal is to create a classroom ethos of nonviolence, whereby students value violence-prevention behavior. Realistic situations depicting anger, fighting, and conflict resolution are presented along with hands-on experiences for the student. Goals, student objectives, content, handouts, procedures, and questions for discussion are cited in the extensive curriculum (Prothrow-Stith, 1987, 1991).

Other curriculum approaches include a sequential program addressing guns and violence. This program, entitled "Straight Talk about Risks" or "STAR," was developed by the Center to Prevent Handgun Violence (1990). It begins in pre-kindergarten years to make the child aware of alternatives for conflict resolution. The curriculum features parent education, community involvement, and a resource guide. Calhoun (1988) describes two other preventive programs suitable for use in school: "Teens, Crime and Community" developed by The National Crime Prevention Council to help young people reduce the chances of encountering violence and "Making a Difference: Young People in Community Crime Prevention" to describe how youth can contribute to safer communities. The Education Development Center (Slaby, 1991) is in the process of preparing a ten-lesson curriculum designed for middle-school children in high-risk communities. The goal of the research program is to develop, implement, and evaluate an intervention designed to reduce violent behavior among early adolescents.

"Crime Resistance Strategies: Tips" (Virginia Public Schools, 1978) was an early effort to translate the FBI concept of crime resistance into an educational program for Grades K-8. The program goals were to promote and maintain positive attitudes and behaviors and to help students ensure the safety and welfare of self and others. This project of the National Diffusion Network (Department of Education) emphasized safety measures for children. Among the protective strategies are identifying friendly and dangerous strangers, knowing what to do if a child is lost, reporting an emergency, and reducing vandalism. The curriculum packets include complete lesson plans and student worksheets. Topics featured in the lessons include comparing feelings, solving conflict, reporting crimes, dealing with strangers, and investigating society's responsibility to its citizens.

Although students need to be informed about potentially violent situations, an understanding of the subject is a must for teachers who are entrusted to facilitate learning about safety and social harmony. Educators at all levels of instruction should receive inservice sessions on high-risk (violent) behaviors among children and youth. Common characteristics of high-risk youth have been well documented: school failure, lack of parental support and guidance, early initiation of deviant behavior, inability to resist peer influences, and living in poverty communities without institutional supports (Dryfoos, 1991). Prevention efforts also need to be focused on non-violent youth who are not characterized as high risk, if the social environment is to be altered. Educational intervention should help build male self-esteem through culturally appropriate curricula dealing with manhood development, role models, counseling, and mentoring by African-American males (Wilson-Brewer and Jacklin, 1991). Among juvenile offenders, educational intervention has been effective in decreasing aggressive behavior and recidivism (Northrop, Jacklin, Cohen, and Wilson-Brewer, 1991).

### Discipline Approaches

The factors contributing to violence — poverty, homelessness, weapon availability, gang behavior, drug abuse, and others — are often beyond the school's control. Yet, there are a number of guidelines schools can use to ensure student safety through prevention. Guetzloe (1989, 1988) lists nine areas of the school's responsibility in regard to problems of suicide, violence, or abuse:

1. Develop a plan for primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention.
2. Train adults and inform students about symptoms of abuse, available resources, and procedures for referrals.
3. Provide a system for early recognition and immediate referral for troubled students.
4. Provide "case management" to be certain services have been received.
5. Provide counseling, psychological services, and special-education services to students in need.
6. Provide follow-up activity after a crisis.
7. Provide a secure school environment and report crimes committed at school.
8. Implement policies, procedures, and curricula that enhance feelings of self-control, self-preservation, and self-esteem.
9. Make the school environment positive for the student.

Safety is a basic consideration in creating a school environment conducive to learning. Unfortunately, students' antisocial behavior constitutes one of the greatest threats to a safe school environment. Hawkins and Lishner (1986) examined early risk factors for antisocial behaviors among elementary and middle school students in Seattle. They included four types of prevention approaches for antisocial behaviors in their longitudinal design: school-based, family-focused prevention services; classroom-focused prevention services; peer-focused strategies; and community-focused strategies. The school-based, family-focused approach used home-school liaison specialists who were assigned home visits to increase positive communication and cooperation between parents and school personnel. Additionally, parent-training classes were conducted to improve parenting skills. The intervention used for the classroom-focused approach combined classroom management, interactive teaching, and student team (cooperative learning) techniques. With the peer-focused approach, students were provided social-skills training. Finally, the community-focused intervention offered career education and community mentorship. Project participation resulted in greater social bonding to school, greater educational expectations, and lower rates of suspension and expulsion from school.

A more typical approach to prevention is through written regulations. Virtually every school district has a set of rules and measures to deal with violence and discipline problems, ranging from a small rural county's simple three-page outline defining types of infractions and consequent penalties, to entire curricula specifically designed for violence prevention in urban schools. For example, a code of conduct was established at Carbondale, Illinois that divided offenses into misconduct with threatening to use force, fighting and weapon possession, and committing a crime as part of the discipline code (Thomas, 1988). Early in the classroom experience, the teacher needs to establish rules for the students that will create an environment of immediate, consistent, and fair handling of behavioral problems.

Appropriate communication style in disciplining is essential for controlling student behavior and the outbreak of violent incidents. Findings by Houston and Grubaugh (1989) and Grubaugh and Houston (1990) indicate that teachers need to understand intervention language and skills. Using nonconfrontational language can help the teacher avoid putting the youth on the defensive. If she/he cannot reason with a violent student, the teacher can "buy time" until help arrives by expressing affirming statements to calm a situation.

A study by Brown and Payne (1988) found that teachers frequently used verbal reprimands at all age levels to induce behavior change and tended to increase the reprimands as the students got older. Inversely, the frequency

of positive comments tended to decline as the age of the student increased. This pattern may increase the likelihood of student frustration and subsequent aggression. In dealing with potentially aggressive situations, a teacher could best respond by (a) remaining calm, (b) listening actively and not becoming defensive or authoritarian, (c) avoiding win–lose situations, and (d) maintaining a problem-solving attitude rather than resorting to emotional overreactions (Goldstein, Apter, and Harootunian, 1984).

To reduce fighting and other acts of school violence, we believe students can take measures to prevent or protect themselves from violence. Student precautions would include using vocabulary that is not offensive, avoiding physical contact, scheduling time for resolving differences, respecting individual differences and the right to own property, avoiding use of alcohol and drugs, and expressing a willingness to compromise. Enforcing a school policy of no weapon possession or availability would help students avoid potentially dangerous situations. Whether a student is threatened by a weapon or by a verbal promise to “get you,” those situations must be reported to school administrators, who should take immediate action.

Responsibility for comprehensive school-prevention programs means reducing violence by restricting possession and access to handguns. Strategies to confiscate weapons and deter students from bringing weapons onto school grounds have included random locker searches, metal detectors, students’ walk through, and the requiring of plastic or mesh book bags (CDC, 1991a). The CDC did not mention how effective these procedures have been in reducing the incidence of violent behavior.

Johnson, Vickers, and Gadson (1982) have suggested additional guidelines that may be helpful in reducing school violence: Get parents involved with instances of student misbehavior, get the community involved in curtailing school violence through community education programs, help students experience success rather than failure, give students opportunities to be heard and to have a greater voice in decisions, and involve the juvenile justice system. These authors emphasized that the first step is preventing school violence rather than eliminating violence. They offer teachers four elements for decreasing disruptive classroom behavior:

1. Heighten students’ interests and furnish them with a rationale for the subject matter.
2. Provide a positive classroom by informing students of the goals and objectives.
3. Allow students to participate in decisions regarding what they will learn.
4. Give students an opportunity to participate in the roles that govern their behavior and in the formation of the consequences for breaking rules.

A more disciplinarian approach was taken by an administrator in Casper, Wyoming (Lowe and Gervals, 1984). The principal inherited a school that had discipline problems because of vandalism, use of bad language, and frequent fights among students. He developed rules and disciplinary actions that were given to parents. By being given rules that specified punishments for identified behaviors, the student was aware of behavior consequences. Each rule violation was documented through signatures of the teacher, principal, student, and parent. Within this school, pride programs were established with awards given to students. These programs offered individual incentives for achievement, thus making the accomplishment visible to the student assembly. During a 3-year period, the fighting dropped to 22 occurrences a year, down from 203 fights in the first year. The students were given clearly defined limits and learned to be responsible for their actions.

Houston and Grubaugh's (1989) review concluded that appropriate policies, rules, and accountability were needed to help prevent violence in the schools. Both proactive and reactive measures need to be utilized in dealing with school violence. Proactive strategies try to decrease the opportunities for violent occurrences. The reactive strategies are employed during violent confrontations to help defuse, contain, and control the situation. Again, written rules and consequences for not following the rules are effective in controlling violent behavior.

Another important characteristic of effective programs is that they link teenagers together in order to expand their knowledge, understanding, and acceptance of other teens with different backgrounds and cultures. The Positive Educational Experiences in Relationships (PEER) program in Minneapolis and the School Mediators' Alternative Resolution Team (SMART) in New York City are just two of the many examples. The last one, in particular, is designed to train some students in mediation and counseling techniques to deal with disputes in the school (Ianni, 1989). A similar program in an inner-city school in Albuquerque, New Mexico, has succeeded in considerably lowering gang problems and violence in the school through the process of mediation, which is often carried out by trained gang members (Sanchez and Anderson, 1990). There are also programs that intervene at the family level by making the parent(s) part of the teaching-learning team.

What is ultimately needed is community-wide comprehensive planning in which all the elements of the community (e.g., schools, families, social agencies, business, political institutions, law enforcement, and teens) come together to establish what Ianni (1989) calls a "youth charter." He defines this "youth charter" as a "sensed" set of expectations and standards provided by the community to establish a quasi-independent and relatively

stable system of conventions and normative behaviors. The charter's guidelines help the child to define role identity and ego ideals, and to reduce the level of both intrapersonal and interpersonal conflict. Ultimately, according to Ianni, this youth charter helps the youngster become an active and constructive participant in society. The process requires the willingness of several groups to accept responsibility and to become involved in cooperative efforts.

One of the participants in this effort should be the school counselor. However, Nuttall and Kalesnik's (1987) review of the counseling literature for the past 20 years identified very few articles that dealt specifically with school counselors' direct intervention in problems of interpersonal violence. According to these authors, school counselors offer five major reasons for not dealing with problems of school violence:

1. It is the role of administrators and teachers to deal with violence.
2. School counselors do not have adequate training on the subject.
3. School counselors do career and educational counseling.
4. Some schools discourage counselors from intervening because they want to whitewash the problem.
5. School counselors do not want to appear, in the eye of the students, as disciplinarians.

At the same time, community-based counseling agencies see the school counselor, acting as a case manager and student advocate, as the ideal link to reintegrate troubled youngsters into their home schools (Termini, 1991). Goldstein *et al.* (1984) contend that although the teacher is probably the first to observe antisocial behavior, he/she should request the evaluation and intervention, if necessary, of the school psychologist or counselor. Prompt intervention before this antisocial behavior becomes ingrained is of paramount importance.

Finally, law enforcement authorities, backed by better legislation, should also become more active participants. Suburban and rural schools seem to have a more cooperative relationship with law enforcement agencies than do urban schools. Perhaps this is in part because of shared values and culture, and because of the relatively small size of the community (Ianni, 1989).

On the other hand, in the urban schools where the level of violence is much greater, administrators seem reluctant to involve the police in dealing with specific episodes of violence. Menacker *et al.* (1990) stated that, in the Chicago schools they surveyed, administrators notified the police in only 6.5% of all the reportable acts of violence. One reason for this, they hypothesize, may be the poor relationship between the two agencies. At times, a police presence on the school grounds may be considered counterproductive by causing a siege mentality or by conveying the impression

of the school as a hostile territory. However, the presence of police on school grounds can also be seen as promoting neutrality among rival groups (McEvoy, 1990).

### Staff Approaches

Recommended strategies for school personnel have been suggested by administrators, educators, health professionals, and criminal justices attending a forum on youth violence (Reports of the Working Groups, 1991). They indicated that everyone in the school, from the janitor to the principal, should participate in violence prevention. Parents also need to be involved, and community intervention programs should be offered to all communities, not just to minorities. Further recommendations included the following:

1. Conflict resolution techniques are needed that emphasize empathy, impulse control, problem-solving skills, and anger-management skills.
2. Plans for safe schools need to include policies and environmental designs that are conducive to violence prevention.
3. Mentoring and role-model programs should provide minorities with alternatives to absent or negative role models.
4. Peer groups should be used to shape health norms and nonviolent behavior.
5. Curricula should be adopted on a school-wide basis that incorporates self-esteem development, monitoring, role models, and culturally appropriate curricula.
6. Programs are needed that build self-esteem to assist children in feeling better about their personal attributes, abilities, and behavior.

Other suggestions were offered by officials from five large school districts (Washington, D.C., Dallas, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, and Toledo) who were interviewed to determine what procedures they used to prevent school violence and to provide safe environments (Staff, 1989). The districts reported employing monitors in schools with high risk conflicts. The monitors can be uniformed people, alarms, motion detectors, cameras, locked doors, and/or I.D. cards. Safe and secure schools require attention to security. In some instances that may mean video-recording cameras that print the date and time (hour, minute, and second) on taped recordings for possible evidentiary use (Quarles, 1989). School staff need to be involved with security implementation. In spite of the difficulty inherent in monitoring, reporting, and recording, these tasks remain essential for the prevention and reduction of school violence.

More prevention programs are needed for public school personnel threatened by violence. For example, the New York City school board sponsors violence-prevention workshops for their teachers (Sherr, 1992). Among the strategies incorporated into these sessions are skills in using verbal language, body language, and handling fear. Workshop participants are taught not to say "calm down" to a student who is a threat. Rather, to diffuse a potentially dangerous situation, teachers need to acknowledge what the student is feeling. When communicating with the violent youth, the teacher needs to assume a physical position equal to or lower than the student, thereby preventing additional threat to the student. In addition to posturing, the teacher cannot express fear. The skills emphasized in the workshop stress direct eye contact with the attacker. Although there is no proven solution for preventing classroom violence, the teacher must take action to protect self and others.

Teachers have their own ideas as to what needs to be done to counteract student violence. A week-long television segment on "Lessons in Violence" (Varner, 1992) informed viewers of teacher suggestions as to what needs to be done to reduce violence in the school. The four solutions follow: (a) Teachers believe the first lessons in discipline are learned in the home. Thus, the home creates respect for discipline from an adult figure. (b) When teachers turn to the juvenile court system, the courts should follow through on punishment. (c) Students need to control their anger and be encouraged to engage in activities that enhance personal worth. (d) Teachers need training to handle behavioral problems and assaults from parents.

We recommend that school personnel be encouraged to brainstorm a list of practical suggestions to prevent violence and to promote safety. After reviewing items presented by other authors and after interviewing educators in Grades K-12, we offer the following guidelines for the prevention of interpersonal violence:

1. Law enforcement and school personnel need to work cooperatively to affect behaviors of youth (e.g., through jointly sponsored events, role playing, discussions, and classroom speakers).

2. Institutions preparing teachers should offer instruction on violent and nonviolent behaviors. Teachers need to be good classroom managers and to command respect from students.

3. Students need an orientation about acceptable and unacceptable school behavior during the initial week of school, followed by frequent reminders of the written rules and consequences for violations.

4. Parents need to be involved in the development and enforcement of school-conduct policies and procedures.

5. Corporal punishment should not be used in disciplining students because it condones, evokes, and models violence.

6. Every person in the school needs to be aware and sensitive to the needs of others. All students need the attention of some school personnel.

7. Teachers should emphasize the importance of cultural differences and model respect for children from all types of cultural backgrounds.

## CONCLUSION

School personnel and board members need to implement a variety of strategies including curricula, counseling programs, legal procedures to discourage weapon-carrying and use, and educational campaigns for parents and other citizens. Hopefully, this profile of interpersonal violence among youth will further an understanding of the current instructional efforts offered through schools. Additionally, the description of theories related to high-risk behaviors and the impact of violence in the schools could shed light on potential interventions inside and outside the school. In this paper, no attempt was made to describe existing community, recreational, legal, or church programs; however, these elements need to be incorporated into the intervention strategies if Americans are to achieve the public health objectives related to violence as set forth in the *Healthy People 2000* document.

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