School Violence

BACKGROUND

School violence is a complicated societal problem. To understand the scope of the problems schools are facing in violence prevention, one must understand the effect violence is having on children and youths in the United States. Violence is a public health issue, and there is much research that illuminates its harmful effects on children (Office of the Surgeon General, 2001). Millions of children are exposed to violence every year. According to the U.S. Department of Justice (2000) report Safe from the Start: Taking Action on Children Exposed to Violence,

- national estimates based on a 1993 survey indicate that of 22.3 million children between the ages of 12 and 17, approximately 1.8 million have been the victims of serious sexual assault, 3.9 million have been victims of serious physical assault, and almost 9 million have witnessed serious incidents of violence
- in 1997 young people represented about 18 percent of all arrests but made up 25 percent of all crime victims
- estimates based on data from 44 states indicate that in 1997 approximately 984,000 children were victims of child abuse and neglect nationwide and that approximately 1,000 children die yearly as a result of abuse and neglect
- data from a survey in 1992 estimate that before a child turns 18, he or she will witness more than 200,000 acts of violence on television, including 16,000 murders
- approximately 2 million adolescents ages 12 to 17 appear to have suffered from posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), presumably stemming from violent incidents in their past.

Also, “there is an increasing body of research that ‘explain how exposure to media violence would activate aggressive behaviors in some children (and youths)’” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [p. 3], as cited in NASW Practice Update, 2002).

Although gang activity is considered an urban problem, it exists in almost every community, large and small, among all socioeconomic and ethnic groups, and negatively affects learning and school safety.

Every day nearly 10 U.S. children are murdered, 16 die from gunshot wounds, 316 are arrested for crimes of violence, and 8,042 are reported to be abused and neglected (Children’s Defense Fund, 1997).

Despite the highly publicized homicides in schools, recent research on school violence indicates that most schools are comparatively safe and secure. In fact students ages 12 to 17 were more likely to be injured or a victim of serious violence in their own home or community than in their school (Dwyer, Osher, & Warger, 1998a). In 1996 thefts accounted for about 62 percent of all serious crimes against students in schools. Since 1993 the actual overall school crime rate has declined slightly, as did crime victimization against youths outside the school. What has increased, however, is the number of homicides in schools and the number of multiple-victim homicides. Although the number of homicides has increased, there is a less than one-in-a-million chance of suffering a school-associated violent death (Dwyer et al., 1998a).

Contrary to popular perception the number of students bringing weapons to school has decreased in recent years. Between 1993 and 1997 there was an overall decline in the per-


percentage (from 8 percent to 6 percent) of students who reported carrying a weapon to school at least once in the past 30 days (Dwyer et al., 1998a). The presence of deadly weapons in schools creates an intimidating and threatening atmosphere, making both teaching and learning difficult. Students and staff reported feeling less safe than 10 years ago. In 1989, 6 percent of students ages 12 to 19 feared they were going to be attacked or harmed at school. In 1995 the figure had grown to 9 percent, and it is projected to be higher since that time. The percentage of students fearing they would be attacked going to and from school also increased from 4 percent to 7 percent during the same period (Dwyer et al., 1998a).

The following risk factors are commonly accepted as factors to consider when evaluating a student’s capacity to commit a violent act:

- history of violent or aggressive behaviors
- frequent disciplinary infractions in school
- bringing a weapon to school
- a pattern of violent threats when angry
- threats to hurt others or self
- access to weapons or possession of weapons
- history of abuse, neglect, or violence in family
- social withdrawal, isolation, or poor peer relationships
- history of depression or mental illness
- academic failure or poor attachment to school
- history of alcohol or substance abuse
- history of cruelty to animals
- involvement in a street gang
- fire setting.

None of these factors alone are sufficient for predicting aggressive actions, so a host of variables should be considered when evaluating a child’s risk.

School violence is strongly influenced by the community in which the school is located and by the size of the school. Teachers of urban schools were twice as likely to report serious violent crimes as those in suburban towns and in rural locations, and the larger the school, the more likely that incidents of violent crimes have occurred. The presence of street gangs in the community also influences violence trends. Between 1989 and 1995 the percentage of students who reported the presence of street gangs in their community increased from 15 percent to 28 percent. Urban students were more likely to report that there were street gangs in their schools (41 percent) than were suburban students (26 percent) or rural students (20 percent). Research also supports that involvement in a street gang is a strong risk factor for future violent behavior (Office of the Surgeon General, 2001).

School Response to Violence Prevention: A Historical Perspective

Before the multiple school shootings in the late 1990s, many schools were somewhat complacent about violence prevention. Many districts had disaster plans in place that only addressed natural disasters such as tornadoes or hurricanes. Few faculty ever saw the plans. With the new research on critical incident stress management and its effectiveness in preventing PTSD after a traumatic event in the early 1990s, some schools adopted crisis plans and crisis teams that could be used postcrisis in the unlikely event that there was a suicide or death of a student or faculty member (American Academy of Experts in Traumatic Stress, 1999).

Schools, by nature of their mission, have always been more focused on academics than on addressing social and emotional learning. Social workers and psychologists often are employed to serve the needs of special education students rather than the entire school population. Most school districts still tend to deal with students who commit violent acts as “bad kids” likely coming from “bad families” who have chosen to defy the rules. Interventions with these students are often very limited and rigidly proscribed in the district school discipline code, with the emphasis on managing and eliminating the maladaptive behavior (usually by suspension or expulsion from school) versus teaching students prosocial,
adaptive skills to replace the maladaptive, counterproductive behaviors. This “one-size-fits-all” approach to discipline for acts of school violence fails to address the variables of the school environment or the often complex interactions of the students with the environment (Klein, 1998).

Some schools and communities have focused their energies and resources on increased security measures such as hiring school security officers, installing metal detectors, or both. Although evaluating the school's overall security plan and working closely with the community police is an important part of any school violence prevention plan, the experience learned from the school shootings in Columbine is that increased security without addressing the climate and culture of the school and intervening effectively with students at risk is not enough to prevent tragedies from occurring.

Recent Developments in Social Policy and Practice

In 1993 the National Education Goals 2000 listed the goal that “every school in the United States will be free of drugs, violence, and the unauthorized presence of firearms and alcohol and will offer a disciplined environment conducive to learning” (Goals 2000: Educate America Act, P.L. 103-227, 1 U.S.C., §102, pt. 7A). That same year federal legislation created the Safe Schools Act (P.L. 103-227, 7 U.S.C., §702) to establish grants to support local school efforts to reduce school violence, promote safety, and assist schools in achieving the aforementioned goal. The Gun-Free Schools Act (P.L. 103-882) was created the next year, in October 1994, and requires schools that receive federal funds to adopt a gun-free school policy and to expel, for one year, students who carry a gun to school (zero tolerance).

After a high number of fatal school shootings in the 1996 to 1997 school year, President Clinton directed the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice to prepare the first Annual Report on School Safety (Dwyer et al., 1998a). This was the first serious attempt to gather accurate data on violence in schools and to start developing a strategy to address the growing problem in the United States. Before this report there was great inconsistency in the kind of information available on crime in schools. Many school districts did not regularly report incidents of crime to their local law enforcement agency for fear of community or school board reaction. Some districts reported only the more serious crimes, but not theft or vandalism.

In 1998 NASW participated in the White House Conference on School Violence. Information from that conference, along with information in the Annual Report on School Safety, was used to generate Early Warning, Timely Response: A Guide to Safe Schools (Dwyer, Osher, & Warger, 1998b). NASW participated in the work group that developed the government document Safeguarding Our Children: An Action Guide (Dwyer & Osher, 2000). This guide identifies early warning signs of which all school personnel should be aware and discusses recommended intervention steps for students, parents, school personnel, and community members.

Attention must be paid to the school’s culture. Harassment of girls; gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender students; immigrant children; children of various racial and ethnic backgrounds; and others who are different must be addressed in the earliest stages. Social workers play an important role in raising the consciousness of teachers, administrators, and other staff as risk behaviors gone unchecked can escalate into physical violence. Even if these behaviors do not escalate into physical violence, they still create an atmosphere of intimidation and are a form of psychological violence.

ISSUE STATEMENT

Social workers rely on best practice models to guide practice. By having a written, publicly accessible school violence policy, social workers have a framework within which to develop and refine policies that are productive and have a research base.

Prevention of school violence has taken on a new urgency in U.S. schools. The highly publicized school shootings in recent years have shocked the nation. The Columbine High
School shooting in the spring of 1999, the worst of the tragedies in terms of number of deaths, was a dramatic wake-up call to government, school officials, and the mental health community that somehow society and schools were not doing enough to prevent these types of tragic events and not doing enough, early enough, to reach out to youths at risk. After the tragic losses at Columbine, President Clinton and Congress requested a report summarizing what research has revealed about youth violence, its causes and prevention. “The world remains a threatening, often dangerous place for children and youths. And in our country today, the greatest threat to the lives of children and adolescents is not disease or starvation or abandonment, but the terrible reality of violence,” reported then-Secretary of Health and Human Services Donna Shalala in the foreword of *Youth Violence: A Report of the Surgeon General* (Office of the Surgeon General, 2001, p. 1).

Although the media have highlighted the most horrific violent acts that occurred in schools, violence in schools can encompass a broad continuum of behaviors, including name calling, bullying, racial comments, gang activity, theft, vandalism, sexual harassment, threats, assaults, and the most severe, homicide. School violence, on any level, threatens the physical, psychological, and emotional well-being of students and staff.

There is no easy answer to why one young person will become violent and another will not, but research scientists have identified a number of variables that put youths at risk of violent behaviors as well as variables that will protect them (Office of the Surgeon General, 2001). A risk factor is generally seen as any factor that increases the probability that a person will suffer from harm, and a protective factor is something that decreases the potential harmful effect of a risk factor. To effectively develop intervention programs, schools and communities need to consider both variables.

Violence is a public health issue and not one that schools alone can combat. Every day 10 American children are murdered, 16 die from gunshot wounds, 316 are arrested for violent acts, and 8,042 are reported to be abused and neglected (Children’s Defense Fund, 1997). Former Surgeon General Dr. David Satcher’s *Report on Youth Violence* (Office of the Surgeon General, 2001) noted that the most effective violence prevention programs combine both individual risk factors and environmental conditions, particularly building individual skills and competencies, providing parent effectiveness training, improving the climate of the schools, and making changes in the type and level of involvement in peer groups. Dr. Satcher’s report further suggested that violence prevention initiatives that target change in the social context appear to be more effective than those that attempt to change individual attitudes, skills, and risk behaviors.

The surgeon general’s *Report on Youth Violence* supports what social workers have long maintained—that violence prevention starts in the family and the community. To combat the problem, one must provide services to families and communities in crisis. And, there are effective, proven prevention programs such as the Families and Schools Together Program (FAST), developed by social worker Dr. Lynn McDonald. Others are being developed but are too new to have the history needed to prove successful (Dwyer et al., 1998a).

Children who witness violence and abuse—even if they themselves have not been the victim of the abuse—can suffer psychological trauma, including PTSD. These children also can display an array of emotional and behavioral disturbances, including low self-esteem; withdrawal; nightmares; self-blame; and aggression against peers, family members, and property (Peled, Jaffee, & Edelson, 1995).

Several research studies have shown that chronic exposure to violence can adversely affect a child’s ability to learn (Barton, Coley, & Wenglinsky, 1998). Children who achieve in school and who develop adequate critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication skills are better able to cope with stressful situations. Academic achievement enhances the development of positive self-esteem and self-efficacy, both of which are necessary for experiencing emotional well-being and achieving success in life (Prothrow-Stith & Quaday, 1995). Children who have a positive relationship with their school are also seen as being at reduced risk of school violence. School social workers can play a crucial role in...
providing counseling
and other support services to the victims of violence so that healthy coping strategies and healthy self-esteem can be developed and school can return to being a place for positive growth, learning, and a sense of belonging.

Given that depression, feelings of isolation, and worthlessness were issues for many assailants of the recent school shootings, providing more school social work services along with other support services in school is one way to prevent further tragedies (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 1999). School social workers are uniquely trained to identify students and families at risk, to provide diagnostic assessments, to understand the risk factors for individuals and families, to counsel students and families, and to arrange for referrals to appropriate community resources.

**POLICY STATEMENT**

NASW believes that all children have the right to attend a physically and emotionally safe school where they can maximize their academic potential. Although most schools are safe, violence occurring in the community has found its way inside many schools. All schools have the responsibility to develop comprehensive violence prevention plans so that every child in school is both emotionally and physically safe.

NASW’s position is that school violence reflects the social, economic, moral, and ethical problems of the larger society. Given this systems perspective, any approach to school violence prevention must be comprehensive in nature and seek the participation of students; parents; school staff; and community resources, including the police, to be effective.

NASW supports the comprehensive approach to school violence prevention outlined in Safeguarding Our Children: An Action Guide (Dwyer & Osher, 2000). This approach identifies three levels for intervention: (1) school-wide foundation and primary prevention, (2) early intervention, and (3) urgent response and crisis intervention.

NASW strongly supports the position that prevention initiatives are the most desirable for controlling and positively redirecting these behaviors and that they have the greatest long-term effect. Early intervention plans must be in place if violence does erupt. These plans must include the evaluation of the situation and each of the students involved, with the guidance of the school discipline code, and any laws pertaining to the infractions. Crisis plans should focus on schoolwide, and even school–community, interventions to minimize the impact of crises of greater proportions.

**Schoolwide Foundation and Primary Prevention**

A school environment in which all students and staff are respected, nurtured, safe, and supported helps students feel attached to their school and reduces student conflicts. All teachers and school staff need to be culturally aware and competent and participate in ongoing training. Activities such as conflict resolution training in grades kindergarten through high school, character education programs, antibullying and peacemaking programs, and bias awareness activities all can positively affect the school climate and culture. Programs that can teach children tolerance, civility, and how to deal with prejudice and differences should be included in the curriculum in every school and at every grade level. All of these programs are most effective if implemented in grades kindergarten through high school and if the material offered is developmentally appropriate to each grade level. Clearly, this creates the need for more social work service. NASW advocates for funding of social workers in all schools.

Crucial to building a schoolwide initiative is developing an effective schoolwide behavior management system and code of conduct. There must be clear guidelines for student behavior that are enforced consistently by school staff. These rules should be reviewed regularly by students, staff, and parents. Consequences for failure to follow the codes of conduct must be appropriate to the offense and should, whenever possible, offer the opportunity for restitution and reflection on the social impact of the misconduct by the student(s) involved. Schools also should take opportunities to recognize students who make positive choices.
and positive contributions to the school climate and culture.

School pupil services teams should be used in every school to address overall school performance on school safety issues as well as to address individual student performance and problems. NASW supports school social workers serving on schoolwide and individual student support teams. School social workers play a major role on such teams by using their unique knowledge of mental health; their knowledge of community resources; and their ability to work with students, families, and other school personnel.

**Early Intervention**

All staff in schools should become familiar with behavior that can be considered “red flags” or risk factors for violent behavior. School administrators have a responsibility to provide in-service programs to all professional and support staff on early and immediate warning signs. There must also be clear procedures and referral mechanisms in the school for referring and evaluating students at risk for emotional difficulties, including violent behavior. Troubled children typically exhibit multiple warning signs repeatedly, which increase over time. All schools should have in place a confidential and reliable referral process so that students who exhibit warning signs can get the intervention they need to evaluate the seriousness of their risk to harm themselves or others. School social workers and other qualified mental health professionals should be used to assess students at risk; to provide a clinical assessment; to provide individual, group, and family counseling; and to identify community resources that are necessary to help the student and his or her family.

Other important components of early intervention programs to reduce violence in schools are social skills training, peer support groups, peer mediation programs, anger management programs, mentoring programs, sexual harassment programs (important for both victims and perpetrators), before- and after-school programs, and parent education classes. Social work counseling for students at risk and their families at risk creates supports for school success. Such supports can also stimulate effective parenting and discipline practices and provide referrals to community resources for additional or more intensive help for the family.

**Crisis Intervention: Providing Intensive Interventions to Troubled Students**

When children experience significant emotional or behavioral problems that interfere with the learning process or endanger the health and welfare of others, then more intensive interventions are needed. All school staff must be familiar with their school safety–crisis plan so that in case of an acute emergency they can take steps to ensure the immediate safety of all children and staff. This plan must be reviewed regularly with staff so that all are familiar with the appropriate procedures to follow in a variety of different situations (that is, hostage situation, school shooting, student or staff suicide, bomb threat, natural disaster, and so forth).

Some intervention approaches that have been successful in meeting the needs of severely troubled students are comprehensive, school-based mental health services; special education and related services; alternative education programs, including separate alternative schools; and individualized mental health services and supports. NASW supports developmentally appropriate interventions that increase prosocial competence and better protective factors. NASW also supports models of intervention that are more therapeutic in nature (that is, referrals to a day treatment program with intensive counseling and clinical interventions) rather than punitive in nature and lacking clinical services (that is, out-of-school suspension or expulsion with no services). Students in need of alternative education due to violent or aggressive behavior should be offered, whenever possible, alternatives that include individual behavior therapy focused on skill building in problem solving; empathy training; and nonaggressive, more effective methods of dealing with their feelings. Families of such students may benefit from parent management training, with an
emphasize on effective supervision of their child and the use of encouragement, discipline, and problem solving.

**Role of School Social Workers**

School social workers, given their unique training, offer schools a way to link student, family, community, and the school. School social workers play a major role in the development of their schools’ comprehensive violence prevention plans. NASW believes school social work services should be available to every student in the United States, meaning both special education students and all regular education students who may need their services. NASW believes that school social workers belong on districtwide and individual student support teams. School social workers are knowledgeable about the theory and practice of critical incident stress management so that they can work to reduce the harm to children who may have witnessed a tragic event in school or the community and are knowledgeable about children who display signs of distress.

School social workers are trained to identify and counsel students at risk of violence, students who are victims of violence, and students at risk of school failure. School social workers can assume a leadership role in creating or implementing school violence prevention efforts such as character education programs, social skills training, conflict resolution programs, and peer mediation programs, all of which have proven to help improve school climate and reduce violence in schools. Programs on dating violence should be introduced into school curricula at the middle school or junior high school level and reinforced every grade thereafter. Dating violence is ubiquitous, starts early, and is a precursor to family violence.

School social workers should seek to create opportunities in their schools that strengthen family and parent relationships with the school and that improve parenting skills and communication. They should work in coalition with other community agencies and resources that service children and youths and look for opportunities to partner with such agencies and programs, with the goal of improved mental health services in schools. Social workers must collaborate with school administrators in developing and revising codes of conduct and consequences for improper student behavior.

School social workers also can provide a valuable service to their schools by providing in-service and staff development programs and consultation on the risk factors for school violence. They can teach methods of behavior management in the classroom, ways to avoid conflicts, and alternative ways to manage defiant behavior.

All of the above initiatives for prevention and early intervention with children who display violent or unsettled behavior require long-term as well as shorter, more intensive interventions of immediate crisis response. Continued input about the need for such long-term and intensive services may need to be repeatedly and skillfully relayed to the school administration and staff so that there is agreement that the whole school will benefit from additional availability of services to prevent violence.

**REFERENCES**


Policy statement approved by the NASW Delegate Assembly, August 2002. For further information, contact the National Association of Social Workers, 750 First Street, NE, Suite 700, Washington, DC 20002-4241. Telephone: 202-408-8600; e-mail: press@naswdfc.org