

Safe and Caring Schools:
A Response to Youth Violence

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School Violence: The Facts

School-related shootings increased by 30% in 1999, but media reporting of school-related deaths increased by 700%.

In the four well-publicized school shootings in 1999, 11 children were killed.

Every day in the US, 11 children die from abuse, neglect, and family violence.³

Schools reflect the communities in which their students live.

Children in America die of gun deaths at a rate about 12 times that of other developed nations.³

Schools Are the Safest Places for Students to Be.³

- More than 3000 children die of hand gun wounds in the US each year.
- Less than 1 percent of all homicides against school-aged children (5 - 19 years of age) occur in or around school grounds or on the way to and from school.⁸
- In 1998, about 21 of every 1,000 students (ages 12-18) were victims of serious violent crimes away from school, while about 9 of every 1,000 students were victims at school, or going to and from school.⁸

Violent Deaths in School Are Extremely Rare Events.⁶

- There is less than one in a million chance of suffering a school-associated violent death, but even that is too much.¹
- Thirty-four violent deaths were reported in 1998-99, compared to the high of forty-nine deaths reported in 1995-96.⁶
- In 1998, twice as many people were killed by lightning as were killed in schools.³
- The number of multiple victim homicide events, which had been on the increase since, 1992-93, decreased from 6 events in 1997-98 to 2 events in 1998-99. ^{6,8}

Only 10% of schools reported any instances of serious crime during the 1996-97 school year.

- 43% reported no crime at all.¹

Most school crime is theft.

- In 1996, there were 79 thefts for every 1,000 students. Theft accounted for about 62% of all crime against students that school year.¹
- In 1998, there were 58 thefts for every 1,000 students (age 12 to 18) at school. Theft accounted for about 58% of all crime against students at school that year.⁸

- In the U.S., one in 10 children and adolescents suffer from mental illness severe enough to cause some level of impairment. Yet, fewer than 1-5 of them receives needed treatment.⁹

What can we learn from studies on
school violence?

Serious crime on school campuses is more likely to happen during the “unowned” times and places of the school day.

Response: Own all the spaces--everyone
is responsible.

- Adolescents who feel closely connected to their schools are adolescents who are emotionally healthier, and far less likely to engage in risky behavior than their counterparts *who feel no sense of community in their school*. Without question, it is the formation of friendship networks within the school that help to provide that sense of community, along with a perception that teachers care, that teachers are fair, and that school is a place where one belongs.

Resnick, 1999

Response: Create schools where no student is anonymous.

“Prior to the incident, nearly 3/4 of the attackers either threatened to kill themselves, made suicidal gestures, or tried to kill themselves, more than half of the attackers had a history of feeling extremely depressed or desperate.”⁶

Response: Know the warning signs for depression, suicidality.

“In almost every incident, the attacker engaged in behavior that caused others (e.g., school official, police, fellow students) to be concerned about him. In over 3/4 of the incidents, an adult (school administrator, teacher, staff member, or law enforcement professional) had expressed concern about the attacker.” 6

“Behaviors that caused others to be concerned about the attacker prior to the attack included behaviors related to the attack, such as efforts to get a gun, as well as other disturbing behaviors not related to the subsequent attack.” 6

Response: Figure out what do do
with your concerns. Build the
safety network. Follow through.

“In well over 3/4 of incidents, the attackers had difficulty coping with a major change to a significant relationship or a loss of status (e.g., a personal failure), prior to their school attack.”⁶

Response: Implement programs that foster resilience.

- Caring relationships,
- Opportunities for students to participate,
- High expectations

“Over half of the targeted schools attackers had a history of gun use; most did not necessarily show a fascination with weapons or explosives. In nearly 2/3 of the incidents, the attackers for the gun(s) used in the attack from their own home or that of a relative. In some cases the guns had been gifts to the attackers from their parents.” 6

Response: Teach families about the risks of firearms. Learn how to conduct a weapons history with clients and students.

Aggression is often a response to being humiliated. In the 37 incidents of targeted school violence studied by the USSS, more than half of the attackers had revenge as a motive. More than 3/4 of the attackers were known to hold a grudge at the time.⁶

Response: Avoid coercive practices that create hostility.

“In over 2/3 of the targeted incidents, the attackers felt persecuted, bullied, threatened, attacked, or injured by others prior to the incident.”⁶

“A number had experienced bullying and harassment that was longstanding and severe. In those cases, the experience of bullying appeared to play a major role in motivating the attack.”⁶

Response: Implement bullying prevention programs.

In over half of the incidents, the attacker told more than one person about his ideas/plan. For example, in one case an attacker made comments to at least 24 friends and classmates about his interest in killing other kids, building bombs, or carrying out an attack at the school. Some peers knew detailed information about the attacker's plans while others knew "something spectacular" was going to happen in school on a particular date." 6

In virtually all of the cases in this study the person told was a peer—a friend, schoolmate, or sibling. In only two cases did such a peer notify an adult of the idea or plan.

In fewer than one quarter of all incidents the attacker communicated a threat to his target(s) prior to the attack. 6

Response: Strengthen the communications between adults and students. Make it safe for students to share information with adults.

Teach students about their responsibilities to report threatening situations. Enlist the critical caring majority.

Violence is a process, as well as an act.
Violent behavior does not occur in a vacuum. . . Violent acts often are the culmination of long-developing, identifiable trails of problems, conflicts, disputes, and failures.⁴

Response: Identify and intervene early. But do so carefully.

Perpetrators of violence consider, plan, and prepare before engaging in violent acts. A key to prevention is to identify these behaviors. 4

Response: Identify *behaviors* that indicate a problem. This is more effective than profiling on the basis of traits or characteristics.

Threatening situations are more successfully resolved when systems and agencies work together.⁴ However, most targeted school violence was not resolved by law enforcement, because the incidents happened so quickly.

Response: Safety is everyone's responsibility. This implies that schools must become and remain involved, not rely on law enforcement to take care of safety concerns.

Good teaching requires a strong relationship between the instructor and the instructed.

Learning requires a safe place, and that means not only physical and psychological safety (“I will not be mugged and I will not be humiliated”) but a climate in which a student knows that he can ask any question with the assurance that a well-known adult will attend to it.

Sizer, 1996, p. 94.

References

- 1 Keller, H. R. & Tapasak, R. C. (1998) Classroom management. In Goldstein, A. P. & Conoley, J. C. Eds. School violence intervention: A practical Handbook. New York: Guilford Press, pp. 107-120.

Related Research

Resnick, M.D. et al., Protecting adolescents from harm: Findings from the national longitudinal study on adolescent health. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 9/10/97.

Benard, B. and Marshall, K. A framework for practice: tapping innate resilience.
[Http://www.Coled.Umn.Edu/careiwww/researchpractice/v5n1/benard.Htm](http://www.Coled.Umn.Edu/careiwww/researchpractice/v5n1/benard.Htm)

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