ISSUES AROUND VIOLENCE IN SCHOOLS

Edited by Lauren W. Collins,
Timothy J. Landrum and Bryan G. Cook

ADVANCES IN LEARNING
AND BEHAVIORAL DISABILITIES

VOLUME 33

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CHAPTER 1

ISSUES AROUND VIOLENCE IN SCHOOLS: CONSIDERATIONS AND INTRODUCTION TO THE VOLUME

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, we consider the complexity of issues associated with violence in schools and provide an overview of this 33rd volume of Advances in Learning and Behavioral Disabilities*. We begin with a brief consideration of the nature and definitions of violence as it manifests in schools and then consider three broad areas addressed by the chapters in this volume. First, we consider bullying and the bullying dynamic, including cyberbullying, and the intersection of bullying and students with disabilities. Next, we address the extraordinarily difficult topic of school shootings, including whether and how we can predict, prevent, and respond to school shootings. Finally, we consider more broadly advances in building a more positive school climate and sense of community and creating safer schools generally. In all of these, we acknowledge the challenges of understanding the complexity and multiple causes of school violence, and the apparent rise in many forms of violence in schools, but conclude with thoughts on the positive avenues identified by authors in this volume for ways we might better support children and youth in both preventing violence and responding to it in appropriate, supportive ways.*

Keywords: Violence in schools; school climate; school shootings; threat assessment; bullying; zero tolerance

Issues Around Violence in Schools
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INTRODUCTION

Few topics are more important to families and educators than the safety of children while they are at school. It should go without saying that schools and schooling should be designed and structured in ways that make school among the safest places children spend time. And indeed data suggest generally that this is the case; as one example, we know that children and youth are far more likely to be victims of serious violence outside of school rather than in school. But as anyone paying attention to news and popular media knows well, there are increasing concerns about just how safe schools are in the broadest sense, whether children and youth are shielded from violence to the greatest extent possible, and whether there is promise in ongoing efforts to mitigate the development of violent and antisocial behavior in children and youth.

An important starting point in considering violence in schools is of course definition – what exactly does *violence* mean? A topic that surely comes to mind when raising the issue of violence in schools is the most extreme form of violence – namely school shootings. In the United States, gun violence in general has increased in frequency to the point that it is considered by many to be a "public health crisis" (e.g., American Medical Association; see Zarefsky, 2023), with President Biden declaring it to be an "epidemic" (Naylor, 2021). A particularly ominous tipping point may have occurred when gun violence became the leading cause of death among youth aged 1–19 in the United States (Goldstick et al., 2022).

Even as gun violence generally was on the rise, there has been uncertainty about whether gun violence in schools was on the same trajectory. The question of whether gun violence in schools is increasing is largely dependent on (a) how gun violence is defined (e.g., a targeted mass shooting vs any discharge of a firearm that coincidentally occurs on school property, such as a playground (see Collins et al., 2020)); and (b) the way in which data related to gun violence are analyzed (e.g., number of incidents, perpetrators, and/or victims). Regardless of the true prevalence, there is no debate that even a single instance of gun violence in schools is too many, and the fact remains that school shootings do happen. Moreover, while there are arguments that even though data may be simply too limited to identify clear trends, by most measures there seems to have been a documented uptick in the frequency of such events in the last decade (see Katsiyannis et al., 2023). Due to the understandable emotional reaction from the public when a mass school shooting occurs, the issue of school safety in general has become conflated with issues surrounding school shootings. While school shootings may certainly be the most devastating form of school violence, there are many other issues related to violence in schools that should be examined. What factors and conditions contribute to the development and perpetuation of violent behavior? What are the relationships among, and implications of various forms of violence, including growing concerns about bullying? And what responses can schools and communities offer, both toward the prevention of violent behavior in schools and toward healing and support in the aftermath of violence?

Given the complexity around what defines violence in school, the manuscripts included in this volume cover an array of topics and are organized into three main sections. The first includes three chapters that address issues related to bullying. In the second section, authors consider extreme violence in schools, namely school shootings, and examine ways that have been proposed or considered for preventing or responding to such violence in schools. Finally, in the third section, we examine broader issues around violence, including responding to violence and supporting those impacted by it, and preventative and collaborative approaches for establishing and maintaining school safety and a sense of community.

Issues Related to Bullying

The volume begins with an examination of the intersection of bullying and youth with disabilities. Historical assumptions likely minimized the complexity of the bullying dynamic. These may have included broad ideas that students with obvious or visible disabilities might be vulnerable to bullying, while students with emotional and behavioral disabilities may have been presumed to be more likely to be perpetrators – to tease and bully others. In Chapter 1, Graves and colleagues discuss the complexities in understanding the bullying dynamic and provide an overview of the ways that students with disabilities are likely to become involved with bullying as both victims and perpetrators, and indeed may be both at the same time, referred to as bully-victims. They also discuss evidence regarding approaches to preventing bullying, including the importance of collaboration across educators and families.

A relatively recent phenomenon in the bullying dynamic that demands attention is the rapid evolution of cyberbullying as a critical target of research and intervention. In Chapter 2, Rose and colleagues posit that the very socialization that children and youth experience has shifted in dramatic and fundamentally important ways from a largely in-person experience based on interpersonal communication to one that occurs largely in the rapid and as-yet poorly understood context of instant messaging and social media. Given that most youth spend an extraordinary percentage of their social time in internet-based interaction and communication, Rose et al. offer a compelling argument for the need to reexamine our understanding of traditional socialization processes and the development of online friendships to better understand how these new modes of social interaction may be positive, as well as how this intersects with growing concerns around cyberbullying.

The examination of issues related to bullying concludes with a chapter by Holben and Zirkel that provides a summary of recent bullying-related court decisions. Specifically, their overview summarizes the nature of cases that make up the increasing trend that continues in lawsuits filed related to school-based bullying. Among their findings are that the increasing trajectory in the frequency of litigation has continued, that plaintiff students were most often those with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), mental health diagnoses, and autism; and, in a shift from previous research, more recent outcomes were more

likely to be favorable to parents/plaintiffs rather districts, which had previously been the case.

Extreme Violence in Schools

In the second section of the volume, our examination of violence in schools shifts from more common occurrences around bullying to more extreme but more rare acts of school violence: mass shootings. This section begins with a chapter by Langaman that considers factors that potentially contribute to mass school shootings. Specifically, Langaman describes how factors across biological, psychological, social, and cultural domains may contribute to individuals becoming school shooters. Although there is strong guidance to avoid profiling as a preventative measure in mass school shootings (e.g., from the National Threat Assessment Center [NTAC]), Langaman has developed this four-domain model of factors that may influence or contribute to an individual's desire to carry out a mass school shooting, as well as his or her capability of doing so. After describing this four-domain model and providing examples of each domain drawn from actual perpetrators of school shootings, Langaman concludes with a description of how this model might be used for school violence prevention in general and, more specifically, in threat assessment.

A more specific discussion of threat assessment continues in the next chapter by Cornell, who describes the Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines (CSTAG) he developed. The CSTAG model has shown promise in assessing the seriousness and context of threatening behavior by students, and in connecting such students to interventions and supports rather than relying on zero tolerance policies. Cornell argues that zero tolerance and the exclusionary discipline that often results disproportionately impact students with disabilities, and that the CSTAG model provides an alternative that has the potential to help schools avoid both under-reacting and over-reacting to threats, and to initiate appropriate safety and support measures when needed.

Preventative and Collaborative Approaches for Maintaining School Safety and Building Community

The third and final section of this volume begins with a chapter that expands specifically on zero tolerance policies. Collins et al. describe the origins of a zero tolerance approach and analyze the ways that such an approach not only failed to achieve its stated objectives (e.g., to respond more consistently, and consequently with less bias, to disciplinary infractions), but likely made matters worse. They provide real examples of the extreme and absurd lengths to which zero tolerance policies were carried (e.g., suspending a young child for pointing a "finger gun" at another student), highlight problems of disproportionality associated with the use of zero tolerance policies, and point to the irony that the exclusion from learning that invariably comes with a zero tolerance approach is certain to exacerbate learning problems for students with and at risk for disabilities. They briefly discuss alternatives to zero tolerance, which rely largely on tiered models of

support and prioritize positive, antecedent interventions over punitive, reactive approaches to discipline.

Building on a foundation of positive, preventive strategies, Benner et al. describe their work around the Whole Child Initiative (WCI). The WCI model evolved from the larger Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child model (Slade, 2022), first articulated in 2014 as a public health model of aligning education and health approaches to promoting children's cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development and well-being. Benner et al. argue that no single intervention or even set of practices is likely to provide lasting and meaningful change in child outcomes and success. Rather, they suggest that the WCI model's emphasis on foundational components of social–emotional learning (SEL), coupled with an overt focus on all domains of children's development, is essential if children are to be able to thrive academically and physically, as well as socially and emotionally.

In the next chapter in this section, Nickerson et al. describe the PREPaRE model, developed by the National Association of School Psychologists, as a guide for schools to implement crisis prevention and intervention practices. The PREPaRE model is broad in that it considers all manner of crises from natural disasters to pandemic-related impacts on schools, and, importantly to this volume, incidents of extreme violence. The model specifically addresses the preparedness needs of school-based professionals across four crisis phases: prevention, mitigation, response, and recovery. We find several elements of the PREPaRE model to be particularly timely and relevant to how schools prepare for and respond to school violence, including school shootings. First, it guides schools in developing the basic elements of a crisis response plan. Second, it includes the recommendations that mental health risks be assessed in the aftermath of a crisis event. Finally, the PREPaRE model suggests that crisis interventions be embedded in a multitiered system of support.

In describing their research on a model of technology-based threat assessment, Vincent et al. apply a fascinating wrinkle by testing the use of restorative practices as a means of capturing student voice and thus potentially overcoming some of the barriers that may limit the utility of this student driven reporting mechanism. Specifically, they describe their research on the use of *Advocatr*, an app that allows students to make reports of concerning interactions or observations, as well as positive behaviors relevant to matters of school safety. Among the barriers to such reporting identified in their initial research were such things as a culture of "anti-snitching" among students, that students may have had low levels of trust in adult responses to concerns they might report, and overall concerns with creating or maintaining a punitive school climate. Vincent et al. conclude with recommendations for attending to student voice in combination with training in restorative practices as a means of minimizing peer conflict and ultimately school violence.

Finally, Koslouski et al. address an overarching concern that has taken on even greater importance in recent years: the impact of trauma on the education and well-being of children and youth. While principles of trauma-informed care have been established and promoted for some time, the most commonly cited

probably being those delineated by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2014), the impacts of school-related violence have given rise to greater concern about the nature and extent of trauma. Koslouski et al. describe specifically how trauma is both caused and exacerbated by school violence and provide an overview of trauma-informed approaches that show promise in healing the individual and collective trauma violence may cause. They consider the intersections of disability and trauma and especially the implications of school violence for students with disabilities and their teachers. They further examine the notion of systemic trauma and offer suggestions for ways the systemic conditions that may perpetuate trauma and school violence might be disrupted.

CONCLUSIONS

Taken together, the chapters in the volume highlight the breadth of impacts school violence may have on children and youth as well as their schools, teachers, families, and communities. They also highlight the complexities of understanding violence and the genesis of violent and antisocial behavior. Given the focus of this volume and series, most chapter authors also either directly or indirectly consider the intersections of violence and disability in schools. We note that this includes considerations of whether students with disabilities may be more likely to be perpetrators of violence (a premise which we think has been overblown), victims of violence (a premise we believe is supported by data), and how students with disabilities and their teachers can better cope with and respond to violence and the trauma it undoubtedly carries.

The complexities around understanding violence, coupled with its devastating impacts, may lead to pessimism that trajectories of violent behavior are only increasing, and even more sobering that there is little we can do to stem this tide, to prevent violence, or to respond in ways that promote healing in its aftermath. While there is good reason for alarm that violence occurs at all, and in particular that it occurs in extreme forms in schools at times, we hope the collection of chapters here also provides some measure of hope that there are pathways toward successful mitigation of violence, and the establishment of safe, supportive schools that nurture children and youth. It seems clear that no measure will prevent all violence or shield children and youth from experiencing or at least witnessing it at some point in their school careers. Thus, it is only logical that priorities must include (a) mitigating violence – reducing it to the lowest levels possible both in frequency and intensity; and (b) equipping children and youth, as well as educators, with skills and abilities to manage the impacts of violence they may experience or witness. Among the many ideas presented in the chapters in this volume, we highlight three broad ideas or themes that capture some of the most promising avenues for interventions and support as well as for further research and development. These include a focus on the positive social–emotional development of children and youth, the need for approaches to behavior and discipline to be proactive and positive, rather than reactive and negative, and the

need for a structured and systematic means of responding to threats of school violence.

First, it strikes us that a theme across many chapters involves creating environments in which children and youth feel safe and supported. These are certainly not new concepts, and many current iterations of tiered models of support and trauma-informed care either overtly or indirectly support these notions. We suggest only that increasing concerns around violence in schools mean that efforts should be re-doubled to ensure that all schools have as a core focus the well-being of children and youth in the broadest sense – a focus on the whole child, as Benner et al. suggest. The reasons for this are obvious. Though direct causal links are difficult to establish in the individual case, it would seem that the development of violent or antisocial behavior is at minimum blunted when the positive social and emotional development of children and youth is prioritized early and consistently. Related to this is the idea that children and youth are better equipped to respond to violence when they experience supportive environments and positive relationships with adults. In other words, schools and teachers must consistently be protective factors, rather than risk factors themselves, for children's ability to cope with the various forms of violence they may encounter.

Related to this idea is that interventions and supports – indeed all aspects of education – should focus on positive, preventive approaches, or antecedent interventions in the language of classroom and behavior management. Punitive approaches, and especially those that would fall under the umbrella of a zero tolerance approach, have not only proven ineffective, but may in fact be associated with poorer outcomes. Collins et al. touched on the limitations of a zero tolerance approach, and offered suggestions for alternatives to zero tolerance that are more supportive, precorrective, or educative. Simple strategies like Positive Greetings at the Door (Cook et al., 2018), or broader strategies like Check-in, Check-out (Maggin et al., 2015) are examples of ways that teachers can acknowledge students in positive, supportive ways, precorrect for anticipated errors, and engage students, not only in their academic work but also in positive, relationship-focused interactions (see Collins & Landrum, 2023).

At a more specific level with regard to instances of potential school violence, we believe that emerging evidence suggests that threat assessment provides a promising approach to meaningful responses. As Cornell describes, threat assessment involves a framework school-based teams can use to assess the seriousness of threats (e.g., Is the threat transient or substantive? Does the student have the means to carry out the threat?) and to initiate interventions that range from implementing safety protocols to make sure a serious threat is not carried out, to connecting the students with needed mental health supports. We are aware of concerns around threat assessment, including the potential for bias or disproportionality, or a tendency to move too quickly to more punitive outcomes, and we certainly endorse continued research to examine and mitigate against these concerns. That said, we also know that threats occur, and thus schools must respond in some way. At present, it appears that threat assessment at minimum provides a research-based framework for analyzing threats and mobilizing appropriate responses, and we concur with professional organizations (e.g.,

NASP, 2020) and the US Secret Service (National Threat Assessment Center, 2018) that schools should establish multidisciplinary teams and implement some form of formal threat assessment.

In sum, it is clear that violence in schools presents a daunting set of complex challenges, and that many of these challenges appear to be growing. Bullying, harassment, and significant acts of physical violence, including school shootings, are far too common occurrences. It is possible that circumstances have coalesced in recent years such that these problems have worsened in ways that will prove only temporary. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic had potentially profound impacts on most children and youth, including learning loss, impacts on the physical health and well-being of children and families, economic impacts on families, and the mental health impacts that stem from all of these. We do not yet know just how lasting these impacts will be. Further, problems with gun violence in the United States, which we noted earlier have reached such a level as to have been described as a public health crisis, may improve or worsen, depending at least in part to shifting political landscapes. But regardless of the factors that influence violence and the trajectories that may ebb and flow in rates of violence in schools, the fact remains that educators must be prepared to deal with violence and its impacts. Again, it is our intent that the chapters in this volume provide an overview of key areas of promise for improved research and practice in this regard, such that schools are better positioned to mitigate violence, and to respond in positive, supportive ways to those who may be impacted by violence.

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