

Youth Violence and the Urban Public School Response

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To examine how urban schools have responded to the threat of youth violence, we interviewed 64 school administrators--in most cases, principals--from high-, middle-, and elementary schools in the five largest urban areas of Massachusetts. Consistent with other research, we found that the urban schools in our sample offer numerous programs and activities aimed at preventing or resolving violent student behavior, aside from repressive law enforcement controls. Most such measures are located primarily at the high school level; few in the elementary schools. Similarly, after-school activities are offered by most of the high- and middle-schools, but are almost completely lacking in the elementary schools. Moreover, where they exist, such after-school programs are usually available to students on a selective basis. These differences between elementary versus middle- and high-schools are explained in terms of the perspectives of school administrators regarding their students: at the elementary school level, students are regarded as victims of violent media exposure and family conflict; by the time they reach the middle- and high-schools, however, students are more likely viewed as the perpetrators of violence.

Introduction

For many years, Justice Department homicide statistics have done little to allay the fears of city residents about walking the streets after dark or doing shopping downtown. In urban areas around the country, anxieties concerning violent crime have been reinforced by a soaring crime rate and by the growing participation of juveniles in the most serious criminal offenses.

From 1985 to 1994, for example, the rate of murder committed by teenagers, ages 14-17, actually increased more than 170 percent. During this period, the rate of killing by white male teenagers doubled, while the rate of killing by their black counterparts more than tripled. By every measure available, it appears that younger and younger teens have become increasingly involved in serious violent crimes. Given its prevalence, the issue of youth violence has become more difficult to ignore (Fox, 1996).

The public schools have been affected in important ways by the long-term escalation of juvenile violence. Some 35,000 teenagers go to school each day carrying a firearm. Almost half of all high school students report that their schoolmates carry weapons; about 40 percent report that gangs are present in their school (Blumstein, 1995).

Method

To examine how urban schools have responded to the threat and challenge of youth violence, we interviewed school administrators--in most cases, principals--in the five largest urban areas of Massachusetts--Boston, New Bedford, Worcester, Springfield, and Lowell. Not unlike urban schools in other jurisdictions across the country, the student population at the schools we studied are largely minority and from impoverished or working class backgrounds. The schools are located in cities which have been profoundly impacted by the continuing loss of manufacturing jobs and by a major influx of newcomers seeking opportunities.

We conducted structured interviews with a sample of 64 administrators--24 in high schools, 20 in middle schools, and 20 in elementary schools. Our sample represented almost all of the high schools and a random selection of middle and elementary schools located in the targeted cities.

These school officials were eager to talk. Their refusal rate was only about 20%. In both fixed alternative and open-ended formats, we asked the members of our sample a number of questions regarding the problem of violence and conflict in their schools, including its prevalence as well as the presence of programs and policies to combat it.

In addition, we questioned the administrators about characteristics of a range of programs available to their students.²

Results

Not surprisingly, most of the administrators we interviewed—even those at the elementary school level—expressed concern about school violence and perceived a need for programs in their schools to address the issue of student violence and conflict. As a typical response, one vice principal said that “every hour of every day,” his school’s staff is “dealing with conflict.” When asked, “How much of a priority at your school are programs addressing violence and conflict among students,” the majority responded that such programs were “a very high priority --one of the highest.”

Almost all of the administrators reported having to suspend or expel violent students during the academic year. Even at the elementary level, 64% of the principals forced violent students to leave. At the high school and middle school levels, this figure was close to 96%.³ In some of the schools under study, expulsion for carrying a weapon or behaving violently was anything but a rare occurrence. In eight schools, 26 or more students were reportedly dismissed during the school year.

The emphasis on combating violence with repressive control mechanisms was, to some extent, represented in the urban schools we studied, though not at the level previously suggested by some observers (Noguera, 1995). In 56% of the schools, police security personnel were present; in only nine percent, metal detectors had been installed. Most of the security personnel and metal detectors were, however, confined to the high schools.

Even more prevalent than law enforcement tactics were programs and policies that sought to strengthen the students’ informal relationships by providing them with supervision, guidelines, structure, and support during the school day. Many schools offered conflict resolution programs, often peer mediated (61%), and programs to combat hatred and racism (69%). Moreover, although not identifying them as specifically designed to prevent violence and conflict, numerous administrators also reported having such programs as community volunteers as tutors and mentors (88%), student government (54%), teacher training (70%), and community volunteering (43%).

Not unlike law enforcement efforts, most programs and activities were located primarily at the high school level; few in the elementary schools. The concentration of such measures in the high schools may result from the way in which principals differ by level as to how they frame the problem of student violence. Sixty-eight percent of the principals in charge of elementary schools pinpointed the sources of student violence in factors external to their schools. To these school administrators, children were the *victims* of family conflict, bad parenting, or excessive ex-

posure to media violence. By contrast, 80% of the high school principals and 64% of the middle school principals singled out some characteristic of the students themselves as being in need of change--gang rivalries, inadequate academic preparation, racial hostility, rumors in the hallways, or poor communication skills. These principals tended to regard their high school and middle school students not as victims of violence, but as its *perpetrators*. From this perspective, school programs were viewed as important for their ability to change those student characteristics associated with violence and conflict, whether idleness, hatred, or some form of incompetence.

The qualitative responses from administrators supported the notion that they saw elementary-level students as troubled kids and high school-level youngsters as kids causing trouble. One elementary school principal suggested that his violent students were “emotionally disturbed kids because they’re coming from such bad family situations.” Another said of her students that she wanted the school to be a “safe, calm place because it is the best part of their life for a lot of them.” Still another elementary school principal wanted “a school counselor on board early on to address family issues before they become serious issues.”

Lack of economic resources was mentioned by many elementary school principals who regarded their students as victims. One argued that she needed “financial support for special programs for children...good counseling, services for families, before and after school programs.” Another claimed that if she had more money at her discretion, she would use it “to make home visits, hire an extra nurse, more secretaries to allow administrators to do less paperwork and more one on one.” As she saw it, her mission was “to teach kids to cope with their life circumstances.”

Viewing their students as perpetrators rather than victims of violence, many middle and high school administrators, when asked to indicate the primary source of school-based violence and conflict, focused on their students’ lack of inter-personal skills. One principal suggested that “rumors lead to conflict among peers and then the students don’t know how to handle it, so they resort to violence.” A second administrator similarly implicated the “‘You said that I said’ stuff. It’s lots of the ‘he said, she said’ thing!” Still another principal emphasized the negative consequences of “interpersonal conflicts. Gangs are a problem,” she said.

When asked to identify a program that would be effective in dealing with student conflict and violence, the middle and high school principals focused on efforts to improve their students’ communication skills and cognitive abilities. In their qualitative responses, administrators cited programs to “teach intensively that violence has immediate consequences for the students,” programs to “show students how to problem solve and use good judgment,” and programs to teach “communication skills to deal with people.” As one administrator put it, “We must teach kids to understand the larger effects of their actions.”

After-school activities were offered by 90% of the high

schools and 96% of the middle schools, but by only 14% of the elementary schools. Such programs usually included intra-mural athletics in addition to drama, art, music, and student government.

Where they existed, after-school programs were usually available to students on a selective basis. In 95% of the schools offering after-school activities, one or more restrictions were placed on the students' eligibility to participate. Fifty-seven percent of the schools required a minimum-grade-average; 14% charged a fee; 60% established a conduct requirement excluding the worst behavior cases; and 25% provided no transportation home. According to one principal, youngsters who are able to participate in after-school programs "need to be good students and not act up a lot." Another principal asserted, "They have to pass conduct and effort, and pass in homework and have good attendance."

The reasons why so many schools impose eligibility requirements for participating in after-school activities may go beyond scarce economic resources. Only one of the 64 administrators interviewed explicitly mentioned after-school programs as violence or conflict prevention measures. Principals were perhaps more likely to view such programs and activities as a *privilege* extended to *deserving* students--those who are achievement-oriented, compliant and well-behaved; yet the perceived importance of such programs was probably diminished in comparison to peer-mediated conflict resolution techniques because they were almost never identified as necessary for combating or preventing school violence.

As a general concern, economic resources were on the minds of most of the administrators we interviewed. Whether in charge of elementary, middle, or high schools, they brought up the issue of a lack of funding in their schools and their need for money to develop the kinds of programs and activities they saw as necessary to counteract and prevent student violence. One principal cited the need to hire more teachers in order to provide a better student/teacher ratio. "This would mean more supervision, more direct contact with adults," she said. A second administrator argued for hiring more staff in order to expand his after-school activities. "We don't have the money," he said. "Staff is volunteering time and extra staff is limited." While one principal argued that she needed "full-time social workers," but didn't have the financial resources to do it, another emphasized wanting funds for "professional development and teacher training to deal with conflict and violence." Many suggested they would like to do more for their students but they "don't have the money or the people to do it."

Discussion

Consistent with other research, we found that the urban schools in our sample offer numerous programs and activities aimed at preventing or resolving violent student behavior, aside from the repressive law enforcement controls represented by police personnel and metal detectors

(Petersen, 1997). We found that many schools have peer-mediated conflict resolution programs, programs to combat hatred and racism, and community volunteers as tutors and mentors. Also, as is true nationally, most administrators we interviewed suggest that such programs are vastly under-funded. It seems futile to ask that schools take on a broader range of important responsibilities without the collective willingness to provide them with adequate economic resources.

Conflict resolution programs are extremely popular at all school levels. Recent evaluation research suggests that such programs actually do work to reduce fighting between students during school hours and that the lessons learned from conflict resolution programs may even carry over to the after-school hours as well (Crawford & Bodine, 1996).

At the same time, however, it should be kept in mind that a peer-mediation approach for teaching youngsters to resolve disputes operates under the assumption that youth conflict is a *personal problem* rather than a *public issue*. While worthwhile, such programs do little if anything to resolve the underlying structural deficiencies for which violence and conflict are symptomatic.

For the most disenfranchised students--those who have lost faith in the system--violence is functional. In joining a gang, they often find a sense of belonging otherwise missing from their lives. By expressing their physical superiority in violence, they gain a profound feeling of importance and control. In the illicit drug business, they may generate an enormous income and serve an apprenticeship in a career (Padilla, 1993).

For such youngsters, school programs aimed at improving inter-personal skills may seem irrelevant, almost laughable. In order to turn their lives around, the most troublesome young people must be convinced that society will provide them with opportunities to realize their dreams, that schools will give them hope for the future. What really counts for such youngsters, then, are structural changes through which formal education is seen as having some practical purpose other than as a baby sitter.

Although most urban high schools and middle schools also provide after-school activities, such programs are usually restricted to students who are in academic good standing, haven't been troublesome, have economic resources, and can find transportation home. Once again, students most lacking in healthy alternatives after classes end--those who are impoverished, alienated, and idle--are probably unable to participate.

In addition, after-school programs are almost entirely missing at the elementary school level. This leaves many younger children without opportunities for wholesome experiences and activities in the afternoons, unless they are provided by parents or some other community group. Financial restrictions often make it difficult, if not impossible, for many families to provide their children's after-school programming on their own. Moreover, because they generally do not begin until the middle-school years, supervised activities after school have not become part of the

students' daily routine and therefore may not be seen as acceptable--as "cool" or "hip" by the very students who are most rebellious and, therefore, most in need of ameliorative and enriching activities. By the time such programs are available, students have already entered adolescence and may be unwilling to participate in activities supervised by adults, especially by teachers and parents.

Teenage crime peaks during the afternoon period between 3 p.m. and 7 p.m.--from the end of the school day to the time at which many parents arrive home from work. Almost 40% of all serious crimes committed by teenagers occur during this period. Yet 57% of all juveniles lack full-time parental supervision; they grow up in dual-career families or in single-parent households (This figure was only 37% in 1970). In wealthy, suburban communities, many children may be provided with opportunities for healthy after-school activities. In urban areas where economic and human resources are seriously lacking, however, children tend to be on their own until their parents come home from work (Fox, 1996).

Therefore, a serious expansion of the school day to include *all* students would structure youngsters' days so that their time could be spent on worthwhile activities rather than in boredom and idleness. What we currently regard as after-school programs should be incorporated into a much longer school day during which traditional academics become interspersed among clubs, internships, athletic programs, job apprenticeships, and the arts. By re-structuring the school experience so that it is identified with more than academic subjects, the meaning of school would be broadened to include appealing and practical activities from the youngsters' standpoint.

As one principal suggested about his students, "a lot of violence and conflict is created because they're not interested in school." It would therefore be helpful if schools were to determine what the students wanted to do, rather than attempt always to force the students to do what adults think would be good for their students. This was recognized by one school administrator who urged his colleagues to "focus on the needs of children so the organization is structured to address those needs."

Years ago, researchers conducted a famous study which examined the effect of illumination on the productivity of a group of factory workers at Western Electric (Roethlisberger and Dickson, 1939). First, researchers turned up the lights and worker productivity increased. Then, researchers turned down the lights to approximate pale moon light, but productivity increased even more. Their conclusion was surprising: Degree of Illumination had nothing to do with productivity; it was actually a result of the increased attention these workers were given by the researchers. Participating in an "important" experiment had made the workers feel special. Researchers called their unexpected finding the Hawthorne Effect, because of the area in which it was located.

A Hawthorne Effect in the area of juvenile violence would assure that widespread concern is translated into

collective action. In response to severe cutbacks by state and federal government, this means working even harder to repair the moral, social, and economic damage done to our country's urban youth. Yet this can only be accomplished if our decision-makers take a broader perspective on the problem of juvenile violence and recognize that our youngsters are as much victims as they are the perpetrators of violence.

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Footnotes

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² A copy of the interview schedule is available from the first author.

³ All differences reported in this paper were found to be statistically significant by χ^2 test of significance at $p < .05$.

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