Youth Violence

It has been more than 10 years since the killings at Columbine High School, along with several other high-profile school shootings, made school safety a headline story on the evening news. Parents, educators, and community leaders demanded action. States across the nation responded swiftly. Millions of dollars were invested to implement new policies and programs to create safer learning environments. The good news is that the rate of student murders appears to have decreased and there is a higher level of awareness of school safety issues today than 10 years ago.

But school safety and youth violence is again making national news. In Chicago, an honor roll student was brutally beaten and killed on his way home from school. A female student was gang raped after the homecoming dance in Richmond, Calif. A boy in Springfield, Mass. hanged himself after being ridiculed by classmates for the way he dressed. Four middle school boys were arrested for sexually assaulting another boy at a Tampa middle school.

Although the primary focus of schools is clearly on curriculum and instruction, violence disrupts the learning environment and has a negative effect on students, families, schools, and the broader community. This Policy Update is the first in a four-part series that will explore the issues around youth violence. Below we provide an overview and define youth violence, give the most current incident rates, and discuss the impact of youth violence on students. The second and third Policy Updates in the series will discuss youth violence in greater detail, exploring such issues as fatal versus nonfatal violence, electronic aggression, intimate partner violence, and violence off campus. The concluding Update will examine state efforts in violence prevention and provide state-level recommendations, including a comprehensive framework that consists of strategic school-community and cross-agency partnerships to help curb violence and provide all students with a safe learning environment.

What Is Youth Violence?

As defined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "youth violence refers to harmful behaviors that can start early and continue into young adulthood….Some violent acts—such as bullying, slapping, or hitting—can cause more emotional harm than physical harm. Others, such as robbery, assault, or rape, can lead to serious injury or even death." This can be further broken down into violence at school versus away from school:

**At school:** Inside the school building, on school property (school parking area, play area, school bus, etc.), or on the way to or from school.

**Away from school:** Outside of school property and not while students are on the way to or from school.

How Often Does Youth Violence Occur?

Two recent Institute of Education Sciences reports found the following rates of youth violence for the 2007-2008 school year:

- The rate of incidents was higher for middle school students than for elementary or high school students (41 per 1,000 students compared to 26 and 22 per 1,000).
- About 13 percent of city schools reported at least one gang crime, compared to 5 percent of suburban and town and 3 percent of rural schools.
- Among youth between 5 to 18 years of age, there were 43 school-associated deaths.
- Among students 12 to 18 years of age:
  - there were 1.5 million victims of nonfatal crimes at school, including 826,200 thefts and 684,100 violent crimes;
  - there were 1.1 million nonfatal crimes away from school;
  - 4 percent of students reported being victimized at school in the previous six months; and
  - 32 percent reported being bullied at school during the year.
- Approximately 5 percent reported they were afraid of attack or harm at school compared to 3 percent away from school.
- More teachers in cities and in secondary schools reported being threatened with injury than teachers in town, suburban, or rural schools or in elementary schools.
- Close to 85 percent of public schools reported at least one incident of crime had occurred at their school—75 percent recorded one or more violent crimes and 17 percent recorded one or more serious violent crimes.
• Since the 2007-08 school year, more than 70 students in Chicago have been murdered, most of them killed in their neighborhoods either coming home or going to school.

What is the Impact of Youth Violence on Students, Schools, and the Community?

In addition to the cuts, bruises, broken bones, and even deaths that can occur, youth violence has detrimental effects on student learning as well as on students’ overall health and well-being. Victims of violence are more likely to have lower attendance rates, to have poor academic performance, and to drop out. These students may also exhibit signs of depression, anxiety, and other psychological problems. One study found that on any given day, more than 160,000 students go home early for fear of being bullied.

In addition, students do not necessarily have to be victims to be negatively affected by youth violence. A national survey of high school students found that about 6 percent reported not going negatively affected by youth violence. A national survey of high school students found that about 6 percent reported not going negatively affected by youth violence.

Youth violence not only has an impact on the students, it also affects the school environment and the broader community. Schools with a high incidence of violence experience greater teacher and leadership turnover. They also increase the cost of health care, reduce productivity, decrease property values, and disrupt social services in their community.

Resources

NASBE’s regularly updated School Health Policy Database is online at www.nasbe.org.


Risk Factors that Increase the Odds of Instigating Violent Behavior

Individual Risk Factor
• History of violent victimization
• Attention deficits, hyperactivity, or learning disorders
• History of early aggressive behavior
• Association with delinquent peers
• Involvement with gangs
• Involvement with drugs, alcohol, or tobacco
• Low IQ
• Poor academic performance
• Low commitment to school or school failure
• Poor behavioral control
• Deficits in social, cognitive, or information-process abilities
• High emotional distress
• Antisocial beliefs and attitudes

Community/Societal Risk Factors
• Social rejection by peers
• Exposure to violence and conflict in the family
• Lack of involvement in conventional activities

Individual Protective Factors
• Intolerant attitude toward deviance
• High IQ
• High grade point average
• Positive social orientation
• Religiosity
• Connectedness to family or adults outside the family
• Ability to discuss problems with parents
• Perceived parental expectations about school performance are high
• Frequent shared activities with parents

Consistent presence of parent during at least one of the following: when awakening, when arriving home from school, at evening mealtime or going to bed
• Involvement in social activities

School Protective Factors
• Positive school climate and atmosphere; clear and high expectations of all students
• Strong student bonding to the school
• High levels of student participation and parent involvement
• Opportunities to gain skills and develop socially