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VIOLENCE AFFECTING SCHOOL EMPLOYEES

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A review of the literature shows significant violence (both physical and verbal threats) in schools in the United States (U.S.). Almost all of the studies focus on violence by students and against students. There is very limited information about violence involving employees in the schools even though teachers are three times more likely to be attacked than are students on a per capita basis. The purpose of this study was to understand the extent, causation, and reduction of violence against school employees in a metropolitan area. Administrators of all schools (K-12, vocational schools, and colleges) in a 4-county, 2-state metropolitan area were surveyed. The results of the survey found that violence in the Portland metropolitan area was not as prevalent as nationwide trends indicate. However, most respondents believed violence would continue at the present level into the future. More research needs to be conducted about violence against school employees, but it should carefully consider the geographical area and the type of respondents.

INTRODUCTION

Schools have traditionally been thought of as safe havens for students and employees. However, recent incidents have threatened the sense of security usually found in educational institutions. The images of the Columbine High School attacks in Littleton, Colorado in 1999 are still shown today in the media. In his award winning movie "Bowling for Columbine," Michael Moore (Moore, 2002) showed graphic footage of the massacre that was captured on the video cameras of Columbine High School. Unfortunately, Columbine is not the only school that has experienced the tragedy of school violence

in the last 5 – 10 years. Since 1999, deadly incidents of school violence have occurred in Pennsylvania, Kentucky, Mississippi, Alaska, Washington, Tennessee, New Mexico, Oregon, California, Minnesota and Florida. The vast majority of media coverage about school violence today focuses on violent attacks by students against fellow students. A search of media coverage reveals newspaper headlines, news accounts, and journal articles about violence against students but limited information about violence against *employees* of the schools.

Definitions

Since the shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, various government bodies, private groups, and educational researchers have focused on the issue of violence in schools. To understand the scope and implications of this issue, the term "violence" must be defined as it pertains to school employees. Definitions found in the literature seem very broad and diverse with no consensus on one definition. "Violence" in schools can range from verbally swearing at a school counselor to verbally threatening an administrator with bodily harm to pushing a custodian in a school hallway to physically fighting with a bus driver to killing a teacher with a handgun. For purposes of this paper, "violence" against employees in schools is defined as "physical harm (e. g. hitting, pushing, throwing objects at, or damaging property of the employee), or threats of such harm, towards employees of schools." "Employees" are defined as "anyone paid for work by and for the school, including but not limited to, teachers, administrators, custodial and service staff, coaches, and part-time employees."

Background of Violence in Schools

Violence has occurred in schools over history. The federal government has collected data about the safety of American schools from school principals for several decades. The first large study, the Safe School Study, was administered to principals, teachers, and students in the 1970's (NCES, 2003). More recently the violent events have garnered increased media coverage due to the dramatic nature of the

crimes. In this age of instant communications and open dialogue, the media has almost been forced to report deaths and other violent acts in schools. As such, violence in schools has warranted more attention by researchers and the schools themselves.

Some report the incidence of violence in schools in general in the U.S. to have increased over time (Gaughan, 2001; Tjaden, 1998) while others state it has remained constant (NCES, 2003). In any case, the level is higher than most would prefer. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) stated that 71% of public elementary and secondary schools experienced at least one violent incident in the 1999-2000 school year and 36% reported at least one violent crime to the police during that time (NCES, 2003). According to the NCES national report, violent incidents were most commonly some form of physical altercation. These incidents were more likely to occur in secondary schools (as compared to elementary or middle schools), urban schools (compared to suburban or rural), and larger schools (versus smaller schools). The majority of non-violent crimes continued to be thefts (NCES, 2003). However, there seem to be notable recent increases in U.S. schools in bullying (NCES, 2003) and increases in violence in elementary schools (Wallis, 2003).

As might be expected, violence seems to be stable or increasing on a state level also. Most of this information comes from North Carolina as it has been the only known state that is required to consistently track violent incidents and report them to a state agency. The Annual Report on

North Carolina School Violence states that during the 1995 -1996 school year, the state had 1443 incidents of violent acts against school employees. In the 2002-2003 school year in North Carolina, 8,548 acts of crime and violence were committed (North Carolina Public Schools, 2004). The most recent data available showed 6.627 incidents of violence per 1000 students for the 2002 - 2003 school year (North Carolina Public Schools, 2004). This is a reduction from the 2001-02 rate of 7.709 but an increase over the 2000-2001 rate of 6.085 (North Carolina Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2003).

The usual victims of violence in schools are other students and teachers (Gaughan, 2001). We know that students are often the victims because the mass media frequently tells us so. However, we know little about violence against the employees of the schools such as teachers. Yet, it appears that *teachers may be three times more likely to be victims of violent crimes at schools than are students* (21 incidents per 1,000 teachers versus 7 incidents per 1,000 students, respectively) (NCES, 2003; North Carolina Public Schools, 2004)! On a national level, the National Center for Education Statistics (2003) stated that between 1997 - 2001 there were 1.3 million nonfatal crimes (including 473,000 violent crimes) against America's teachers. That equals approximately 324 violent crimes against our nation's teachers each day in the United States. The U.S. Department of Education (USDE) stated that from 1995 to 1999, teachers were victimized approximately 1,708,000 times in nonfatal instances. Nearly one out of every five

public school teachers reported being verbally abused, 8% reported being physically threatened, and 2% reported being physically attacked (USDE, 2000). Recent NCES (2003) data reveal that teachers are more likely to be victims of violence if they are male, in public (versus private) schools, and in urban (versus rural or suburban) areas. Teachers in secondary schools were more likely to be threatened with physical harm but less likely to be actually physically attacked than teachers in middle or elementary schools. Black teachers were more likely to be verbally threatened with violence but no more likely to be physically attacked than white teachers. No studies were found on violence towards other employees like custodial workers or administrators.

Other issues of violence against school employees involve perpetrators, weapons, and locations of the violent acts. Perpetrators of violent acts against school employees are usually thought to be male students in either urban or rural areas. The usual types of weapons against school employees are fists and guns; over half were handguns with the rest being mainly rifles and shotguns (USSS & USDE, 2002). Violent acts normally occur throughout the school property-- in classrooms, hallways, playgrounds, and parking lots.

New York State has passed legislation to protect students and school employees. The Safe Schools Against Violence in Education Act (SAVE) of 2000 established standardized procedures for schools to follow in the event of a violent act occurring at a school. It also increased the penalties for committing violence in schools. Each

school district will be evaluated on the violence that occurs in its schools thus leading to certain direct and indirect penalties and rewards for the school (New York State United Teachers, 2005).

In summary, violence in schools has generally increased over time, but that violence has mainly been studied as student-to-student violence. With safety being of paramount concern, it is important to look at all individuals involved in such violence in schools including teachers, administrators and other employees. Further research is needed to fully understand the effects of violence against school employees.

PURPOSE

Considering that very little research has been conducted regarding how violence affects school employees, this study will look at how violence in schools in one metropolitan area affects employees of those schools. Specifically, we look at extent, frequency, weapons, causation, prevention, responses, perpetrators, victims, and trends in the former areas. We hope to obtain information which can generate questions to be addressed nationally and policies to be developed locally.

METHODOLOGY

The sample in this study is all schools in the Portland, Oregon metropolitan area. This includes early childhood centers, kindergarten, elementary, middle, secondary, business/vocational/technical, community colleges, 4-year colleges, and universities. These included public and pri-

vate schools for low- to high-income schools in rural as well as urban and suburban areas. A 2-page questionnaire addressing the above topic areas was developed and mailed to the top school administrator in all 824 schools in the metropolitan area of Portland, Oregon. The Portland metropolitan area consists of Multnomah, Clackamas, and Washington counties in Oregon and Clark County in Washington. The 17-item questionnaire first gathered relevant demographic information from each respondent and then addressed information about violent incidents against employees, degree of violence, the perceived causes, and the characteristics of the perpetrators. Additionally, the survey addressed the degree to which employees felt safe at their schools and if they believed violence was an increasing threat.

RESULTS

The respondents were mainly administrators from suburban elementary and middle-level public schools (Table 1). Since the survey was sent to the top administrators of the 824 schools, it was not unexpected that they filled out 90% of the returned questionnaires while human resources employees filled out 4% and safety/security personnel returned 1%. The remaining 5% of respondents did not specify their positions in the school. The average length of time reported by the respondents in their jobs was 10 years (SD 8.00), and the respondents had been employed at their current school for an average of 7 years (SD 6.12). Receiving 139 usable questionnaires produced an

apparent 17% return rate. (As explained in the Discussion section of this paper, 17% is an understated response rate.) The majority of the 139 respondents (52%) represented public schools while 30% represented private schools. However, 18% of the respondents did not indicate whether they represented a public or private school. Fifty percent identified their school as suburban, 36% stated that they were an urban school, and 14% said their school was rural. The median numbers of students and faculty represented were 400 students and 36 employees per school.

The general level of violence against employees in schools was low (Table 2). The mean of "serious verbal threats" was 2.8 per school (SD 11.1) for all of the schools responding, and the mean of "actual physical harm" to employees was 0.90 per school (SD 3.3) in the 12 months prior to reporting. In the K-12 category, the rates showed 10 Serious Verbal Threats per 100 employees and 0.5 instances of Actual Physical Harm for every 100 employees. In comparison, the rates at colleges/universities and vocational schools were 0.1 Serious Verbal Threats per 100 employees and 0.075 instances of Actual Physical Harm per 100 employees. Private schools had 0.54% per student rate of violent action while the public schools had 0.56% rate. The rate of violent actions was 0.55% per student for urban schools, 0.39% for suburban schools, and 0.09% for rural schools.

When asked how safe respondents felt at their schools now, 14% stated they felt "somewhat safe," and 86% felt "very safe." No survey respondents indicated they felt "not safe at all" at their schools. Violence against employees in schools was gener-

ally seen as stable over the last five years. About 16% stated that violence against employees had increased, 15% stated that violence had decreased, and 69% declared that violence against employees had stayed the same. Regarding the future of school safety and increasing violence, 9% of the respondents felt that violence against employees in the next five years would decrease, 73% felt it would "stay about the same," and 18% felt that violence would increase.

The responding schools did have some planned tactics in place to prevent violence against employees. About 80% of the schools had a "zero tolerance policy" for violence while 65% used mediation to handle conflict instances that occurred. Additional violence prevention approaches are listed in Table 3. Notably, 4% of the respondents stated that they had no prevention tactics for violence against employees.

Responding to violence in schools was mainly in the form of contacting the local police (58% of the respondents). School-employee response teams (39%) and voluntary counseling (39%) were the next most common response approaches to violence against school employees. Other approaches to responding to violence are listed in Table 4. While 18% of the respondents stated that they used some other form of response (without listing details), 13% of the respondents indicated that they had no planned response at all.

The majority of respondents believed that white students, both male and female, committed most of the threats and acts of violence against employees. There were more female victims on the average in

comparison to males. Additionally, white employees were more likely to be victims as compared to employees of color. Poor home life was the number one perceived cause of violence against employees at schools, drug and alcohol abuse chosen as the second most frequent cause, and "other" ranked number three. Other mentioned causes of violence against school employees were: gangs, easy weapons access, school location/neighborhood, school buildings/parking design, and ineffective school discipline.

DISCUSSION

The study is limited by several factors. Per the plan of the study, the overwhelming majority of respondents were administrators (89.9%). This creates both plusses and minuses. Perceptions of higher ranking officials should more accurately represent the actual incidence, etiology, and responses to violence against employees in schools since they have the best overview of all school activities. However, the experiences and perceptions of top administrators (who are removed from direct contact with most violence) may differ greatly from other school employees who are front-line employees such as teachers. There may be a discrepancy between what is happening to school employees and what is being reported. The administrators may also have a tendency to understate the violence problems since they may be ego involved in making sure their safety programs look good and also not want to cause problems and additional work if their school is seen as violent. One of the provisions of the federal "No

Child Left Behind Act" (2001) could be to classify a school as "persistently dangerous." This requires schools that are so designated to allow students to transfer to another school. This "persistently dangerous" label is also reported to the community. Both actions can jeopardize the school's existence.

There is an apparent low response rate for the survey. Of the 824 surveys that were sent out, only 139 were returned, yielding a response rate of only 17%. This response rate may be seen as seriously limiting us from drawing any major conclusions about violence in schools in the Portland Metropolitan area. However, it should be explained that, although surveys were sent to each school in the Portland metropolitan area, many K-12 schools may have responded only through their district office or representative. For instance, it was found that one school district of 36 schools relied on one survey returned from the district administrator to represent all 36 schools. If other schools also pooled their responses to be given only by their school district administrators, the actual sample size could shrink from 824 to as few as 415 schools. In that case, the response rate would actually be 33%. There is no way of confirming this as the survey was anonymous. Additionally, it's possible that some vocational and early childhood schools believed that surveys were meant only for "regular" K-12 schools and did not pertain to their situation, so they did not respond.

Another possible shortcoming is the demographic make-up of the employees in the Portland Metropolitan Area. Most residents in this area are white which may explain why the majority of respondents

claimed that perpetrators of violence in schools were white. If the demographic make-up were different, different characteristics may have been found. This could be the reason that national and North Carolina's statistics differ from this survey's findings in such areas.

There is a need for further research about violence against employees in schools. It is recommended that future research carefully consider the sample for study. Front-line employees, like teachers, would seem to be desired subjects. Choosing varied geographical locations in the U.S. and more intensely studying vocational schools would aid in better understanding the violence against employees in schools.

CONCLUSIONS

The incidents of violence reported in this study did not confirm initial perceptions of high rates of violence against school employees. It was found that respondents, mainly administrators from suburban elementary and middle schools, stated there was little violence against employees. Respondents felt quite safe now and expected low violence levels in the future. Schools used zero tolerance programs and mediation to prevent violence and used police to respond to incidents of violence. White (male and female) students were seen as the main perpetrators of violence against employees. Poor home life was judged the number one cause of the violence. While the total number of incidents was lower than expected, it is certain that employee safety is still of high

concern to school administrators. It is especially important to research this area considering that teachers (and other employees?), who seldom make the mass media stories, are much more likely to suffer violence at school than are students (who usually make the headlines). It is definitely important to school employees for us to learn more about violence against employees in schools.

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Table 1: Types of Schools of Respondents

<u>Types of Schools</u>	<u>Percentage of Respondents</u>
Pre-school/kindergarten	14.4%
Grades 1-5 Elementary school	31.1%
Grade 6-8 middle school	28.1%
Grades 9 - 12 Secondary school	12.6%
Business/Technical school	4.8%
Two-year college	0.6%
Four-year College	1.2%
University	1.2%
Other	6.0%

Table 2: Violent Incidents Reported Against Employees in Prior 12 Months

<u>School Level</u>	<u>Serious Verbal Threats</u>	<u>Actual Physical Harm</u>
Preschool	2	20
Elementary	47	52
Middle	44	8
Secondary School	58	43
Business/vocational/technical	14	1
Colleges and universities	6	0
Unknown	<u>207</u>	<u>30</u>
Total	378	154

Table 3: Tactics Used By Schools To Prevent Violence

<u>Tactic Used By Schools</u>	<u>Percentage of Schools Using</u>
Zero Tolerance program	79.3%
Conflict resolution programs (e. g. mediation)	65.2%
Dress code	35.6%
Community/school clubs	28.9%
ID badges/labels on people	28.1%
Security guards	16.3%
Extra lighting	14.8%
Personal hall monitors for security	9.6%
TV monitors for security	8.9%
Metal detectors	1.5%
Other	16.3%
None	3.7%

Table 4: Responses to Violence against School Employees

<u>Response</u>	<u>Percentage of Respondents</u>
Contact Police	58.1%
School-employee Response Team	39.5%
Voluntary Counseling	39.5%
Required Counseling	25.0%
Other Form of Response (Not Specified)	18.5%
No Planned Response Method	12.9%