

Teen Violence: Schools are not Immune

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For the past 5 or 6 years, it's been hard to turn on the television without seeing a teenager at school with a gun, shooting fellow classmates or teachers, or holding someone hostage. During the past decade there have been stabbings, shootings, brutal rapes, gang-related incidents—not in a back alley in the inner city (though these crimes are happening there, too)—but in the place parents once thought was safe: an educational institution.

How Safe are Schools?

Despite recent Justice Department figures showing school was a safer place than the street or the home, youth violence is still occurring. And it's happening in a big way in our schools nationwide. Half as many students were victims of violence in the hallways of their schools as ran into crime away from school.

According to a 1997 Youth Risk Behavior Survey done by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Department of Education, Department of Justice, and the National School Safety Center, the facts bear this out:

- 65 percent of school-associated violent deaths involved students;
- 28 percent of fatal injuries occurred inside the school building;
- 18.3 percent of high school students carried a gun, knife or club to school during the 30 days preceding the survey;
- 7.4 percent were threatened during the previous 12 months;
- 4 percent felt unsafe either at school or on while traveling to school and missed one or more days because of fear; and
- 32.9 percent had property stolen or destroyed on school grounds.

A separate CDC study on youth violence found that the majority of violent incidents were homicides and involved firearms. That same study found that though the number of violent school-associated incidents had decreased since 1993, the number of incidents involving multiple victims has increased. The National School Safety Center reports that students in higher grades are more likely to be victims of violent death than are younger students. The Center also found that black students are more likely to be victims than their counterparts from other racial-ethnic groups. School-associated violent death is also nine times more likely to happen in urban schools—the recent mass shootings in rural and suburban areas such as Paducah, Kentucky, and Columbine notwithstanding.

Clearly, the youth crime statistics could go on and on. The question is why this violence is happening in the first place. The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention has assessed the risk factors for youth violence. They include:

- Poor interactions between mother and child at 1-year-old;
- An emotionally distressed parent;

- Marital conflict and lack of communication between parents;
- Criminal or violent behavior of a parent;
- Alcohol or other drug abuse by a parent;
- Child abuse or neglect;
- Harsh or inconsistent discipline;
- Lack of parental supervision;
- Living in violent neighborhoods;
- Rough or antisocial peers;
- Learning problems;
- A history of absenteeism from school; and
- A lack of social problem-solving skills.

Creating “Cultures of Peace”

But there are organizations doing something about the problem. Fourteen youth violence prevention evaluation projects are underway in 11 cities nationwide, under the sponsorship of the CDC's National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. The goal of these projects is to determine which interventions are effective in preventing and reducing aggressive and violent behavior. The majority of the projects emphasize primary prevention and are cooperative efforts between schools, health departments and community partners. Four of the projects (Tucson; Chicago; Richmond, Virginia; Portland, Oregon) will be extended three years to assess whether initial intervention effects continue after the program has ended.

The idea behind the projects is to catch the students early—some programs begin with students as young as 5 years of age—and train them to create a “culture of peace” within the school environment. The projects teach students to understand other cultures as well as their own and to develop an appreciation for their communities and families. Other cities' projects, for example, Chicago and Aurora, Illinois' Cognitive/Ecological Approach to Preventing Violence, are aimed specifically at African-American and Hispanic youth (ages 7-13) who are at high risk for violence. These at-risk youth are taught to recognize and better manage aggression.

Are these programs—and others like them—working? Only time will tell, since most of them are ongoing. Fernando Soriano, Ph.D., principal investigator of the Santa Cruz, California, Cultures and Communities program, says so far, the results are promising. “The responses from young participants are favorable, with youth indicating a positive experience. Many of the participants want to continue with the program after its 16-week term. And teachers appear to observe positive changes among participants,” he said.

For more on youth violence and risk factors, you can download CDC's booklet, *Best Practices in Youth Violence Prevention*, at <http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/dvp/bestpractices.htm> or call CDC at (770) 488-4362. ❖

