School Violence: Effective Response Protocols for Maximum Safety and Minimum Liability

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Abstract: Despite the recent preoccupation with terrorism, most Americans are still killed by our own citizens, and school violence continues to be a significant source of mortality and trauma. This article describes the basic facts, features, and dynamics of school violence and presents a prevention, response, and recovery protocol adapted from the related field of workplace violence. This model may be used by educators, law enforcement professionals, and mental health clinicians in their collaborative efforts to make our academic institutions safer and healthier places to learn. [International Journal of Emergency Mental Health, 2007, 9(2), pp. 105-110].

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School violence is not really back in the news because it never really left. Eclipsed by the war on terror, recent campus mass violence incidents such as Virginia Tech – as with Jonesboro, Littleton, Columbine, and others before it – remind us that most killers of Americans are still our own citizens and that many of these murders take place where we expect them least, our schools. This article will provide some insight into the psychology of this modern form of mass murder and provide some practical recommendations for preventing, responding to, and recovering from school violence that can be utilized by law enforcement, education, and mental health professionals.

Demographics of School Violence

The good news is that youth violence as a whole has been decreasing in frequency since the 1970s. However, during the same period, the severity of juvenile violence has dramatically increased, with a greater number of homicides and the involvement of more potent weapons. In addition, students are committing violence at increasingly younger ages. According to National School Safety Center, almost 3 million crimes are committed on or near a school campus each year, accounting for 11% of all reported crimes in the United States (Bender & McLaughlin, 1997).

In this context, high-profile multiple murders on school campuses, horrific though they may be, are still relatively low-frequency events. Much more common are the everyday instances of bullying, harassment, and nonlethal violence that occur on school campuses across the nation and the world. These, too, can be psychologically traumatizing and may set the stage for episodes of explosive violence.

School Victimization

The kinds of intimidation and harassment that would get an employee fired at almost any job are routinely tolerated by school authorities when they occur between students. In...
many of the cases of school violence studied, the perpetra-
tors had been harassed or persecuted in some way by other
students and their efforts to have their cases resolved by
school authorities were rebuffed or ignored. Of course, a far
greater number of bullied students suffer in silence without
seeking to redress their injustice with a greater atrocity.

Peer victimization is the experience of being a target of
the aggressive behavior of other students. Indirect aggres-
sion is carried out through a third party or in some way that
conceals the identity of the aggressor. Relational aggression
is behavior which damages peer relationships and accept-
tance within the social group. In verbal victimization, the
student’s status is attacked or threatened with words; this
can be exceedingly vicious and damaging to a student’s
psyche and self-image (Bjorkvist, 1994; Crick et al, 1999;
Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Olweus, 1993; Ross, 1996).

Studies have shown the effects of school victimization
to include lowered self-esteem, increased loneliness and iso-
lation, anxiety and panic attacks, depression and suicidal
thoughts, psychosomatic symptoms, and posttraumatic
stress disorder. Victimized children miss more days from
school, suffer impaired academic performance, and make more
trips to the doctor. Only rarely do disturbed, desperate stu-
dents resort to violence but, when they do, it often high-
lights systemic problems that have occurred for a long time –
a strong parallel with workplace violence (Hawker & Boulton,
2000; Johnson, 2000; Miller, 2002b; Pitcher & Poland, 1992).

Preventing School Violence

Academic administrators who remain unmoved by the
human costs of school violence might want to consider the
potential legal and financial liabilities. In Stoneking v.
Bradford Area School District, 1988, the court found that, if a
school is aware of dangerous and unlawful activities on its
premises and takes insufficient action to address them, it
may be found liable under the 14th Amendment. School offi-
cials may be protected from liability, however, if they can
demonstrate due diligence in their prevention of crime on
campus. Accordingly, the following recommendations are
adapted from a large body of work in the area of workplace
violence that can be productively applied to the academic
setting (Braverman, 1999; Kinney, 1995; Labig, 1995; Johnson,
press; Namie & Namie, 2000; Pitcher & Poland, 1992; Ross,
1996; Schouten, 2006).

Clear Policies

Schools should have clear, strong, consistent, written
policies against bullying, intimidation, and harassment. They
should have effective security programs, a standardized, con-
fidential, and user-friendly reporting system, a supportive
faculty, open channels of communication, and training in
verbal negotiation and conflict resolution skills. Schools
must have a clearly understood policy of zero tolerance for
violence. This should be contextualized as a safety issue,
the same as with rules regarding fire prevention or disaster
drills. Plans should be in place that specify how and to whom
threats are reported, as well as a protocol for investigating
threats.
**Safe Discipline**

As in the workplace, many acts of violence relate to the perpetrator feeling he was treated unfairly by the administration; some of this relates to confusion over the very zero-tolerance policy cited previously. Schools should develop an individualized disciplinary program that strikes a balance between a too heavy-handed approach that might discourage reporting and participation, and a too lax approach that gives the impression of ambivalence and lack of control. Discipline should occur in stages, with a clear policy and rationale for each action taken. School officials should not be afraid to “pull rank” where student safety is concerned.

**Safe Suspension or Expulsion**

If disciplinary or corrective measures prove ineffective, suspension or expulsion from school can be clear and firm without being inhumane. This should include a systematic process of documentation of the precise behaviors and rule violations that have necessitated these actions. The student and his family should be treated with reasonable respect, but should understand that the action is final and will be backed up. The student should be informed of any counseling or other services offered by the school for the transition period. For behaviors that constitute criminal acts, school officials should report these to local law enforcement or their own school police if they have them.

**Responding to School Violence**

Sometimes, despite the best efforts at prevention, a dangerous situation begins to brew and a violent incident becomes a distinct possibility. Or the incident just erupts explosively and personnel have to respond immediately. In either case, the effectiveness of the response will be determined by how thorough the pre-incident planning and training have been.

**Warning Signs of Impending Violence**

It is always best for school officials to know their individual students, but generic warning signs include deterioration or changes in dress, speech, or facial expression; increased agitation, anxiety, isolation and/or depression; evidence of substance use; or preoccupation with violent events in the media. Almost always, the student’s peers will know something is up long before parents or teachers, which is why a safe and confidential reporting system is so important.

**Defusing a Dangerous Situation**

Planning and training for defusing potentially violent episodes should be developed, put in place, and reviewed periodically. Elements of such a protocol include initial actions to take when danger begins to escalate, codes and signals for summoning help, chain of command for handling emergencies, appropriate use of verbal control strategies and body language, scene control and bystander containment, tactics for dealing with weapons, and hostage negotiation procedures.

**Recovering from School Violence**

The crisis is not over when the police and TV crews leave. Students or faculty may have been killed, others wounded, some held hostage, and many psychologically traumatized. Schools should proactively establish policies, procedures, and training for responding to the aftermath of a violent incident, and the plan should include the following elements.

**Law Enforcement, Physical Security, and Cleanup**

A school representative should be designated to work with local, regional, and/or federal law enforcement. Within the limits of safety, the crime scene should be kept intact until investigators have gone over the area. There should be someone assigned to immediately check, protect, or restore the integrity of the school’s data systems, computers, and files. Physical cleanup of the area, pending approval from law enforcement, should be conducted in as respectful a manner as possible.

**Mental Health Mobilization**

This includes a prearranged plan for school representatives to contact local mental health professionals immediately; arrange for the clinicians to meet first with school officials for updates and briefings; conduct crisis counseling with affected students, faculty, and families; and arrange follow-up schedules for mental health clinicians to return to provide psychological services as needed.
**Student and Family Interventions**

Another designated school official should notify the victims’ families of the incident and be ready to offer them immediate support, counseling, and referral services. The school should arrange time off for grieving and traumatized students and faculty. After the initial stages of the incident have passed, mental health clinicians should help students and school officials find constructive ways of memorializing the victims.

**Media and Public Relations**

A media spokesperson or public information official should be designated to brief the media and shepherd them away from grieving students, family members, and faculty. School officials should cooperate with law enforcement authorities regarding the timing and content of news releases.

**Legal Issues and Post-Incident Investigations**

These measures include notifying the school’s legal counsel, who should be asked to respond to the scene if necessary. Investigatory questions include the nature of the perpetrator(s), their relationship to fellow students and faculty, history of disciplinary action or suspension, specific circumstances or institutional stressors that may have led to the incident, the role of mental illness or substance abuse, any warning signs that should have been heeded, and a thorough review of the school’s overall security, threat assessment, and critical incident response protocols.

In summary, if any good can come out of an episode of school violence, it will be in the form of improved policies and procedures that adopt a best-practices model to the prevention, response, and recovery to and from any kind of institutional mass violence. This kind of proactive effort can save lives, improve student health, and reduce costs and liabilities from both everyday school bullying and harassment, and more uncommon lethal mass violence.

**REFERENCES**


