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Role of School Psychologists

in Violence Prevention and Intervention

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**ABSTRACT.** Kansas school psychologists were extremely accurate in their estimates of violence in their own schools and viewed school vio- lence prevention as an important part of their job, regardless of the rates of violence in their districts. Most had at least some involvement in their own school’s violence prevention program, although many reported that they had little or no training. Despite the fact that the majority of respon- dents work in districts with relatively low rates of violence, over half re- ported that fighting, bullying, and substance abuse, early warning signs of school violence, occur a lot or a fair amount in their districts.

**KEYWORDS.** School psychologists, school violence, prevention, bul- lying, substance abuse

Violence in America’s schools has slowly decreased in recent years. Cloud (2001) reported that in the 1992-1993 school year there were 54 violent deaths on school campuses. During the 1999-2000 school year, there were 16 deaths. Even so, school violence remains a very serious problem for students and teachers. The Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) collabo- rated on *Indicators of School Crime and Safety* (Kaufman et al., 1999). They found that each year 202,000 students between the ages of 12 and 18 were victims of nonfatal, serious, violent, crimes at school.

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These national statistics are corroborated in individual states. The Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE) found that during the 1999-2000 school year there were 5,585 incidents of school violence that were misdemeanors or felonies, most of which occurred at school during the normal school day (84%), as opposed to occurring on school property outside the normal school day (13%) or at school-supervised activities outside the normal school day (3%).

Teachers are also victims of crime at school. The BJS and NCES (Kaufman et al., 1999) study found that during a five year period from 1993 to 1997, 1,771,000 teachers were victims of nonfatal crimes at school, more than a third of which were violent crimes. This amounts to 84 crimes per 1000 teachers per year.

Renewed attention to school violence has paralleled a change in the patterns of such violence from earlier years. People’s perceptions of the violence problem in American schools has been greatly impacted by re- cent multiple victim school shootings committed in smaller towns, pri- marily by white, middle-class males with no previous criminal records.

Why is the issue of school violence important? Children in American society spend a great deal of their time at school. These schools are com- plex and intimate social settings in which close, caring relationships de- velop. Children expect to be safe and secure at school. Parents also expect that when they leave their children at school, they will return home un- harmed, both physically and psychologically. When school violence oc- curs, it damages the sense of security and trust that is an essential part of students receiving the best possible education to which they are entitled (Furlong, Morrison, Chung, Bates, & Morrison, 1997).

# DEFINITIONS OF SCHOOL VIOLENCE

In order to understand school violence and violence in general, a clear definition is important. Furlong and Morrison (1994) simply de-

fine school violence as a range of behaviors that happen at school and cause some form of harm to the person. Kopka (1997) noted that many violence statistics only deal with physical harm, but most violence pre- vention programs use a broader definition of a violent act, which in- cludes “verbal, visual, or physical acts intended to demean, harm or infringe upon another’s civil rights” (p. 6). Henry (2000) developed a more general definition of school violence as

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the exercise of power over others in school-related settings, by some individual, agency, or social process, that denies those sub- ject to it their humanity to make a difference, either by reducing them from what they are or by limiting them from becoming what they might be. (p. 21)

In Kansas, individual school districts are responsible for defining what school violence means and then reporting to the state department of education the number of incidents for their districts each year.

# INDICATORS AND WARNING SIGNS OF SCHOOL VIOLENCE

Knowing what types of indicators may precede school violence can be very helpful in terms of prevention and early intervention. While it is impossible to predict which students will commit violent acts, it is pos- sible to look at ways in which violent youth are similar. Walker, Colvin, and Ramsey (1995) looked at profiles of youth who repeatedly commit violent acts. They determined that common characteristics of these youth included being male, academic problems, peer rejection, lack of adequate social skills, low self-esteem, and a past history of progres- sively more severe antisocial or aggressive behavior.

In contrast, Furlong, Chung, Bates, and Morrison (1995) conducted a comparison study between students who reported no victimization and students who reported 12 or more different types of victimization in the past month. The most dramatic finding was that victims of school vio- lence were almost 22 times more likely to have a high score on a scale that measured hostile interpersonal attitudes and beliefs. Victims were also more likely to be male, poorly attached to the school community, almost 10 times more likely to feel unsafe at school, and almost 7 times more likely to have lower levels of interpersonal trust.

Olweus (1993) defines bullying as a type of aggression where one or more students physically and /or psychologically harass another student repeatedly over a period of time. Children being “picked on” by class-

mates is something that has been occurring for many years. Too often it is seen as a normal part of growing up, but recently the USDE and USDJ (1999) listed both bullying and feeling picked on or persecuted as possi- ble early warning signs of school violence. Adults who fail to recognize and stop bullying are actually encouraging violence (Arnette & Walsleban, 1998).

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The American Psychological Association (APA) Commission on Vi- olence (1993) found having access to a firearm to be one of four charac- teristics playing a vital role in the prevalence of violence. The other three characteristics are involvement with drugs and alcohol at an early age, association with deviant, antisocial peer groups, and exposure to large amounts of violence in the media (APA, 1993).

# RESPONSIBILITY FOR VIOLENCE PREVENTION

Schools have a responsibility to try to prevent school violence before it occurs. The next question that arises is who should be responsible for violence prevention planning? Poland, Pitcher, and Lazarus (1995) looked at a wide array of crises that can occur at schools, one of which is school violence. They argued that the responsibility for prevention and intervention during a crisis should fall directly upon school psycholo- gists. This is because school psychologists are the only school staff who have received training in all three areas of counseling, interventions, and preventative program planning.

Furlong, Babinski, Poland, Munoz, and Boles (1996) found a strong correlation between the type of violent incidents that occurred and school psychologists’ perception of violence at their schools. Bullying and harassment were found in most schools, yet school psychologists did not see these as serious problems. They were likely to classify the violence problem as moderate if problems with property had occurred, and severe if there was a physical altercation involving a serious injury or weapon. School psychologists were not likely to be victims of vio- lence while at school despite the fact that students and teachers at these same schools experienced a variety of incidents. Most school psycholo- gists who responded said they had not received any specialized school violence training. Few felt that they were prepared to address school vi- olence. Readiness was associated with gender, with males reporting more confidence than females, and type of community, with school psychologists from rural schools feeling less prepared to deal with school violence.

Although responsibility for school violence prevention and interven- tion has been assigned to school psychologists by several authors (e.g., Burns, Dean, & Jacob-Timm, 2001), there is not any research that ex- plores whether or not school psychologists actually do assume this re- sponsibility. Research on school psychologists and school violence is extremely limited at best. The literature does not even address school psychologists’ accuracy of knowledge regarding school violence rates.

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The primary objectives of the study were to assess how accurate school psychologists are in their knowledge of school violence rates in the district in which they are employed; determine to what extent school psychologists see school violence prevention as a part of their jobs; and determine how skilled and active school psychologists believe they are in violence prevention. These results bear directly on the issue of school psychologists’ role in school violence prevention and intervention.

It is reasonable to predict that in districts that have higher rates of school violence, school psychologists will be more aware of the prob- lem and therefore more accurate in their knowledge of school violence rates. Likewise, school psychologists who work in districts with higher rates of school violence will deal with this issue more often and as a re- sult, they should be more likely to see violence prevention as an integral part of their jobs.

# METHOD

***Respondents***

In late Spring 2001, 200 of the 484 of the certified school psycholo- gists employed either part- or full-time in the state of Kansas were asked to complete a questionnaire about their perceptions, views, and beliefs regarding school violence. Ninety-four of them completed useable questionnaires, for an overall return rate of 47%. Sixty respondents were female (63.8%) and 34 were male. The majority was Caucasian (95.7%) and worked at an elementary school (57.4%). Also, 63% of re- spondents worked in districts with 6,000 or fewer students.

# Instrument

The questionnaire contained 19 items (multiple-choice, Likert-scale, and open-ended) related to demographic information; knowledge about school violence rates; whether violence prevention was viewed as an in-

tegral part of the school psychologist’s job; how involved and how much training in violence prevention school psychologists report; and school violence in general.

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# Procedure

A list of all school psychologists employed in the state of Kansas along with their work addresses was obtained from the Kansas State Board of Education. Multiple listings for each school psychologist were removed so that there was only one work address for each school psy- chologist. This provided a list of 484 school psychologists employed in the state of Kansas, and from this list, 200 names with addresses were randomly selected using a random number generator.

Prior to the mailing, each of the 200 school psychologists was as- signed a number 1 through 200 that was placed on the corner of the questionnaire. This coding system was to help the researcher determine which school psychologists had not returned their questionnaires and should be sent a follow-up letter. School psychologists were informed of the coding system in the cover letter, as well as the fact that their re- sponses would be kept anonymous and confidential by the researcher. A follow-up letter was sent to those school psychologists who had not re- turned their questionnaires two weeks after the initial mailing.

The school violence rates for the districts in which the respondents worked were computed from data submitted to the Kansas State Depart- ment of Education by the individual school districts. These data are available on the KSDE Website*.*

# RESULTS

***Knowledge of School Violence***

Respondents estimated the total number of school violence incidents between students in their districts during the previous year (1999-2000) by selecting from the options of less than 100, 100 to 299, 300 to 499,

500 to 699, 700 to 899, and 900 or more. They estimated the number of

incidents toward staff by selecting less than 50, 50 to 149, 150 to 249, 250 to 349, or 350 or more. The actual numbers of incidents of school violence between students and toward certified staff for the 1999-2000 school year in each respondent’s district (as reported on the KSDE Website) were assigned to categories identical to those used by respon-

dents (e.g., 100 to 299, 300 to 499). Each category was assigned a score of 1 through 6 for the incidents between students and a score of 1 through 5 for the incidents toward staff.

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The score assigned based on the respondent’s answer was subtracted from the score assigned for the actual number of violence incidents. The absolute values of these differences were labeled “accuracy of knowl- edge scores” and ranged from 0 through 5 for violence between students and 0 through 4 for incidents toward staff. The higher the score, the greater the difference between the two scores (estimate of respondent versus actual rates) and the less accurate school psychologists were in their knowledge of school violence in their district.

The data indicate that the majority of respondents were quite accu- rate in their estimates of violence between students and violence toward staff. For estimates of violence incidents between students, 85% of re- spondents had accuracy of knowledge scores of 0 or 1. Likewise, 84% of respondents had accuracy of knowledge scores of 0 or 1 for estimates of violence toward certified staff.

Absolute numbers of violent incidents were somewhat misleading because school districts differed in their student and staff sizes. There- fore, the actual number of incidents (reported on KSDE website) was converted into the number of incidents per 1,000 students or staff in that school. The resulting rates were assigned a “school violence score” of 1 to 7, for violence rates per 1,000 students or staff of 0, 1-20, 21-40,

41-60, 61-80, 81-100, and 101 or more, respectively. For the schools of the respondents, the mean school violence scores were 2.54 for students and 2.68 for staff. The most frequent school violence score was 2, repre- senting 1 to 20 violent acts between students per 1,000 students (37% of schools in this study) and 1 to 20 violent acts toward staff per 1,000 staff (65% of schools).

Chi-squares of independence analyses between the accuracy of knowledge scores (ranging from 0 to 4 or 5) and the school violence scores (ranging from 1 through 7) for both the violence rates between students and violence rates toward staff resulted in an excessive number of cells with very small expected cell frequencies. Therefore, categories were combined in such a way to meet the minimum requirements for us- ing a chi-square of independence test.

In the chi-square analysis for violence toward staff, participants were divided into those who had accuracy of knowledge scores of 0, and those who had accuracy of knowledge scores ranging between 1 and 4. For school violence scores, schools were divided into those that had scores of 1, those that had scores of 2, and those that had scores of 3

through 7. The chi-square of independence for violence toward staff was statistically significant, (2, *N* = 88) = 19.81, *p* < .05. Even though there was a relationship between school psychologists’ accurate knowl- edge of school violence rates toward staff and districts with *lower* rates of school violence toward staff, at *higher* school violence rates (3 through 7), school psychologists’ accuracy scores were not related to actual violence rates.

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For the analysis of the violence between students data, the partici- pants were divided into those with accuracy of knowledge scores of 0, 1, or 2 through 5, and schools with violence scores of 1, or 2 through 7. No relationship between school psychologists’ knowledge of school vi- olence rates between, student and actual levels of school violence be- tween these same students was found, y2 (2, N = 88) = 1.71, *p* > .05.

# Responsibility for Violence Prevention

Respondents rated their agreement with the proposition that school violence prevention is an important part of a school psychologist’s job, using a 5-point Likert scale where higher ratings were associated with greater agreement. Over 57% of the respondents rated this statement as “strongly agree” and another 13% selected “agree,” indicating that the school psychologists in this study do see school violence prevention as an important part of their jobs.

Chi-square tests were used to determine whether respondents’ views on this responsibility were related to the violence rates in their school districts. The ratings were combined into two groups due to small ex- pected cell frequencies, and in such a way to meet the minimum re- quirements for using the chi-square of independence test. One group contained ratings of 1 through 3 (lower agreement), while the other group contained ratings of 4 and 5 (higher agreement). Similarly, the scores for actual school violence between students were also combined to create two categories, school violence scores of 1 and 2 and those of 3 through 7 (higher score associated with more violence). No relationship between school psychologists’ views on violence prevention as part of their job and actual rates of school violence was found (1, N = 91) = .92, *p* > .05.

# Involvement and Training in Violence Prevention

Respondents were asked how much involvement they currently have in their school’s violence prevention program. Almost all said that they

had at least some involvement. “A lot” was selected by 27% of respon- dents, “fair amount” by 35%, and “some” by 35%. By contrast, over 36% of respondents said the amount of their training in school violence prevention was “very little” or “none.”

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Respondents’ answers to questions regarding their current involve- ment and their training in violence prevention were combined to exam- ine the relationship to the degree of violence in the schools in which they worked. The combined scores ranged between 0 and 9 with a higher score indicating more involvement and training in school vio- lence prevention.

In order to complete a chi-square of independence test on the rela- tionship between these involvement and training scores and the school violence between students scores, some categories were combined. No relationship was found between school psychologists’ involvement and training in school violence prevention and the actual rates of school vio- lence among students, y2 (2, N = 91) = 1.42, *p* > .05.

# Other Factors Affecting School Violence

School psychologists also responded to three Likert-type questions concerning the extent to which fighting, bullying, and substance abuse were present at their schools. Bullying was reported to occur from “some” to “a lot” of the time by 84% of respondents, whereas fighting and substance abuse were reported at these levels by just over half the school psychologists, 53% and 51%, respectively.

School psychologists were given the option of responding to three open-ended questions at the end of the questionnaire. Many chose not to respond, but 41 (44%) did answer the question that asked who was re- sponsible for violence prevention at their school. The most commonly listed personnel in charge of violence prevention were administrators (56%), counselors (46%), and school psychologists (22%). These total percentages are greater than 100 as many respondents listed more than one answer for the question. In addition, several school psychologists stated that less media attention, and more time for prevention efforts would lower the likelihood of violence at their schools.

# DISCUSSION

Kansas school psychologists who responded to this questionnaire on school violence were generally accurate in their estimates of violence in

their own schools. Even though the respondents viewed school violence prevention as an important part of a school psychologist’s job and have at least some involvement in their own school’s violence prevention program, many (36%) reported that they had little or no training in vio- lence prevention.

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It was expected that if school districts had a higher rate of school vio- lence, then school psychologists would be more aware of the problem and therefore more accurate in their knowledge of these same rates. No relationship was found for the violent acts between students data and the significant relationship found in the violent acts toward staff data was not in the predicted direction. When either no violent acts (scores of 1) or one to twenty acts (scores of 2) occurred in a school, the great ma- jority of school psychologists accurately reported the rate of violence toward staff in their schools. However, when more than 20 acts of vio- lence occurred, only about half (48%) of the school psychologists were accurate in their reports.

Both school psychologists in districts with higher rates of school vio- lence between students and those in districts with lower rates of school violence between students were accurate in their knowledge of these same rates. These results may have been influenced by the fact that many of the respondents (84%) came from districts with little (1-20 acts) or no reported incidents of school violence. As a result, it was not surprising that they were able to accurately estimate the level of school violence in their district.

Schools with *lower* rates of school violence had school psychologists who were more accurate in their knowledge of these rates toward staff. One possible explanation for this relationship is that when a school vio- lence incident involving a staff member occurs in a district with low overall school violence, it is more memorable to other staff members, including school psychologists.

There was not a significant relationship between school psycholo- gists’ views on the importance of violence prevention as a part of their jobs and actual school violence against students rates. The great major- ity of school psychologists (84%) either strongly agreed or agreed that this is an important part of their role. Recent media coverage on the problem of school violence may have increased school psychologists’ awareness of this problem and as a result they may feel obligated to ad- dress this issue, or at least say they do.

There was not a significant relationship between school psycholo- gists’ involvement and training in violence prevention and school vio- lence rates. Relatively few of the school psychologists (26%) reported

low levels of involvement and training. While school violence as a whole has declined, the recent multiple victim school shootings have greatly increased public concern. Schools of all sizes in rural, suburban, and urban settings are responding to this concern by offering training on addressing school violence, implementing prevention programs and de- veloping crisis plans. One would hope that school psychologists are di- rectly involved in these activities and that may explain why so many reported high levels of involvement and training.

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School psychologists were also asked about the extent to which fighting, bullying, and substance abuse were problems at their schools. School psychologists were quite accurate in their knowledge of school violence rates and it is likely that they are also accurate in their estima- tion of fighting, bullying, and substance abuse. Fifty-three percent felt that fighting was a problem some to a lot of the time, while 84% felt bul- lying was a problem some to a lot of the time, and 51% said that sub- stance abuse was also a problem some to a lot of the time. These factors are school violence correlates (Dwyer & Osher, 2000). The fact that 57.4% of school psychologists responded with regard to an elementary school is particularly disturbing. These are “red flags” that should be addressed now rather than when they are part of an even bigger problem at the secondary level.

One limitation was that individual school districts in Kansas were re- sponsible for defining what school violence meant and then reporting to the state the number of incidents for their district each year. Lack of a statewide definition as to what constitutes school violence could lead to districts under or over reporting school violence incidents. This in turn could lead to an unclear picture of the role and frequency school vio- lence plays in individual districts. More understandable and reliable data would emerge if a clear definition of what constitutes school vio- lence were provided and if an individual in each district collected and reported these data on an annual basis.

Another limitation of this study was that 57.4% of school psycholo- gists answered the questionnaire in regards to an elementary school. While school violence can occur at any level, it has been more prevalent in high schools and middle schools. This may have impacted school psychologists’ views on violence prevention as a part of their job, and the amount of training and involvement they have in school violence prevention overall.

This is the first time research has examined whether school psychol- ogists have an accurate perception of violent acts in their districts. The good news is that the data indicate they are extremely accurate and that

they see violence prevention as an important part of their role, regard- less of the rates of violence in their districts. The bad news is that de- spite the fact that the majority of school psychologists come from districts with relatively low rates of violence, over half report that fight- ing, bullying, and substance abuse occur a lot or a fair amount in their districts. This is alarming when one considers that all of these factors were listed as early warning signs of school violence (Dwyer & Osher, 2000). Additional research is needed to determine if school psycholo- gists are aware of this link and are taking steps to reduce the incidence of fighting, bullying, and substance abuse in their schools.

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