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 schools 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 Americas schools has slowly decreased in recent years. Cloud (2001) reported that in the 19921993 school year there were 54 violent deaths on school campuses. During the 19992000 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.

These national statistics are corroborated in individual states. The Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE) found that during the 19992000 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 schoolsupervised 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. Peoples 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, middleclass 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 anothers civil rights (p. 6). Henry (2000) developed a more general definition of school violence as

the exercise of power over others in schoolrelated 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 selfesteem, 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).

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, & JacobTimm, 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.

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 fulltime in the state of Kansas were asked to complete a questionnaire about their perceptions, views, and beliefs regarding school violence. Ninetyfour 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 (multiplechoice, Likertscale, and openended) related to demographic information; knowledge about school violence rates; whether violence prevention was viewed as an in

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

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 followup 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 followup 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