

Preliminary Report

Youth Violence Prevention Research in Schools of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Violence is a major public health problem in both the United States and South Africa. Witnessing violence in the home, school or community can leave emotional scars and place young people at risk of becoming involved in acts of violence. As schools in South Africa are integrated, students with different socio-economic backgrounds, cultural norms and ideologies will interact socially, which may increase the likelihood of violence in this context as these differences may lead to confrontations. Threats of violence and personal experiences with violence at school negatively affect students and the educational process. Most of the research on adolescent violence in the US emphasizes identification of risk factors – both individual and social ecological – associated with violent behaviour, yet risk models typically predict only about half of the youth who engage in violent behaviour. Many adolescents who possess risk factors do not exhibit violent behaviour. This suggests that protective factors that are present in the lives of the youth may help them to overcome the risks that they face. This research study characterised different types of violence and measured their pervasiveness, documented risk factors associated with increased probability for different

violent behaviours and attitudes in the South African context, and studied protective factors that may decrease the effects of risks. The information obtained from the study can be used to enable schools to develop and adopt effective violence prevention programmes.

PURPOSE AND GOALS OF STUDY

Schools offer a unique opportunity for primary preventions of violence based on accentuating and exploiting protective factors because they are able to reach youths at an early age and in a common organizational setting. The aim in conducting the investigation of youth violence in schools was to enable us to better understand the dynamics of youth violence in general and in particular school-associated youth violence in South Africa through direct interaction with the learners themselves. In this situation, they are the experts because this is their life. The study, done in schools, focused on individual characteristics such as attitudes, perceived norms and behaviours as well as social ecological factors such as adult and peer influences and neighbourhood and school context. The survey questions were formatted in the attempt to measure the levels of and tendencies toward aggression among learners, their attitudes towards violence and violence prevention, and to examine the risks and protective factors associated with violent behaviour. The goal of the research is to help schools minimise violence levels by learning more about violence in schools.

SURVEY METHODS

Learners were asked to complete a self-reported questionnaire during school hours that measured the prevalence of various types of violence in the public schools and community, as well as obtained information about personal and social factors linked to violent behaviour. Before completing the questionnaire, each learner read and signed a consent form that summarized the purpose of the research and standard protocol for

completing the survey. The participation of students was totally voluntary. The learners were given the right to skip any uncomfortable question and to refuse participation at any time. The questionnaire assessed information about: 1) family process and structure; 2) other adult influences and support; 3) peer and victimization; 4) psychological well-being; 5) school achievement and attitudes; 6) violent behaviour, attitudes and victimization and 7) problem behaviours.

A population sample of 635 learners from high schools around the Durban area were studied. Of the 635 learners, 243 (48%) were female and 264 (52%) were male with 128 of the learners as undefined. There were 372 (69.7%) learners in the population who identified themselves as Black and 141(26.4%) learners in the population who identified themselves as Indian and 22 (4.2%) learners identified themselves as Other. The mean age of the population was 16 years of age. Several critical variables were selected from the survey and analysed. The variables that were analysed are:

- expressions of violent attitudes
- victimization by violence
- violent behaviour
- racial violence
- witnessing violence
- delinquent behaviour
- weapon carrying
- presence of family conflict
- presence of household monetary needs
- discrimination.

RESULTS

Initial examination of the results shows a generally well-adjusted population of learners. Of the learners surveyed, 94.2% did not express violent attitudes, 73.4% of the population had not been victimized by violence, 90.1% had never behaved violently as measured by the survey, 86.5% of the population had never participated in racial violence, 81.7% of the population had either

never witnessed violence or had witnessed violence only 1-2 times, 88.3% of the population had never acted in a delinquent manner, 81.7% hardly ever had family conflict in the home. These low levels of identified risk factors may be correlated with high levels of protective factors that are present in the lives of the learners. Further analyses were done to closer inspect for any possible differences in the group surveyed.

Further Analyses of Risk Factors

Sex

Significant differences were observed in the responses provided by the females and males in the population in the expression of violent attitudes, violent behaviour, racial violence, witnessing violence, delinquent behaviour and weapon carrying. Males reported higher amounts on all accounts.

Age

There were no significant differences in the responses provided by the learners who were 16 years of age or below and those who were above the age of the 16. Both groups reported nearly the same low levels of aggression.

Race

Significant differences were observed in the responses of the Indians and Blacks in the population in the expression of violent attitudes and violent behaviour. Indians and non-Blacks expressed higher amounts of violent attitudes as well as higher rates of violent behaviour than non-Indians. Blacks and non-Indians expressed higher rates of victimization than Indians. Non-Indians refers to those that identify as Coloured, White and Other.

Further Analyses of Protective Factors

The survey also inquired about positive protective factors that exist in the lives of the learners. It is hypothesized that these positive factors, or assets, help to protect the learners from exhibiting violence as measured by violent

behaviours, attitudes, weapon carrying, racial violence and delinquent behaviour. The protective factors studied are:

- support from the mother
- support from the father
- support from friends
- parental monitoring
- community monitoring
- positive behaviour of friends
- leadership abilities of the learner
- feelings of school efficacy by the learner
- religion
- school bond
- positive behaviours of the most important person in the lives of the learners
- knowledge about racial contributions.

Sex

Females reported significantly higher amounts of friend support, parental monitoring, positive behaviour of friends, religiosity, and school bond. This significant difference in the amount of reported protective factors may be correlated with the lower amount of the expression of violent attitudes, violent behaviour, racial violence, witnessing violence, delinquent behaviour and weapon carrying in females.

Age

In comparing the protective factors reported by the learners who were 16 years of age and below with the protective factors of the learners above 16 years of age, little difference was found between the two groups. The amount and exposure to protective factors was not significantly different except for the positive behaviour of friends. This overwhelming similarity corresponds with our previous hypothesis; the exposure to protective factors is nearly equal and there is no significant difference in the levels of violence in the learners as measured by our survey.

Race

Significant differences in the protective factors reported by the learners were found when analyses were done on the basis of race. Blacks reported more mother's support and feelings of school efficacy than non-Blacks. Indians reported more friend support, parental monitoring and school bond than non-Indians.

Overall, preliminary findings from our research shows that there are differences in levels of violent behaviour between males and females. There are also differences in the levels of protective factors between the sexes. There are no differences between age in either risk factors nor protective factors. However, there are differences between race in both risk factors and protective factors.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Youth violence is a public health issue in many countries because of its tremendous impact on the health and well-being of youths. As defined by the World Health Organization (WHO), health is not merely the absence of disease or infirmity, but is the state of complete physical, mental and social well-being (WHO, 1987). Living in surroundings filled with violence or the threat of violence impedes a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and therefore has a negative impact on the health of the youths in this situation. Contemporary youth violence researchers often argue that school violence is not geographically specific; it transcends socio-economic class, race, etc. 'Stable' suburban and urban rural communities, as well as private and public schools all experienced increased violence among school-age youth over the past twenty years (Laub, & Lauritsen, 1998). It has become synonymous with physical violence perpetrated by children within the school domain. The high levels of crime and violence experienced

in the schools in Durban and its surrounding areas is a major concern, for the KwaZulu-Natal province and for South Africa as a nation (IPT, 2001).

Background research showed that South Africa is one of the most dangerous countries as measured by aspects such as rape and murder. In both South Africa and the United States, homicides are the leading cause of death for males between 15 and 21 years of age (GCA, 2000). Much of its crime stems from political upheaval and has resulted in over 20,000 deaths between 1985 and 1995 with more than half of these deaths having occurred in KwaZulu-Natal, the country's largest province. Although these statistics are slightly outdated, this is evidence that after only five years out of its Apartheid regime, South Africa is still struggling to stimulate its economy, revise national government and policy and to undo its strong racial segregation.

However, this research has indicated that the population of learners that were studied are adjusting well to the changes brought about by the integration of schools and the end of the apartheid regime. The levels of aggression reported by the learners and measured by our survey was not substantially higher than that of their age counterparts in other parts of the world. But yet, statistics continue to insist that there are dangers brought about by youth in South Africa. Perhaps the problem does not lie with the youth that are in school, but with the ones who are not as fortunate and who cannot attend school for whatever reason. Perhaps the most influential protective factor that is safeguarding the learners that we studied is school itself and the characteristics that go along with it, such as teachers. It is probable to assume that youths that regularly attend school have a measure of economic security and parental support in their lives, no matter how small these measures may be. Public schooling is not free and the continual payment of school fees correlates with an importance being placed on the education and future of the child. Having a child in school means that for

the majority of the day, they are occupied in very productive manners. Learners also have an extended network of support through their educators and administrators. School children are “safer” from negative influences because they are able to combat them with a myriad of protective factors offered through schools.

The school environment is one component of exposure to violence; such behaviour most often exhibited at school, derives from a non-school-related environment (APA, 2001). Like US researchers, social scientists in Durban, such as van Rooyen, formerly of Independent Projects Trust group, suggest that violence in schools derives mainly from factors external to schools, but may be precipitated or aggravated by the school environment. Youth spend a considerable amount of time in school, on the way to and from school, and at school sponsored events. Research conduct by CRISP at the Independent Projects Trust group has shown that people tend to emulate the violence they have witnessed in their environment. The learners in this study reported having witnessed crimes within their homes, communities, and schools. Data from various studies revealed a trend among the distributions of those who have witnessed violence and those who have emulated the violent act they have witnessed (IPT, 2001).

School programmes can be targeted at this, offering outlets for learners who may frequently be in situations where they witness violence. Violence prevention can be attained by providing positive, non-violent alternatives for youths to emulate such as arts and crafts, theatre, music and peer mentoring and tutoring. If youths can be made to feel as though they have autonomy over their lives and what happens around them, they can be positive catalysts for change in their environments. These autonomous youths can in turn become protective factors for other youths around them which, by the

philosophy of "each one, teach one," can theoretically start a domino effect of changes towards a more non-violent community.

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