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ADOLESCENT VIOLENCE AS VIEWED BY HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

On April 20th, 1999 two high school students from Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado armed with a variety of firearms managed to kill 15 persons and injure many others in their school. Following this incident, a wave of bomb threats to schools throughout the country erupted and several adolescents and adults were arrested. Ten days following the incident we surveyed a total of 412 students from urban area high schools. All students have heard of the shooting, 80% felt sad about the incident, 90% felt hate for the shooters and sad for the victims. 3% felt indifferent and 3% liked or admired the shooters. 60% thought the shooters had help from others. In response to why did the shooters do it, the top factors included loneliness, family problems and desire for attention. Virtually all participants thought that access to fire arms is what made it possible for these teens to commit their shooting. Other factors included poor school security, help from others and inattention from other students and teachers. The survey also included questions regarding suicide, carrying weapons and access to firearms. Adolescent violence continues to increase in the USA and other countries. Major contributing factors, at least from the adolescent point of view, are

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access to guns, family problems, lack of friends and poor communication with teachers.

INTRODUCTION

Homicide rates in the United States are the highest of any developed country and adolescents are at the highest risk of violent death /1/. Violent death from homicide and suicide among school-aged children more than doubled during the last decade /2,3/. By the mid-nineties, school-associated violence became widely recognized as a common and increasing problem /4-6/. In a two-year period (1992-1994) there were 105 school-associated violent deaths in the United States /7/. This trend of school-associated violence continues to rise. On April 20th, 1999 two high school students from Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado armed with a variety of fire arms, managed to kill 15 persons and injure many others in that school. This incident triggered a wave of bomb threats to many schools throughout the country that led to widespread fear and many cases of school evacuations. This study was conducted 10 days following the Columbine incident. The objective was to survey high school students regarding school violence at a time when they are thinking about it, in order to understand their perception of the causes of violence and factors contributing to it.

METHODS

A survey of high school students from two high schools in the Lexington, KY area was conducted by having the students fill out an anonymous survey. The survey included biographical data section and questions regarding the Columbine High School incident. Students were asked if they have heard about the incident, their feelings about the shooting, the shooters and the victims. Reasons for the shooting, what made it possible and if the shooters acted alone. Another section of the survey inquired about personal experiences with weapons in school and at home, if they have thought or attempted hurting themselves or others and if they have ever been in a fight in which a weapon was used.

A total of 412 students ages 15-17 completed the survey. Percentages were calculated for the different answers.

RESULTS

Of the 412 students, 208 were females and 204 males. A total of 312 identified themselves as White, 12 Hispanics, 80 African-Americans and 8 Asians. All 412 students were aware of the Columbine incident. 80% of respondents felt sad about the shooting, 16% were disgusted, 13% outraged and 3% indifferent. 90% hated the shooters, 2% liked them, 1% admired them and 6% were indifferent. 90% felt sad about the victims, 9% were sorry about them and 1% were indifferent. 60% of the participants thought the shooters did not act alone. When asked their opinion why did these teens do the shooting, 90% thought they must have had problems with their families, 80% thought the shooters were lonely, 60% thought they wanted attention. Other answers included: They hated people 40%, they could not make friends 30%, they belonged to a violent hate gang 10% and having guns 2%. All participants (100%) thought that having access to firearms made it possible for the teens to do the shooting. Other factors that made it possible included: poor school security 90%, help from others 60%, inattention from other students 60% and inattention from teachers 60%.

Responses to general questions relating to violence are shown in table 1.

DISCUSSION

This study was conducted in the aftermath of one of the worst school-associated violent incidents in the history of the United States. High school students were still thinking about the incident and what led to it and were eager to share their opinions. This may be an advantage in this survey in terms of obtaining honest answers from willing teens. However, the subjective nature of the responses is the main limitation of the study. While most students felt sad or outraged by the incident, a few were indifferent and some actually liked (2%) or admired (1%) the shooters. Even in a small total number of 412 students, that amounts to 12 students who would potentially encourage or copy the actions of the shooters. Should these numbers hold true for the nation, it would be easy to understand the seriousness of the issue of school violence. Most participants rated family problems and loneliness as the leading cause for the teens to commit the shooting. Despite the continuing rhetoric of politicians and the National Rifle Association that guns do not kill, virtually all participants believe that access to firearms made the killing

TABLE I
Responses of high school students to general questions regarding violence

	<u>YES</u>	<u>NO</u>	<u>NOT SURE</u>
Ever seen a student carrying weapon to School?	87%	13%	0%
Ever carried weapon to School?	36%	64%	0%
Is there a firearm at your home?	48%	50%	2%
Did any of your friends ever talk about hurting people ?	3%	92%	5%
Did you ever think about hurting people?	2%	96%	2%
Ever think about hurting yourself.	42%	57%	1%
Ever attempt to hurt yourself.	29%	71%	0%
Ever been in a fight with weapon.	26%	74%	0%

possible. Adolescents lack well-developed abstract thinking, therefore they can not appreciably foresee the finality and long-term consequences of their actions. That makes access to firearms the more dangerous. Most participants have seen weapons in their schools and have firearms in their homes. Significant number of the respondents have thought about or attempted hurting themselves or have been into a fight with use of a weapon. That adds to the concern that the potential for violence is fairly high among high school students.

Although school-associated violence accounts for less than 1% of homicides and suicides among school-aged children in the United States /7/, its impact is disproportionately higher because of the media attention generated and the sensitivity of parents and the rest of society to what happens in the schools. All this brings the issue of prevention to forefront of measures to combat school violence. Strategies to prevent or reduce violence in the school setting have been suggested by many educators and public health officials /5,8-12/. Unfortunately, none of these strategies has been objectively proven to work. Most deaths identified in a study of violent school-associated violence /7/ resulted from firearms, further showing the desperate need for measures to prevent teens from access to these weapons.

We believe that the responses given by high school students in this study, highlight the facts that family problems, poor communication with families, peers and teachers, lack of friends and most importantly access to firearms are leading factors in the continued rise in school associated violence. Parent education, community-based after school programs and restricting access to firearms are feasible measures in the effort to reduce school-associated violence.

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