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# VIOLENCE PREVENTION IN HIGH SCHOOLS: Choices for Effectiveness

Megan J. Knapp and G. Kent Stewart

Every two days, guns kill the equivalent of a classroom of youngsters and injure 60 more (Sautter, 1995). Adolescents between the ages of 10 and 19 are killed with a gun at the rate of one every three hours. In fact, more young people have been killed by violent crime in the United States in the last thirteen years than lost their lives during the entire Vietnam War (Sautter, 1995). Firearms have now replaced car accidents as the leading cause of death for teenage boys (Weisenburger, 1995).

From 1988 to 1992, the number of violent crimes committed by juveniles showed an alarming increase: aggravated assaults increased 80%, homicides increased 54% and rapes increased 27% (Studies Show, 1994). Youths between the ages of 12 and 17 are five times more likely to be the victim of a violent crime than adults (Juvenile Crime, 1994). Over half of the people arrested for murder in the United States in 1991 were under the age of 25 (Sautter, 1995).

The alarming increase in violent crime involving school aged children has captured the attention of parents. Concern about their children's safety at school has increased proportionally. A recent study suggested that violence and poor discipline are the top two public concerns about education in the United States today (Violence, Discipline and Guns, 1994). Forty percent of parents reported concern about their child's safety while at school (Met Life, 1994). The opportunity for successful education is severely jeopardized when students, school staff, and members of the community are preoccupied with the fear of going to school (Mulhern, 1995).

Despite compelling statistics, school personnel have continued to deny the existence of violence in the schools. Educators perceive school violence to be someone else's problem (McPartland, 1977), often contending that school violence "is a problem, but not in my school" (Ordoversky, 1993). School personnel have been reluctant to acknowledge that violence occurs on their campuses, in part because they felt the

presence of violence was damaging to the reputation of the school (Wayson, 1985), or perhaps more accurately, was a poor reflection on the professionals involved. Miller (1994) found that principals feared reprisal or the appearance of inadequacy if they admitted that violence occurred in their building. A recent report from the American Association of School Administrators suggested that some schools consciously play down instances of violence to avoid bad publicity, litigation, and having the public view the teachers and administration as poor leaders (Western Regional, 1996).

Educators have used a number of strategies to address the problem of school violence ranging from student suspension (Portner, 1995; Johnson, 1992) to the implementation of staff development programs (Myles, 1994; Trump, 1993). While information is available on violence prevention strategies, scant information is available regarding the effectiveness of these violence prevention efforts (Gorski, 1995). This perspective was echoed by Weiler (1995), who wrote that the literature on violence prevention reveals little about the effectiveness of these programs and that few programs contain any evaluation component.

In the 1940s the main discipline concerns reported by teachers included: talking, chewing gum, making noise, improper dress, littering, and getting out of place in line (Jackson, 1990). In the 1950s the primary concerns identified included fighting, stealing, and disrespect toward authority. By the 1970s these concerns had risen to distracting others, fighting, and unsatisfactory attitudes toward school. In the 1980s teacher concerns were focused on assaults on teachers, burglary, extortion, and destruction of school property (Arsulich, 1979). Today teacher concerns focus on drug abuse, alcoholism, weapons, rape, robbery, and assault (Jackson, 1990).

Schools are a reflection of the economic, political, social, and cultural communities in which they are located. Unfortunately, the violence found in our society has followed students into the school environment (Mulhern, 1994). The National School Safety Center, which tracks media coverage of school violence, reported that the 1993-1994 school year witnessed a 25% increase in school-associated violent deaths over the previous year (Violence, Discipline and Guns, 1994). Between 1986 and 1990 there were 65 students and six school employees shot and killed while at school (Walsh, 1994). During the 1993-1994 school year there were 46 students killed at school (Portner, 1995) and another 92 were injured (Sautter, 1995).

## Student Concerns

A survey of students conducted in 1993 indicated that 35% of the tenth graders surveyed had been threatened or injured while at school (Safe at School, 1994). A 1993 study by Benson found that 55% of the Midwestern 6th through 12th grade students surveyed had been involved in at least one of the following types of violence in the last year: hitting someone, group fighting, hurting someone badly enough to require bandages, or had used a weapon to get something from another student. A similar survey of high school students in North Carolina showed 14% of the students surveyed had carried a gun to school in the past month, 10% had been threatened or injured by a weapon on school property during the last year, and 15% had been involved in a fight (Survey Shows, 1994). More than 2,000 students are physically attacked on school grounds each hour and confrontations which once resulted in scratches and bruises are now ending in stabbing and gunshots (Huertas, 1995). Portner (1994) reported that 135,000 students brought a gun to school every day in American schools. However, estimates by Sautter (1995) placed the number of students bringing guns to school every day closer to 200,000.

Recent surveys by the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company have offered startling glimpses in the lives of school aged students. The 1994 survey found that 52% of the high school students surveyed believed that their school did only a fair to

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poor job of providing a safe and secure school environment. Forty-four percent of these students had been involved in an angry confrontation in the last month and 24% of the students had been involved in a physical fight. Perhaps as frightening as any of these statistics was the one that suggested half of the students surveyed would not have reported a fellow student who brought a weapon into school to the school authorities because of fear that the student would retaliate against them (Met Life, 1994).

Sautter (1995) found that 160,000 students a day stayed home from school because of their fear of violence. A second study conducted in 1996 found that 1 of every 12 students stayed home each day out of fear for their safety (Stephens). Similarly a recent study of elementary students from economically depressed areas showed that many felt they would not live long enough to become adults (Poplin and Weeres, 1992).

Students spend a great deal of time in school. Since the likelihood of a crime being committed in a particular location is influenced by the amount of time spent there, schools are a prime location for teen crime (Western Regional, 1996).

### **Teacher Concerns**

A study by Natale (1996) found that nationwide 5,000 teachers a month were verbally or physically assaulted by students. Eleven percent of the teachers surveyed reported that they had been assaulted by students while on school grounds (Met Life, 1993). Nearly a fifth of U.S. schools reported student assault on teachers (Resnick, 1996). Twenty-eight percent of urban teachers admitted they were hesitant to confront disruptive students due to fear for their own safety (Lowery, 1995). A second study by Carter (1981) found that teachers were unlikely to report physical attacks from students, feeling that such assaults called into question their ability to handle the students. Jackson (1990) found that many teachers would have been disappointed if their own children selected teaching as a profession. It seemed reasonable to assume that the lack of discipline and respect currently shown to teachers played a role in this sentiment.

### **Parental Concerns**

Parents were also concerned about their children's safety while at school. The findings of a recent study suggested that violence and poor discipline were the top two public concerns about education in the United States today (Violence, Discipline and Guns, 1994). Forty percent of parents reported that they were concerned about their child's safety while at school (Met Life, 1994). A 1992 study conducted by Poplin and Weeres stated that in their interviews with parents they found that very few parents felt that public schools were safe places. The researchers also found that regardless of position, race, or class, many parents believed that schools are potentially violent sites. The opportunity for successful education is severely jeopardized when students, school staff, and members of the community were preoccupied with the fear of going to school (Mulhern, 1994). The mission of providing a challenging academic program which maximized achievement for students cannot be completed as long as teachers experience confrontations with students in their classrooms, the students are afraid to attend schools, and the parents fail to set a good example at home (Shanker, 1996).

Eighty-five percent of public school parents believed that discipline was a factor in selecting a school. Parents were looking for safe schools and some are pulling their children from public schools and placing them in private schools which they believed to be safer (Western Regional, 1996). With school choice being an increasingly ominous concern for public schools the ramifications of these actions are obvious. A 1994 study found that 85% of Americans favored giving parents the right to select the safest school available for their children (Western Regional, 1996).

### **Violence Prevention Costs**

Limited information is available regarding the true costs of violence prevention efforts in schools. Money used to combat violence is taken from many different funds including equipment, capital outlay, and personnel. Nevertheless, school districts spent over \$300 million per year on school security (Portner, 1994). In 1990 the California State Department of Education estimated that the average California school spent \$3,014 each year on violence prevention efforts excluding personnel costs (CA Dept. of Education, 1990). In spite of considerable expenditure of money and effort to curb the epidemic of school violence, no school has yet declared victory (Western Regional, 1996).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purposes of this investigation were to identify the strategies being utilized by Kansas high school principals to cope with school violence, to assess the level of effectiveness principals attributed to these strategies, and to determine and report the factors principals utilized to select violence prevention strategies to be employed in the schools for which they were responsible.

### **Population**

The population for this study was the primary administrator or designee for each public high school in the state of Kansas, 353 total (KSBE, 1995). Surveys were mailed to the attention of the principal with instruction that a building administrator complete the survey. Of the 340 schools from which information was requested, 83% (282 schools) provided responses.

### **Instrumentation**

The investigation used a survey instrument developed to identify those violence prevention strategies being used by each principal surveyed and the level of effectiveness each attached to these strategies. Additional information regarding those factors which the administrators believed to be important in the selection of a violence prevention strategy was also obtained.

The survey instrument contained demographic data and the violence prevention strategies identified through a review of the literature on violence prevention efforts (Appendix 1). Respondents were asked to rate each strategy which they used as ineffective, somewhat effective, moderately effective, or highly effective. Respondents were offered the option of identifying additional strategies and rating these items as well. Any strategies which the respondent did not use were not evaluated for effectiveness.

To determine those factors which principals viewed as important when selecting a violence prevention strategy, respondents were asked to identify those factors which they believed to be important from a list of 11 factors. These factors were identified as common concerns expressed regarding violence prevention strategies in the literature and through conversations with practicing administrators. The factors identified for investigation included legal implications of the strategy, public acceptance, disruption to the school day, cost, student participation, student acceptance, ease of implementation, skills taught, effect on the appearance of the school building and student involvement.

### **Data Analysis**

To determine if the perceived effectiveness of each strategy varied from the expected normal distribution, one-way goodness of fit chi-squares were calculated. Goodness of fit chi-squares are used to analyze differences along a single category.

Comparisons were then made based on building size (as identified by the school's Kansas High School Activities Association classification), physical building style (as identified by school's initial date of construction), and community size (as

identified through U.S. census designations of urban, rural, and semi-urban). Date of initial building construction was deemed to be an appropriate measure of building style based upon the work of Castaldi (1987). Survey data were organized into frequency distributions to illustrate the percentage of responses falling into each category of use and effectiveness (See Table 1).

Relationships between building size, physical building style, and community size, to the use and perceived effectiveness of each strategy were analyzed using the chi-square test of association for each of the strategies, if possible. Computations of chi-squares were based on the data from all respondents. Those few categories with expected frequencies less than five, even after collapsing categories, were not included in the chi-square calculations. Continuity corrections were used with two-by-two chi-squares with one degree of freedom (Noether, 1990; Roscoe, 1969).

The strength of these relationships was investigated through the use of the contingency coefficient (also known as Cramer's Coefficient) if a significant chi-square was found. Contingency coefficients were used to analyze the significant findings from two-way chi-squares that were not two-by-two designs.

For those analyses utilizing a two-by-two matrix with one degree of freedom it was necessary to use a Phi-Coefficient instead of a contingency coefficient.

A significance level (alpha) of .05 was utilized in this investigation. This level was chosen even though a large number of chi-squares was being calculated because the effect of committing a Type II error was a matter of concern. Given the concerns regarding the safety of students in schools, overlooking a potentially significant finding was considered to be of great concern. The use of a more lenient alpha level is supported in the writings of Williams (1994) when the concerns about Type II error are consequential given the topic being studied.

**Table 1. Relative Frequency Percentages for the Most Commonly Used Violence Prevention Strategies**

Strategy	rel. f (%)
Teachers/Admin Positioned in Hallways	94
After school Athletics	83
Suspension	83
Counseling for Students	74
Night Lighting	73
Expulsion	70
Dress Codes	66
Intercom Systems	65
Parent Involvement in the School	65
Closing of Lunch Periods	60

**Table 2. Relative Frequency Percentage for Top 10 Strategies by Effectiveness**

Strategy	Ineff.	Somewhat	Mod	High
Teachers/Admin Positioned in Hallways	0.0	4.2	18.6	77.3
Expulsion	1.5	3.1	23.0	72.4
Security Personnel	3.8	3.8	26.4	66.0
Suspension	1.7	6.0	33.8	58.5
After School Athletics	0.9	8.1	36.6	54.5
Zero Tolerance Policies	1.7	10.0	35.0	53.3
Closing Lunch Periods	1.2	14.3	31.0	53.6
Two-way Radios	2.3	12.6	31.0	54.0
Penalties for Gang Behavior	1.1	16.8	36.8	45.3

Data on violence prevention for the ten most frequently used strategies is shown in Table 2. Data for effectiveness is shown by the percentage of respondents selecting each of the four effectiveness categories. Overall effectiveness was calculated by providing each of these categories with a weighting factor and then calculating overall effectiveness for each strategy.

### Factors Considered in the Selection of Violence Prevention Strategies

To determine which factors principals considered most important when selecting a violence prevention strategy, administrators' responses to the 11 factors identified on the questionnaire were organized so that the percentage of respondents selecting each strategy could be analyzed. The percentage of respondents indicating that each of the factors was important to them in the selection of a violence prevention strategy for use in their building are listed next. Respondents were free to identify as many of the eleven factors as important as they chose. The most common factor considered was the legal implications for the strategy (85%). Public acceptance was the next most commonly identified factor (62%), followed closely by disruption to the school day (59%), then cost (56%), student participation (53%), training time (50%), student acceptance and ease of implementation (48%), skills taught (42%), and student involvement (39%). The effect that the strategy would have on the appearance of the building was cited least frequently as an area for consideration when selecting a strategy (13%).

### Summary

This study addressed the use and effectiveness of violence prevention strategies in Kansas high schools, and the extent to which these strategies were affected by school size, community size, and the physical design of the building. An additional component of the study was to ascertain the factors principals considered in their selection of a violence prevention strategy.

### Principal Findings

Based on the data presented the following findings were identified.

1. While school size affected the violence prevention strategies used, it did not generally have a significant impact on the perceived effectiveness of these strategies.
2. Community size affected the violence prevention strategies used; however, it did not generally have a consequential impact on the perceived effectiveness of most strategies.
3. Building style as determined by date of initial construction had no significant impact on either the strategies used or the perceived effectiveness of most of those strategies.
4. The most frequently used strategies as identified by the respondents to this study in order of use were positioning staff in the hallways during passing periods, after school athletics, suspension of violent students, counseling for students, and night lighting.
5. The most effective strategies as identified by the respondents to this survey in order of perceived effectiveness were positioning staff in the hallways during passing periods, the expulsion of violent students, the use of school security personnel, suspension of violent students, and after school athletics.
6. Three of the five most commonly used violence prevention strategies were also identified among the five most highly effective strategies. These strategies were the positioning of staff in the hallways during passing periods, suspension of violent students, and after school athletics.

7. In reviewing the five most common factors considered in the selection of a violence prevention strategy, principals identified legal concerns as the most important. After legal concerns four additional factors were identified. In order of popularity they were public acceptance, disruption to the school day, cost, and student participation. Principals were least concerned about the effect that a specific violence prevention strategy would have on the appearance of the building.

### Recommendations

From the principal findings and major conclusions identified above, the following recommendations are offered:

1. Communities must understand that the violence found in classrooms is a reflection of a larger societal problem. Communities must focus on violence prevention efforts which are broader than just the school. As society has witnessed an increase in the number and severity of crimes committed by juveniles (Educational Fund to End Handgun Violence, 1993; Juvenile Crime, 1994; Studies Show, 1994), school leaders have noted an increase in the severity of student discipline problems and violence at school. In the 1940s the main discipline concerns reported by teachers included talking, chewing gum, making noise, improper dress, littering, and getting out of place in line (Jackson, 1990). In the 1950s the primary concerns identified included fighting, stealing, and disrespect toward authority. By the 1970s these concerns had risen to distracting others, fighting, and unsatisfactory attitudes toward school. In the 1980s teacher concerns were focused on assaults on teachers, burglary, extortion, and destruction of school property (Arsulich, 1979). Today, teacher concerns focus on drug abuse, alcoholism, weapons, rape, robbery, and assault. (Jackson, 1990).
2. Principals must feel safe to openly discuss discipline and violence concerns with parents and community members. As long as principals fear for their jobs, an open discussion of what takes place at school is unlikely to occur.
3. Society, and especially its public schools, must come to grips with the issues of school violence and student safety. Given the large numbers of parents who believe that safety is a primary concern in selecting a school for their children and the increased threat of private schools, public schools must find a way to address this problem. Parents are looking for safe schools and some are pulling their children from public schools and placing them in private schools which they believe to be safer (Western Regional, 1996). With school choice being an increasingly ominous concern for public schools, the ramifications of these actions are obvious especially in Kansas where funding is based almost exclusively on pupil enrollment.

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23. Group counseling (on survey as counseling for students)
24. Emergency shelters for students
25. Tutoring programs for students
26. Dance lessons after school (on survey as after school athletics)
27. Family counseling
28. Youth magazines and publications
29. Leadership classes
30. Conflict resolution classes (on survey this area was separated into two items, staff training in conflict management and resolution, and student training in conflict management and resolution)
31. Weekend retreats (on survey as weekend retreats/summer camps)
32. Summer Camps (on survey as weekend retreats/summer camps)
33. Businesses owned by students
34. GED classes
35. College tuition paid for students who graduate from high school
36. Latch key programs
37. Phone hotlines
38. Suspension of violent students
39. Hiring school security personnel
40. Peer mediation
41. Video monitors (on survey as video monitors or dummy monitors)
42. Dummy monitors: nonfunctional monitors (on survey as video monitors or dummy monitors)
43. Expulsion of violent students
44. Zero tolerance policies
45. Alternative schools
46. Staff training in MANDT (on survey as staff training in student de-escalation and restraint)
47. Staff training in Second Step (on survey as staff training in student de-escalation and restraint)
48. Staff training in CPI (on survey as staff training in student de-escalation and restraint)
49. Locker searches
50. Decreasing the height of lockers
51. Closing lunch periods
52. Dress codes
53. Penalties for gang related behavior
54. Parent training programs
55. Phones in classrooms
56. Alarm systems for the building
57. Volunteer/parent patrols
58. Key cards for faculty and staff/programmed door locks
59. Staff ID cards
60. Limiting the height of trees and shrubs
61. Limiting access to the building by locking secondary doors or using exit only hardware
62. Securing against roof access
63. Security fencing
64. Dome mirrors at corridor intersections
65. Intercoms
66. Home visits
67. Behavior management plans (on survey as behavior management plans/contracts for student behavior)
68. Student contracts for behavior (on survey as behavior management plans/contracts for student behavior)

#### Appendix 1

##### *Violence Prevention Strategies Identified Through Literature Review*

1. Teachers and/or administrators stationed in hallways during passing periods
2. Searching students for contraband
3. Student ID cards
4. Photo ID cards
5. Metal detection systems
6. Parking stickers for students
7. Counseling for students
8. Student safety patrols
9. Peer tutoring
10. Gun safety classes
11. Anti-violence seminars
12. Law education classes for students
13. Community service projects for students
14. Mentoring programs
15. Character education classes
16. Two way radios
17. School Resource Officers (S.R.O's)
18. Off-duty police serving as security personnel (on survey as security personnel)
19. After school athletic activities
20. Summer employment programs (on survey as job placements for students)
21. Job placements for student
22. Aggression Replacement Training (on survey as student conflict management and resolution)