

CHAPMAN UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF LAW



LEGAL STUDIES RESEARCH PAPER SERIES

PAPER NO. 11-17

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Schools: Expert Opinions***

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Developmental research on social influences can guide practices aimed to prevent homicidal youth violence.

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Recurrent issues in efforts to prevent homicidal youth violence in schools: Expert opinions

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THE PURPOSE OF THIS ARTICLE is to consider four issues that are raised repeatedly by public policy makers, educators, and juvenile justice authorities in seeking ways to prevent youth violence in general and homicidal attacks on schools in particular. The first topic, bullying, has received great attention because many youth involved in school shootings and other violent attacks at school have been victims of bullying (although the severity of the bullying has been variable). The two boys who carried out the Columbine shootings cast themselves as champions of victims of bullying in their videos and writings, some still available on the Internet.¹ Although there are undoubtedly more complex motives and goals behind their crime, they left the impression, amplified by media

Coauthors Dill, Redding, Smith, and Surette made comparable contributions to this manuscript and are listed in alphabetical order. Cornell was the organizing author for this article.

reports, that their attack was an act of protest against bullies, school authorities, and society in general. Youth around the world who identified with this cause, and who projected onto the Columbine shootings that it represented action against the kind of injustices they experienced, found it to be a source of encouragement for their own plans. For this reason, it is important to consider the role that anti-bullying programs might play in the prevention of school shootings.

The second topic concerns the influence of entertainment violence, especially violent video games and music. Few topics have generated as much debate and controversy over the past fifty years as research on the effects of violent media on children's behavior and development.² The fact that the Columbine youth, as well as youth involved in several other high-profile cases, were known as ardent players of video games that rewarded rampage killing of as many opponents as possible has added a new depth of concern to this topic.

The third topic concerns the generation of copycat crimes by news media reports of sensational acts of violence. Notably, the Columbine boys aspired to achieve infamy by far exceeding the violent impact attained by previous school shooters and, in turn, the unprecedented news coverage of their crime has shaped the actions of other youth who made references to Columbine in their threats or plans to carry out similar acts.

The fourth topic concerns the possible role of deterrence through tougher criminal penalties for juvenile offenders. Policy makers frequently question whether potential offenders might be deterred through more serious criminal sanctions. Perhaps there could be a deterrent effect on some youth who contemplate homicidal acts of violence at school, as well as those who engage in bullying and harassment that might precipitate such acts. For those youth who have decided to kill themselves as part of their attack, deterrence may seem moot. However, a society that holds juvenile offenders more accountable for their actions could experience a generalized effect on attitudes toward criminal behavior that might yield some protective influence.

Four leading experts on these topics responded to the question: “What are the most promising findings in your field in the past ten years that can help us prevent homicidal violence by students in schools?”

Bullying prevention

Bullying refers to intentional aggressive acts where there is repetition and an imbalance of power. Being a victim can contribute, independently of other factors, to mental health problems such as self-harm and psychotic symptoms.³ Although the causal direction is less certain, we also know that homicidal violence by students often appears to be associated with claims of being bullied.⁴ Thus, research on bullying prevention is likely to be relevant to prevention of homicidal violence in school.

Neighborhood, school, classroom, peer group, and family factors have all been implicated as associated with bullying rates.^{5,6} The school and class climate, and the extent to which schools implement effective school anti-bullying policies and other interventions, are generally held to be important. The impact of family factors appears relatively small, but may be more important for students involved in homicidal violence, for whom family-based interventions may also be indicated.⁷

However, schools can make a difference. Over the last fifteen years, many anti-bullying school-based interventions have been developed, and recent meta-analyses suggest that they generally have some degree of success.⁸ Besides having a clear and accessible written policy, schools can implement proactive and reactive strategies. Proactive strategies develop a school climate of responsibility and (in Spanish) *convivencia*—being able to get along together. These include curriculum activities, such as use of DVDs, drama, quality circles, education for citizenship and social and emotional aspects of learning, incorporating learning goals (for example, respect for others) and ways of doing this (for example, cooperative

group work). Assertiveness training can benefit all pupils but especially those at risk of being victims.

Peer support schemes, such as buddying, mentoring, and running lunchtime clubs, involve other students (often a year or so older) in helping with problems that may include peer relationship issues and bullying. As emphasized in the recent KiVa project in Finland, it is important that peer supporters are not only well trained and supported, but that they are themselves respected or high status in the peer-group community. One of the motives for bullying appears to be gaining peer-group status, and the peer group itself can challenge this, but effectively only if high-status peers act as defenders of the victim.⁷

There are also reactive strategies that range from direct sanctions (for example, detention, exclusion) to counseling approaches in which the perpetrator is not sanctioned but asked to change his or her behavior. Restorative approaches take a middle route, holding perpetrators responsible for their actions but seeking to restore workable relationships. More research is needed on the relative effectiveness of these strategies,⁹ but many schools use a flexible tailored response, moving from restorative approaches to more direct sanctions if needed.

Traditional bullying can be physical, verbal, or indirect (for example, rumor spreading). Over the last ten years, cyberbullying has emerged in a variety of formats, such as mobile phones and the Internet. Rates appear to be up to about one-third of all bullying. Some cyberbullies appear to be particularly disturbed children (maybe traditional bully/victims—students who are perpetrators as well as victims of bullying) who use cyberspace as a way of obtaining revenge on those they feel have attacked them. Given that homicidally violent students often act out of anger, shame, acute or chronic social rejection, and a desire to make a public statement by posting violent Internet material, this area may be especially relevant.¹⁰ Efforts to reduce cyberbullying have been attempted in many countries, although the area is not yet very well researched and interventions are less developed than for traditional bullying.¹¹

Video game and entertainment violence

The Columbine shooters were reportedly avid players of the first-person shooter video game *Doom*, prompting questions about the role of video games and other entertainment media in school shootings. The overarching conclusion from dozens of studies is that video games are effective teaching tools, but their lessons can be positive or negative.

In 2003, a team of top media violence scholars concluded that “the debate over whether media violence increases aggression and violence is essentially over. . . .”¹² Analysis of research from a variety of genres, including video games, television, movies, and music, revealed that media violence exposure increases the likelihood of aggression and violence in youth. Attractive media models of aggression and identification with characters increase the aggression-provoking effect.¹³

Brain research has begun to elucidate the relationship between media violence and aggression. For example, Bartholow, Bushman, and Sestir¹⁴ found that violent video game players showed reduced empathic sensitivity, as measured by nERPs (negative event-related potentials) when watching scenes of real-life violence as compared to controls. Moreover, heavy users of violent video games were significantly more aggressive than the light users in a laboratory aggression task.

Despite the large body of evidence, public understanding of media violence is hampered by some common media violence myths.¹⁵ For example, parents, government officials, and other stakeholders may mistakenly believe that media effects are simple, direct, and extreme; that they affect all people the same way; and that exposure to media violence always leads to immediate effects.¹⁶ Actually, media effects are likely to be more complex and subtle. For example, consequences of exposure may build over time and lead to more everyday forms of aggression such as insults and sexual harassment, as well as reduced helping behavior.¹⁷ Scientists are currently modeling media violence effects with the use of risk factor approaches. Risk factor models, as in medicine, are

probabilistic and therefore can help us avoid misconceptions such as the idea that every exposure to media violence results in violence or aggression.¹⁸

In the groups most commonly studied in psychological research, media violence effects may be stronger for milder forms of aggression than for extreme forms of violence.¹² Therefore, studies focusing on everyday aggression as a consequence of exposure to media violence may help attenuate some of the media violence myths. In one such study, Dill and colleagues¹⁹ found that exposure to demeaning portrayals of female game characters caused increased tolerance of sexual harassment for male, but not female, college students.

In recent years, attention has turned to video games as powerful teachers. Gentile and Gentile²⁰ note, for instance, that games have clear objectives, promote active learning and overlearning, teach mastery with the use of multiple contexts, use progressive levels of difficulty, and offer varied rewards (à la operant conditioning).

Although research has demonstrated that learning can take the form of aggression, games also have the potential to teach positive lessons.²⁰ In previous years, the majority of top-selling video games and children's favorite games have been violent,^{21,22} but there are some new trends; nonviolent games, particularly music and exercise games, have become increasingly popular. Also in recent years, a serious games movement has arisen with emphases on political activism, health-related games, and educational games.

Although there has been a tendency to impose a false dichotomy that video games are either good or bad, this black-and-white thinking is counterproductive and inaccurate. Game effects depend on a variety of factors, such as content, time spent playing, and individual differences.²³

News reports and copycat crimes

Copycat crime is a phenomenon in which media coverage of a crime generates subsequent similar crimes. Copycat effects are

thought to have a significant influence on criminally predisposed youth, and to have contributed to some incidents of school violence. Rigorous empirical studies of copycat crime are rare, and most evidence consists of anecdotal reports. However, sound empirical research has linked media coverage to copycat suicides among teenagers.²⁴ Coleman²⁵ provides an extensive list of copycat phenomena such as teenage cluster suicides, airplane hijackings, and school shootings. For school shootings, copycat threats far outnumber actual copycat events.²⁶

There is indirect support for youth copycat effects in research on social diffusion (how behaviors spread through societies), imitation (how individuals come to copy behavior), priming (mental processes that encourage copying), and social learning (how individuals learn behaviors in social settings), as well as media behavioral effects research. Surette²⁷ and Hurley and Chater²⁸ provide overviews of copycat crime and human copycat behavior suggesting that the media accounts most likely to generate copycat crimes: (1) show successful, unpunished, justified crimes committed by heroic models; (2) show crime in realistic settings and as exciting and enjoyable; (3) minimize or justify the harm caused by crime; and (4) include clear and explicit crime instructions. Individual characteristics that may increase a youth's risk of copycat behavior include (1) social isolation, (2) stronger networking to deviant than law-abiding groups, (3) high interest in criminogenic media content or a specific generator crime, (4) belief in personal criminal innovativeness and efficacy, (5) interest in guns and law enforcement activities, or (6) feelings of persecution and anger.

Two hypothesized risk factors linked to homicidal copycat events are media immersion—when individuals concentrate for hours on a single media product or story—and fixation—when individuals repetitively watch the same scene and adopt similar mannerisms, clothing, or speech patterns.²⁹ However, none of the hypothesized risk factors has demonstrated strong predictive value and none can be regarded as necessary or sufficient to lead to copycat behavior.

Contemporary media are not monolithic. News and entertainment are today fused as “infotainment” and news media content is no longer restricted to news outlets. Additionally, new media, such as PDAs, iPods, and YouTube, are likely more influential on youth than traditional newspapers and television media. Thus, news media effects cannot be easily parsed out. Finally, research on other types of media effects suggests that interventions need to be carefully implemented to avoid counterproductive results.³⁰ With these caveats in mind, some recommendations can be made.

Prevention efforts should focus on encouraging the news media to avoid criminogenic media content before a major crime occurs. Crime reports should avoid accounts that glorify or justify the crime, or provide instruction to potential copycats. Schools might reduce at-risk copycat populations through a combination of media and criminal justice literacy instruction that debunks misperceptions about crime. Youth often have mistaken perceptions of the criminal justice system, their real-world risk of apprehension, and the consequences of criminal acts. Thus, even when the initial offenders are shown in the news as unsuccessful, at-risk copycat youth will interpret this to mean that the initial offenders made correctable mistakes that can be avoided by the copycat, resulting in successfully copied crimes. Proactive steps are strongly recommended before newsworthy violent events occur and should be reinforced following one.

To minimize copycat effects after a potential generator crime, the first step is to open discussions and contextualize the event for youth. The criminogenic media portrait can be defused by (1) pointing out inconsistent and speculative content regarding the initial crime; (2) discussing the crime’s true aftermath, so that victims are portrayed sympathetically and offenders are viewed negatively and denied folk hero status; (3) discussions of alternative, more appropriate actions the initial offenders could have pursued; (4) discussing the high likelihood of failure, arrest, and punishment for similar crimes as well as the negative consequences for family, friends, and future of copycat offenders.

Lastly, as soon as feasible, communities should minimize social disruptions such as closing schools and holding memorials that keep the initial crime and offenders in the spotlight. It is important for a school to return to normal as soon as it is safe to do so to reduce the lure of copying an act simply to replicate and continue long-term social upheaval. As soon as it is deemed safe, schools should resume normal schedules and routines. And to the degree possible, news agencies should be asked to limit visual images, perpetrator-focused content, perpetrator statements or interviews, extended coverage, and comparisons to past infamous persons.

The effectiveness of deterrence

The question often arises as to whether more punitive sanctions for juvenile crime can prevent homicidal violence. For adult offenders, the research suggests that the likelihood of arrest acts as a deterrent, whereas the severity of the punishment does not. The fewer studies involving juveniles (none of which has focused on school homicides), briefly reviewed below, reach similar conclusions (see Redding³¹).

In the wake of legal reforms in the United States designed to get tough on juvenile crime by transferring juveniles from the juvenile court to the adult criminal court, recent research has examined the differential effects of trying serious youthful offenders in juvenile versus criminal court. The research has generally found that the stiffer adult sanctions do not deter juvenile crime. For comprehensive reviews, see McGowan and others³² and Redding.³¹ Studies have controlled for demographic and economic variables and compared the juvenile arrest rates across states as a function of whether they had particular transfer laws in place, or as a function of the relative punitiveness of the sentences given in their juvenile and criminal justice systems. Other studies have compared offending rates before and after a state enacted or strengthened transfer laws, and one study examined the effect of reaching the age of majority on youthful offending. Only one of

these studies found a general deterrent effect. A recent small-scale study³³ that interviewed transferred juvenile offenders found that few knew they could be tried as adults, none thought it would happen to them, and few thought they would face serious punishment. Most thought they would get light sentences from the juvenile court despite the serious violent crimes they had committed.

Punishments will likely have deterrent effects only if potential offenders believe there is a high likelihood of getting caught and of receiving a meaningfully significant sentence, and only if they consider the risk of the penalty when deciding whether to offend. Some adolescents may have difficulty perceiving the risk of being arrested and punished because of their psychosocial and brain immaturity, their susceptibility to peer pressure, and their tendency to focus on the short-term benefits of crime while discounting the consequences of their actions (see Beckman³⁴ and Steinberg and Cauffman³⁵). In addition, school shootings are unusual crimes that may be committed by suicidal youth with little or no prior history of offending, which further suggests that the prospect of punishment would have little deterrent effect.

Six large-scale studies have also found higher recidivism rates among juveniles convicted of violent offenses in criminal court when compared with similar offenders tried in the juvenile court.^{31,32} These studies used large sample sizes, multiple measures of recidivism, and different study design and analysis methods; they controlled for a variety of variables (for example, age, race, prior offenses, offense seriousness, use of a weapon, geographical location, family status, case-processing variables) and were conducted in different states of the United States. The higher recidivism rates may be due to stigmatization and labeling effects, the sense of injustice juveniles report feeling about being tried as adults, the learning of criminal attitudes, exposure to victimization while incarcerated with adults, the decreased focus on rehabilitation and family support in the adult system, and decreased opportunities for community reintegration.³² In contrast, incarceration in the juvenile justice system, with its availability of rehabilitative

programming, may have beneficial effects in reducing recidivism.^{31,36}

In sum, because the extant research suggests that harsher criminal penalties do not prevent juvenile violence, there is no reason to suppose that they would prevent homicidal violence in schools. Instead, we must devote the resources necessary to detect and arrest those juveniles who engage in violent acts.³⁷ More importantly, we must utilize the available evidence-based treatments to prevent delinquent behavior and reduce recidivism. We now know what works (particularly cognitive-behavioral and family-based treatments, and interpersonal skills training) versus what does not work (punishment, boot camps, shock incarceration) in treating and preventing serious juvenile delinquency. Such treatments have proven highly effective, particularly when started at the first sign of significant conduct disorder or delinquent behavior and delivered in a high-quality fashion.³⁸

Conclusions

Case studies suggest that the pathway to a school shooting develops over a long period of time, and that childhood problems were often evident years before the attack. Therefore, prevention efforts might be arrayed along a continuum from the earliest manifestations of developmental difficulty through the period of conception, planning, and ultimate decision to act.

Adolescents normatively and characteristically grow markedly less dependent on their parents for guidance and support, and instead turn toward peers as the source for feelings of acceptance, identity, and self-worth. Under normal conditions this developmental shift can be regarded as an adaptive preparation for adult independence. Research on youth who have committed homicidal attacks at school seems to suggest a developmental failure along this normal adolescent trajectory.³⁹ Many of these youth had excessively attenuated ties with their parents that were compounded by failure to attain acceptance with their primary peer group. They

experienced bullying, teasing, or other forms of peer rejection. These experiences, perhaps in combination with other social and academic failures, left them with profound feelings of depression, alienation, narcissistic injury, resentment, and anger.

Although there may be no reliable way to determine which students will be so profoundly affected by bullying, schoolwide efforts to address bullying, as well as efforts to identify and assist students who seem seriously troubled, could be helpful. It must be emphasized that early prevention efforts at a universal level can be effective even when there is no means of determining which members of the general population are destined to develop long-term negative effects. Similarly, an entire nation might be vaccinated against a disease that would otherwise affect only a small proportion of the population.

Clearly only a few youth are so vulnerable to the impact of peer rejection that they would consider a homicidal attack as a public act of revenge, so there must be other factors (and likely different combinations of factors in each case) that influence them in their progression toward violence. Among these other factors may be the desensitizing effect of entertainment violence on inhibitions against harming others and the suggestive effect of sensational media coverage of school shootings. These factors are certainly not necessary or sufficient causes of violence, but they are noteworthy because they are extraordinarily pervasive public influences that are increasingly embedded in cultures throughout the world and can occupy large quantities of the adolescent's daily life. Their distorting impact on the legitimacy of violence may be greatest on those who are most troubled and in need of time spent in more constructive and reparative activities. There are clear directions for ameliorating their impact.

Finally, research on the deterrent effects of criminal sanctions on youth provides strong counsel against reliance on harsher punishment as a readily available and easily implemented preventive measure. Often it is politically popular to recommend tougher criminal sanctions, but rehabilitative treatment efforts offer scientifically more persuasive evidence of effectiveness.

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