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ABSTRACT

This paper was presented as part of a symposium attempting to document historical trends in the extent of disruptive behavior in schools and some contemporary responses to the problem. Fragmentary evidence suggests that disobedience and resistance to authority are not new, but incidents have become more serious. Still, few students are either offenders or victims in serious incidents. A critical review of the literature suggests the following conclusions about trends in school violence and disruption that vary partially from frequently accepted opinion: (1) while disruptive and violent conditions have worsened in recent years, the origins of the present problems are discernible some 20 years ago; (2) the degree to which trends in the last several years can be determined is hampered by limitations in the available evidence on the subject; (3) although disruptive and violent conditions may be at unacceptably high levels in many American schools today, not all schools are equally affected and it is not clear that such conditions continue to worsen presently in the aggregate. (Author/MLF)

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"HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON DISRUPTION AND VIOLENCE IN SCHOOLS"

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(Conclusions and views expressed herein are the author's and not necessarily those of the National Institute of Education)

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Historical Perspectives on Disruption and Violence in Schools

How much disruption and violence is there in schools? Is it getting worse? These questions are frequently asked by parents, citizens and legislators concerned about an apparent epidemic of disruptive and violent behavior existing in today's public schools.

Signs of concern about conditions in school are numerous. Since 1969, Gallup polls on American attitudes towards education have consistently shown "lack of discipline" to be the primary problem perceived to exist in the public schools.[1]

Community concern may be stimulated when a particularly violent or destructive incident is reported. A recent example in the Washington, D.C. area was the week-end long vandalizing of a modern elementary school by six youths, causing $100,000 in damages. In addition, quieter but perhaps deeper concerns can be discerned in conversation with parents who describe children hiding lunch money in their socks to avoid having it taken, or systematically staying out of school bathrooms so as not to be victimized.

State legislatures and the United States Congress have paid increasing attention to the problem. The Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency on the Senate Judiciary Committee, chaired by Birch Bayh (D.-Indiana), has been particularly active in inquiring into the extent of violence and

vandalism in schools and publicizing its findings.

A preliminary Subcommittee report on school violence and vandalism issued in 1975 captured a prevalent mood in many quarters, as follows:

> Simple put, the trend in school violence over the last decade in America has been, and continues to be, alarming and dramatically upward.[2]

While a great deal of scholarly study and journalistic publicity has been focused on disruption and violence in schools, the available evidence documenting the extent of the problem and trends in its development varies widely in consistency and conclusiveness.

A critical review of that evidence suggests the following conclusions about trends in school violence and disruption, which vary partially from frequently accepted opinion: (a) while disruptive and violent conditions have indeed worsened in recent years, the origins of the present problems are discernible some twenty years ago; (b) the degree to which trends in the last several years can be determined is hampered by limitations in the available evidence on the subject; (c) although disruptive and violent conditions may be at unacceptably high levels in many American schools today, not all schools are equally affected and it is not clear that such conditions continue to worsen presently in the aggregate.

Early Stages of the Problem - One can perenially argue that "youth are going to the dogs" and the last two decades are obviously no exception. The introduction to a 1956 NEA Study of behavior in schools nevertheless lent a contemporary air of urgency to the adage:

> The misbehavior of children and youth appears to be one of the most critical social problems of our day. Newspaper accounts of juvenile gangsterism, stealing, armed assault and even murder are being viewed with growing alarm.[3]

The introduction went on:

> The findings were both good and bad. According to teachers the great majority of young people cannot be classified as juvenile delinquents, yet the situation in certain types of homes, schools, and communities is alarming. For instance, altho two-thirds of the teachers said that troublemakers accounted for less than 1 in 100 of their pupils, 28 percent of the teachers in our larger cities said that within the past 12 months at least one act of physical violence against a teacher had been committed by a pupil or pupils attending their schools. Almost one-half of the teachers working in schools in slum areas reported one or more acts of physical violence against faculty members within the same period.

The NEA findings were different in tone from earlier empirical studies of student behavior, in that delinquency and violence became increasingly highlighted, even if such behavior was not actually widespread. By comparison, a 1949 review of behavior problems seen by 225 high school principals showed lying and disrespect to be seen as the most serious problems and impertinence and running in corridors as the most frequent. Earlier studies convey the same impression.[4]

Nonetheless, the NEA concluded in 1956 that:

> Any general assumption that children and youth of this generation have "gone to the dogs" is a serious mistake. Admittedly, there are trouble spots and serious conditions in many communities and schools, but the great majority of boys and girls are not juvenile delinquents.[5]

Still, it should be noted that a generalized increase in youthful crime in the United States began in the late 1950's.[6] While not specifically identified then as a school problem and while partly a consequence of extraneous demographic factors, i.e., the increasing size of the youthful population and the urbanization of the country with its attendant problems, the societal increase in youthful crime was a factor from which schools were not ultimately to be immune.

In the early 1960's the nature and extent of violence and disruption in schools became more publicized, although those conditions seemed to spread unevenly. A 1961 statewide survey of discipline problems in Georgia high schools, for example, revealed little serious cause for concern.[7] Conversely, the emerging tenor of concern in which violence, not traditional "misbehavior" was increasingly emphasized, is caught in the following excerpt from a 1964 NEA report:

> "What are these kids coming to?" an outraged teacher asked his principal after being punched in the face by a student. "Can't we call the police?"
>
> A short while before in the same school system a student riot had prompted an investigation by a committee of prominent citizens. The committee had found that violence and open disrespect toward the teachers were rampant in many school buildings..."[8]

The societal increase in youthful crimes in progress was not simply due to minor offenses. Between 1960 and 1965, it has been estimated that arrests of persons under 18 increased 52% for willful homicide, rape, robbery, aggravated assault and other serious offenses.[9] While official statistics do not permit an analysis of how much of the increased youth crime occurred in and around schools, the rising concern about youthful violence generally was somewhat congruent with the emerging concerns about violence in schools.

Similarly, crimes of school vandalism, historically considered semi-forgivable youthful pranks, escalated during the 1960's in cost and seriousness, as well as number. Many districts were incurring significantly increased costs not only for repair and replacement of equipment, but for higher insurance premiums and other preventive measures as well.[10]

Observable Trends in the Last Fifteen Years - By the late 1960's and early 1970's, public concern about disruption in schools had escalated. In part, concerns were raised because secondary schools experienced the sort of politically-oriented protests and disruptions which were frequent on college campuses during that period. (Unlike their college counterparts who were frequently demonstrating against the Vietnam war or other social phenomena, protests of high schoolers were most often over their own, local concerns such as school dress codes.)[11] Crime in schools -- particularly violence and vandalism -- continued to remain troublesome, however, after

the protest movement died in the early 1970's.

Discussing actual trends in school disruption and violence with any precision is difficult, however, largely because of methodological shortcomings in the evidence available to us. These shortcomings include a lack of longitudinal studies, frequent reliance on anecdotal and impressionistic evidence and in the case of offenses against persons, a lack of information about actual victimization, as opposed to information about only those offenses reported to school officials.

For example, a large number of reports about crime and violence from individual districts, mostly urban and to a much lesser extent suburban and rural, are described in publications of the Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency. They testify eloquently to increasing problems of school disruption and violence. Many of these reports contain year to year comparisons of disruptive activity levels; nevertheless, some caution seems appropriate in extrapolating year to year comparisons from such reports over longer periods of time. As an illustration:

> "The Philadelphia School System reported a 36% increase in student assaults from 1973 to 1974 and an 81% (increase) in teacher assaults over the same period."[12]

Unless the period 1973-1974 was unusually explosive -- and in the longer view of school disruption and violence -- there is no reason to think it was -- the inevitable consequence of several such year's experience

would have been an assault rate affecting all students and teachers in the system. Still, no one has suggested that school system have completely capitulated to a crime wave, even in most urban systems.

In one continuing series of inquiries into violence conducted through "Teacher Opinion Polls", the NEA estimated that 3.0% of public school teachers had been assaulted in 1974, compared to 1.4% in 1964. The percentage of urban teachers estimated to have been assaulted rose from 2.5% to 5.4%.[13] A standard for evaluating such reports is clearly needed. On the one hand, 3.0% of teachers being assaulted is not an immediately horrifying figure; however, when stated in terms of the relative increase in assaults, the foregoing 1964-1974 trends equate to approximately 115% increases, for both the nationwide and urban cases.

Self-reported teacher victimization, as measured by NEA polls, is an area about which relatively good information is available. In general, however, a serious problem of underreporting of violent and disruptive acts may exist. Albert Shanker, President of the American Federation of Teachers, made the point in Congressional Testimony:

> I should emphasize that these figures in New York City, and figures across the country which we have, are understated figures. There is a tendency not to report school violence and school crime. There is pressure frequently brought to bear on the teachers - if this gets out it will hurt the reputation of our school, and similar pressures are brought to bear on superintendents by school boards up and down the line.[14]

To the extent that underreporting of incidents is common, one must take reports based on official records purporting to show increasing violence and disruption with a grain of salt. The apparent increase may in part reflect more vigorous reporting policies, which have the effect of bringing to the surface a greater proportion of previously unreported incidents. In this respect, the level of student victimization, as well as trends in its occurrence, is particularly problematic. No continuing counterpart to the NEA teacher polls incorporating self-reported victimization data exists regarding students. Without it, a reasonable approach to reports about trends in student victimization based on official records might be to accept them as evidence of an increased problem, but not to rely excessively upon their specifics.

It might be noted, not entirely parenthetically, that vandalism statistics equate to "victimization" statistics; i.e., they are obviously not subject to non-reporting for the human reasons involved in non-reporting of personal victimization. As such, vandalism statistics can be relatively good indicators of trends if terminology and reporting procedure are reasonably consistent (although those can be formidable obstacles in themselves). The level of incidents and losses due to school vandalism has indisputably risen since the mid-1960's, although estimates about aggegate yearly loss levels vary widely.[15] Vandalism is not clearly identifiable with urban characteristics of districts as is violence. Nonetheless, individual incidents of vandalism are sometimes extreme, as indicated at

the outset of this paper. In this respect, as in emerging concerns about school violence generally, the locus of the problem is in no small part upon the extreme nature of individual events occurring, as well as their aggregate number.

Recent Trends

Granted that the problems many schools experienced with disruption and violence did escalate markedly in the last 10-15 years, what evidence exists about more recent trends? NEA polls conducted between 1973 and 1976 indicate that the percent of teachers assaulted each year has fluctuated between 2.4. and 3.0%. (The rate in 1975-76 was 2.9%.)[16]

In a recently completed study, conducted in fifteen cities, Dr. Bernard Watson of Temple University concluded:

> Because of differing classifications and changes in classification of criminal incidents, it is difficult to trace trends within or across cities. Weapons violations, however, appear to be on the increase in most cities with the single exception of Oakland, where they have been decreasing over the years... Drug violations, (including alcohol abuse) also appear to be generally increasing. Again, Oakland is an exception...
>
> A rather surprising finding for these cities is that, although there are fluctuations in the incidence of vandalism, the overall trend in the six cities for which long term data are available is down....[17]

Dr. Watson's findings about trends in vandalism are reinforced by analysis of a continuing series of reports made by the Baltimore City Public Schools on vandalism in large cities throughout the country. In 31 cities by which data were available for both years, the costs of vandalism when adjusted for inflation rose between 1970 and 1974 in about half the cases and decreased in the other half. (The cost of materials and labor to replace or repair vandalized equipment presumably rises commensurate with the general pace of inflation. In the foregoing examples, a 31% increase in the cost of living, as measured by the Consumer Price Index, was incorporated in the analysis.)[18] As noted previously, however, individual districts' losses due to vandalism may fluctuate widely from one year to the next because of extreme and costly individual incidents.

A resurgence of gang activity in several large cities has occurred recently, which may be the most prominent exception to the shaky state of equilibrium perceived herein to exist in trends of disruption and violence in schools. In a 1976 study on the phenomenon for the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA), Dr. Walter Miller of Harvard University reported:

> In all four of the largest cities respondents provided vivid accounts of gangs prowling the school corridors in search of possible rivals, and preventing orderly movement through the hallways. All four cities report open gang fights occurring in the hallways -- in some cases with considerable frequency. The shooting and killing of teachers by gang members was reported for Chicago and Philadelphia, and of non-gang students in Chicago and Los Angeles. Shootings and other assaults were also reported to have occurred in school cafeterias, auditoriums, and other internal locations.[19]

Miller concluded that the availability and use of weapons, particularly firearms, was the "single most significant development affecting gang members violence during the present period."[20] Interestingly, the Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency comments that operations of gangs in schools "are not solely or even predominantly violent confrontations". Rather, gangs operate narcotic or protection rings, charge student "fees" for use of lunch room and other student facilities and engaged in "shakedown" or "extortion" operations.[21] The Subcommittee report views the contemporary youth gangs as resembling the organizational model and aims of organized syndicates more than the "jets" and "sharks" model of the 1950's.

Miller's findings regarding the use of weapons by gangs are congruent with Watson's concerning the trends towards increased weapons offenses in urban districts. The presence of weapons in schools is an obvious contributor toward fear of school crime, which is a subject about which much more needs to be known. Nevertheless it seems appropriate to regard gangs as a small, if disproportionately troublesome, element in the current trends of school disruption and violence. Elimination of gangs would not remove the total problem in urban schools nor would it affect problems at all in many suburban and rural schools, where vandalism and non-violent crimes, such as property theft, continue to be relatively more frequent.

It should be noted that even in locations where school crime and disruption exist, but at relatively stable levels, those levels may still be inconducive to the effective or happy functioning of students or staff and justifiable grounds exist to seek improvement in them.

Footnotes

1. See George Gallup, annual polls on "The Public Attitudes Toward the Public Schools", in the Phi Delta Kappan; the eighth annual poll is in the September 1976 issue, p.187.

2. Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency on the Committee on the Judiciary U.S. Senate, Our Nation's Schools - A Report Card: "A" In School Violence and Vandalism, Committee Print, U. S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 1975, p.4.

   The Senate Subcommittee published a final report in February 1977 on the results of its investigations into school violence and vandalism conducted over the past several years; it is entitled Challenge For The Third Century: Education In A Safe Environment - Final Report On The Nature and Prevention of School Violence And Vandalism, also available from the U.S. Government Printing Office.

3. Research Division, National Education Association, " Teacher Opinion on Pupil Behavior 1955-56". National Education Association Research Bulletin. XXXIV, (1956), April, p.52.

4. See Carol J. Henning, "Discipline: Are School Practices Changing?" The Clearing House, XIII, (1949), January, pp. 267 and 270. For summaries of this and earlier empirical studies of student misbehavior with similar findings, see Peter F. Oliva, "High School Discipline in American Society - A Primer in Democratic Discipline in its Social Context", The Bulletin of the National Association of Secondary-School Principals, 40 (1956), January, pp. 13-19.

5. NEA, op. cit., p. 104

6. The arrest rates of 15-16 year olds in the U.S. increased from approximately 85 per 100,000 similar age population in 1953 to 295 per 100,000 in 1974, for homicide, rape, robbery, and assault (crimes against the person). For burglary, larceny/theft, vandalism and arson (crimes against property) the arrest rate rose from 160 in 1953 to 520 in 1974. (Figures are based on statistics compiled by the Uniform Crime Reporting Division of the FBI and have been adjusted for different reporting bases throughout the period. Supplied courtesy of Robert Rubel, U.S. Law Enforcement Assistance Administration.)

   The foregoing crimes comprise the FBI "index" of the most serious crimes occurring in the nation. Statistics compiled by HEW document a similar rise in juvenile court cases beginning in the late 1950's.

These reports document only those offenses made known to the police or juvenile authorities and for which individuals have been arrested or otherwise taken into custody. Data in them will therefore systematically underrepresent the true extent of crime and delinquency in any period and might obscure the specific nature of trends as well, although not their overall direction.

7. See Albert J. Kingston, Jr. and Harold W. Gentry, "Discipline Problems and Practices in The Secondary Schools of a Southern State", The Bulletin of the National Association of Secondary-School Principals, 45 (1961), November, p. 34. The study concluded in part:

> The most commonly encountered behavior problems were failure on the part of students to do homework or other assignments, congregating in halls and lavatories, truancy, smoking in school or on school grounds, and impertinence and discourtesy. These results serve to substantiate the findings of other studies. A low incidence of severe behavioral problems was noted as reflected by the low number of cases reporting use of narcotics, gang fighting, physical violence against teachers, or sex offenses. Generally both white and Negro principals report similar patterns of misbehavior.

8. NEA, "Student Violence and Rebellion - How Big a Problem?", NEA Journal, 1965, September, p.60.

9. Estimated by the President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice; See The Challenge of Crime in a Free Society, 1967, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., p.56. As with all the increases observed in youthful crime during the past 20 years, some but not all is attributable to the growing youth population. Between 1960 and 1965, the 14-17 year old population, responsible for most under-18 crimes, increased by approximately 15%.

10. For a discussion of developments in the 1960's, see Bernard Greenberg, School Vandalism: A National Dilemma, Stanford Research Institute, Menlo Park, California, 1969.

11. For a discussion of this subject, see "Student Activism and Conflict", The Bulletin of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, 55 (1971), January, pp. 70-89, especially Table 8:5.

12. Quoted from The Senate Subcommittee, Challenge for the Third Century, p.11.

13. See "Teacher Opinion Poll", Today's Education, 1974, September-October p.105.

14. Quoted from The Senate Subcommittee, Challenge for the Third Century, p.16.

15. The National Association of School Security Directors has estimated that the nationwide cost of vandalism in 1974 was $594 million in testimony before the Senate Subcommittee.

Other studies have estimated the annual nationwide cost of vandalism to be approximately $100 million during the same period. See, for example, Educational Research Service, Inc., Losses Due to Vandalism, Arson, and Theft in Public-School Systems, 1972-73, 1974, Arlington, Virginia. The differences in estimates seem due primarily to methodological differences in the surveys. The weight of the evidence might suggest the nationwide cost is nearer the high figure than the low one. An unpardonable but nonetheless actual editorial sin has been to place a lower estimate (in the range of $200 million) from one source next to a higher figure ($500 million) from another source and to suggest a trend in rising costs of vandalism thereby.

16. See "Teacher Opinion Poll", Today's Education, 1976, September-October, p.20.

17. Presented by Dr. Bernard Watson in Oversight Hearing on the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act, Hearings before the Subcommittee on Equal Opportunities of the Committee on Education and Labor, House of Representatives, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1976.

Dr. Watson selected cities for his study to be representive of urban areas with diverse populations and needs, recognizing that previous reports have generally indicated schools in such locations are trouble spots. (See p.51)

Conclusions on trends are based on data available in about half the fifteen cities for the years 1970-74. All data are derived from official school records, supplmented by interviews with school personnel. Watson's conclusions are therefore subject to cautions about interpretation of officially-recorded data expressed earlier herein.

18. See Center for Planning, Research and Evaluation, Baltimore City Public Schools, Annual Report of Vandalism in Selected Great Cities and Maryland Counties, Baltimore, Maryland. The comparison cited was based on reports covering 1970-71 and 1973-74. (The series was discontinued after 1974.)

According to the Senate Subcommittee, a statewide survey in New Jersey showed that in 1974-75, 45% of the districts reported an increase in vandalism from the previous year, 33% indicated no change and 22% found "a somewhat reduced level of vandalism". See Challenge for the Third Century, p. 14. No cost of living adjustment was mentioned.

19. Walter B. Miller, Violence by Youth Gangs and Youth Groups in Major American Cities - Summary Report, Center for Criminal Justice, Harvard Law School, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1976. Miller's studies covered 12 cities, including New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Detroit and San Francisco.

20. Ibid, p.81.

21. Senate Subcommittee, Challenge for the Third Century, p.38.