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ABSTRACT

This paper briefly reviews the literature on violence in rural schools and communities, as well as the causes of rural crime and violence. General demographic and economic characteristics of rural communities are listed, followed by facts on rural school enrollments, achievement, and funding. Recent changes in rural communities that might contribute to crime and violence include the diminishing influence of church, school, and family and the economic restructuring that is undermining sense of community and lessening local control. Rural America can no longer be characterized as a safe haven from crime and violence, but information on rural violence and rural school violence is limited. Data on rural crime rates are listed, followed by findings from three studies of rural school violence. These findings indicate that rural school violence is increasing; over half of the boys and one-fifth of the girls in a Texas study had been in a fight involving weapons; and most violence occurred in unsupervised areas such as hallways, restrooms, cafeteria, and locker rooms. Small schools may have advantages that improve school safety. Nine possible causes of rural violence are briefly discussed: culture of violence, poverty, urbanization, rapid economic and population change, organized crime, urban export of criminals, substance abuse, guns, and youth poverty. (Contains 21 references.) (SV)

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INCREASING CARING AND REDUCING VIOLENCE IN RURAL SCHOOLS

Predatory crime does not merely victimize individuals, it impedes and, in the extreme case, prevents the formation and maintenance of community. By disrupting the delicate nexus of ties, formal and informal, by which we are linked with our neighbors, crime atomizes society and makes of its members mere individual calculators estimating their own advantage, especially their chances of survival amidst their fellows. Common undertakings become difficult or impossible, except for those motivated by a shared desire for protection (Wilson, 1993, p. 26).

There are many reasons for educators, parents, students, representatives of the media, politicians, business leaders, and academicians to express interest and give focused attention to the issue of violence in schools. Recent atrocities in Colorado, California, Arkansas, Oregon, etc. demonstrate predatory behavior with horrific consequences. Feelings of distress and fear threaten to tear further at an already besieged confidence in America's only universally guaranteed social program: public education. Thus, understanding school violence is important in developing programs that promise to reduce or prevent it. Violent behavior by students in the school setting appears to be a rather recent phenomenon and, as such, does not possess an extensive literature or developed theory.

Attention to violence in rural schools has received even less attention than violence in urban settings. Much of what is discussed in the educational literature is borrowed from criminology. In the introductory commentary to their extensive review of literature on the subject, Wilson and Hernstein (1985) put in simple terms what is known about violent behavior that is generally classified by our society as criminal:

- Predatory street crimes are most commonly committed by young males
- Violent crimes are more common in big cities than in small ones
- High rates of criminality tend to run in families
- The persons who frequently commit the most serious crimes typically begin their criminal careers at quite a young age
- Persons who turn out to be criminals do not do very well in school.

Youth violence does not occur in isolation but emanates in some yet to be understood fashion in the social communities in which it occurs. Therefore, we begin here by describing the communities and environments in which youth violence emerges and outline some recent changes that may contribute to what is happening in rural schools and communities today.

THE RURAL SCENE

One fourth of Americans reside in rural areas (Monsey, Owen, Zierman, Lambert, & Hyman, 1995), yet wide variances exist between communities. Despite each rural community's unique qualities, a 1994 research report by the U. S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement shows some distinguishing characteristics of rural communities as a whole.

Rural Communities

The 1994 Department of Education's report shows that rural America

Is sparsely populated, averaging fewer than 40 residents per square mile

- Is located outside an effective commuting range of a metropolitan area
- Has a higher poverty rate than urban areas, a rate that is rapidly increasing (Hodgkinson, 1994, refers to rural youth as the invisible poor)
- Has a jobless rate higher than metropolitan counties
- Lags behind the rest of the nation in job and income growth
- Characteristically provides jobs that require few skills and pay poorly
- Is no longer supported by the farming industry
- Has had a dramatic exodus of workers since 1980
- Has a rising rate of families headed by women
- Has recently begun to experience the resettlement of large numbers of urban families in rural areas seeking safer environments for rearing families. Some people are moving out of rural communities because these communities lag behind in the opportunities they provide for higher education and/or well-paying occupations. This lag, according to Hobbs (1994) "is both cause and effect for the continuing migration of the most highly educated youth from rural communities" (p. 18).

Rural Schools

According to the U.S. Department of Education's 1994 report, 46 percent of school districts in America are classified as strictly rural with many more located in districts officially defined as urban. Most rural districts are likely to be in the North central, Southern, and Western parts of the United States. Schools in these rural districts generally

- Have enrollments of fewer than 400 students
- One out of five has fewer than 100 students
- Are located in small school districts; 41 percent have less than 300 students
- Have student achievement levels that are generally higher than those of the disadvantaged urban students but lower than those of the advantaged urban
- Have small budgets with few government resources funneled their way (McLean and Ross, 1994)
- Per pupil cost of operations are not necessarily less in rural schools; one study showed such costs to run about 18 percent higher than the state average (Rural Policy Matters, April, 1999)
- Some of the funding inequities can be attributed to a commonly held belief that rural schools do not have the problems of racism, violence and general decay that more metropolitan schools have (Petersen, Beekley, Speaker, & Pietrzak, 1998).

The Changing Rural Scene

Historically, rural communities have been portrayed as having two-parent families who sat down together to a home-cooked meal after the parents worked in the fields and the children returned home from a trouble-free day at school. Somewhere in this picture was the church that the community members faithfully and collectively supported. "The family, the church, and the school have been at the heart of rural communities since this country was settled. These three institutions have provided the standards of behavior, circles of personal interaction, and a variety of social activities that collectively shape community ethos and identity" (U.S. Department of Education, 1994, p. 21).

The reality today is that rural conditions have changed significantly.

- Rural churches and schools have lost considerable influence in recent years (Hobbs, 1994)
- The tightly-knit rural family that has traditionally been viewed as a stabilizing influence on students and a strength of rural life is also weakening
- Over 50 percent of school administrators in one study felt that lack of parental involvement was the single most important contributor to school violence (Stephens, 1994)

- No matter the size of the school, the perceived causes of violence in a study involving 611 teachers and administrators were lack of family involvement, supervision, and family violence with the stability and emotional atmosphere of the families of the perpetrator to be unstable (Petersen et at., 1998).

Coupled with the altered influence of the family, school, and church, is the economic restructuring of rural communities which has begun to undermine the traditional sense of belonging and reduced local control. Not only is the rural economy directly connected with national and international markets, but rural schools, health care, and other services have become a part of national systems. One consequence of these changes is greater rural community dependency and less autonomy. ...It is increasingly difficult for rural residents to maintain a sense of community when so many things they depend on are located somewhere else (Hobbs, 1994, p. 14).

Violence in Rural Communities

Rural American can no longer be characterized as safe havens from the crime and violence that plagues urban settings but the lack of information on rural violence coupled with mistaken stereotypes are limiting factors in forming a completely accurate picture. Existing information, however, supports the following observations.

- From 1965 to 1992, rape, robbery, and assault rates tripled in rural areas (Monsey, Owen, Zierman, Lambert, & Hyman, 1990)
- Sixteen percent of all violent crime is in rural areas (Monsey, et al, 1990)
- Whites more than Blacks are the victims in rural areas (Monsey, et al, 1990)
- The perpetrator of a crime in rural America is usually a relative of the victim and is more likely to be drunk than perpetrators in urban areas (Monsey, et al, 1990)
- Rural crime rates are actually increasing faster than those in urban areas (Donnermeyer,1994; Bachman, 1992)
- The gap between urban and rural crime and substance abuse rates is closing Hobbs, 1994)
- Between 1959 and 1991, crime rates in urban areas increased more than in rural (FBI Uniform Crime Reports cited in Donnermeyer, 1994)
- From 1988 to 1991, rural crime rates have gone up 8.6 percent, compared to on 3.6 percent for crime rates in urban areas (FBI Uniform Crime Reports cited in Donnermeyer, 1994)
- A 1990 Texas survey of 1004 eighth and tenth grade students from small Texas communities showed that, excepting school supervised environments, 30 percent had been threatened with bodily harm though not actually hurt, and 16 percent had been physically attacked. Eighteen percent said someone tried to force them to have sex when they did not want to (Kingery, Mirzaee, Pruitt, & Hurley, 1990, p. 24).

Violence in Rural Schools

"Despite the perception that non-urban schools are free of violence, communities of all sizes, ethnic makeup, and socio-economic status have experienced violence in schools" (Friday, 1996, p. 24). Many rural public schools, particularly those near large cities, have even worse violence problems than the national average (Kingery, et. al., 1990). Alarmingly, work by Donnermeyer (1994) and Bachman (1992) shows that crime and violence is actually increasing faster in rural than in urban areas. However, "...because of the infrequency of published acts of violence in small schools, rural administrators, board members, and teachers are likely to feel safe (Bachus, 1994, p. 19). As a result, school leaders too often adopt a "wait-and-see" attitude.

Despite the lack of systematic documentation on rural school violence, some studies have been conducted which shed light on the issue. Petersen and a group of researchers (1998) studied violence in school districts of varying sizes, from 12 states, representing all geographic regions of the United States. When rural teachers and administrators ranked their greatest concerns, the results showed that

- Respondents were fearful of verbal and physical threats/attacks from students and from parents
- Nearly half of the respondents had experienced some form of violence at least once in the past two years
- Student to student violent behavior had increased the most (with the exception of organic problems such as crack babies, etc.) and rural schools were unique in their reporting of setting fires/arson

- Rural educators' reports were similar to those from urban and suburban schools when it came to verbal intimidation/threats, pushing and shoving by students, and punching and/or hitting
- Suburban educators reported the highest rates of sexual harassment and urban educators had the greatest amount of fear of getting involved in student disputes
- Of all the respondents, 79 percent saw the ethnic background of perpetrators as generally Caucasian, 81 percent indicated that the perpetrator was male, and the greatest percentage of incidents were perceived to occur at high schools
- Rates of violence in elementary schools and particularly at the middle school level were reported to be increasing.

A 1990 study of rural Texas communities by Kingery and others provides additional information regarding rural school violence. In the year prior to the study

- More than half of the boys and one-fifth of the girls had been in at least one physical fight involving weapons (20 percent of the boys and 6 percent of the girls had been in three or more such fights)
- One-fourth of the students said they had carried a weapon to school
- Almost 40 percent of the boys and 8 percent of the girls admitted carrying a knife to school at least once
- Fifteen percent of the boys reported carrying some other weapon
- Forty-two percent said they could get a handgun if they wanted to
- Students frequently reported engaging in behaviors that placed them at risk for becoming a victim of violence.

Where in the school does this undesired behavior actually occur?

- "Most teachers believe that violence occurs in hallways or under staircases, in the lunchroom or cafeteria, or in unattended classrooms" (Hoffman, 1996, p. 9)
- Students concur but add the gym and locker room as prime sites
- "Most acts of violence occur where adult supervision is minimal, or where there are large crowds of people moving to and fro" (Hoffman, 1996, p.9)
- "...violence is more likely to occur in schools where the quality of education is poor" (Hoffman, 1996, p. 9)
- Rural teachers and administrators reported little violence taking place primarily in the classrooms with small enrollments and where students were monitored by the teacher in charge of instruction (Petersen, et al, 1998). Violence most often occurred in hallways and restrooms, less often on buses, and at extracurricular/athletic events in rural schools
- In contrast, suburban and urban school personnel indicated that "the classroom was an area of high potential for violence" (p. 27).

The increase in interest over school and community violence has renewed the debate over school size. "Of the seven recent deadly school shootings in the US, five took place in schools with enrollments close to or over 1,000. They took place in large towns and rural towns, suburbs and cities. ...According to the research that's been done, smaller and less crowded schools would appear to be generally safer places" (Rural Policy Matters, June, 1999).

The advantages of small schools are gaining national attention. The Governor of North Carolina recently pressed for smaller schools as a means for improving school safety believing that small schools provide a forum for more positive attitudes about school, fewer behavior problems, and improved personal relations (Rural Policy Matters, September, 1999). Similarly, the Vermont Department of Education is proposing an increase in funding for small schools believing that the role of the school in rural communities is vital (Rural Policy Matters, April, 1999).

The public's concern about the condition of violence in rural schools and communities has been awakened, partially due to the more recent acts of violence in schools that are outside of large urban communities.

Consequently, the urge to undo mistakes and rectify what has gone awry is growing. The following section addresses perceived causes of violence and crime in rural areas and outlines what has been offered as solutions.

CAUSES OF RURAL VIOLENCE

One commonly held belief is that crime and violence in rural areas originates in nearby cities and is simply a migration. This attitude places blame on conditions and people elsewhere. Womble & D'Amico (1994) argue that rural areas must look to individual communities for the root causes of increased violence and then identify related solutions.

Donnermeyer (1994) examined FBI Uniform Crime Reports to identify causes for crime and violence in rural communities and identified six sets of factors that suggest causal relationships leading to the increase in rural crime rates.

1. Culture. Traditional rural areas, principally in the Southern and Western states and rural areas dominated by mining and timbering historically have higher rates of violence, which are associated with the use of violence as an accepted means of resolving conflict (Nibsett, 1993 as cited in Donnermeyer, 1994).

2. Poverty. Like many urban neighborhoods, rural areas with persistent poverty over several generations can exhibit higher crime rates, especially poverty-related incidents.

3. Urbanization. Rural areas having higher crime rates, especially poverty-related incidents, are generally (a) located near interstates or large cities and other urban developments, (b) suburbanized (large outer clustering of homes and businesses), (c) locations for second or seasonal homes or other tourist developments, and (d) locations for retired householders moving out of the city.

4. Rapid Change. Rural areas are increasingly subject to economic and population change that is very rapid and, regardless of whether the change represents an increase or decrease in population or an increase or decrease in jobs or per capita income, rapid change can weaken local community norms that reinforce lawful behavior.

5. Organized Crime. Some rural areas are the location for organized crime activities, which may include activities ranging from farm equipment or garden tractor theft to drug production. Drug trafficking gangs and their presence can increase crime--especially violent crime.

6. Urban Export. The movement of urban criminals to rural areas will increase crime, but this phenomenon is relatively rare, although it is a common explanation voiced by long-time members of rural communities. The vast majority of people arrested by rural law enforcement are residents of the area.

In addition to the six variables cited by the Uniform Crime Statistics, other factors merit attention. Rural poverty, social change, substance abuse, and the availability and ownership of guns add to the "deadly mix" that seems to promote violence in rural communities and their schools.

7. Substance Abuse. The availability and abuse of controlled substance in rural communities and schools has increased dramatically in the past ten years and appears to approach much the same level as that reported in urban areas.

- Seventy-one percent of rural students indicated availability of drugs at school (Bastina & Taylor, as cited in Donnermeyer, 1994)
- Use of marijuana and LSD were reported as being significantly higher for urban communities but use of smokeless tobacco was higher among rural youth, particularly in 8th and 12th grades (Donnermeyer, 1994)

- One in five rural males were found to abuse smokeless tobacco on a daily basis (Donnermeyer, 1994)
- Use and abuse of alcohol were also found to be similar for urban and rural students (Donnermeyer, 1994)
- Rural perpetrators are more likely to be drunk than perpetrators in urban areas (Monsey, Owen, Zierman, Lambert, & Hyman, 1995).

8. Guns. Nationally, the sale of weapons of deadly force has increased for several years and has reached all walks of life. These weapons exist in large numbers and are easy for school youth to obtain. For example, Kingery and others (1990) found that, in rural Texas, 40.8 percent of boys and 8.9 percent of girls had carried a weapon to schools. Some 40 percent of the boys admitted carrying a knife at least once and 19 percent reported carrying one daily. Slightly more than 6 percent of the boys said they carried a handgun to school and 1.6 percent admitted to carrying a gun on a daily basis. Forty-two percent of the students said they could get a handgun if they so desired.

9. Poverty. Levels of poverty found in rural areas significantly impact youth. A report undertaken for the Children's Defense Fund (Sherman, 1992) reported that rural children live in poorer families more frequently than do their urban counterparts and dropout rates are reported to be higher than in urban schools. An investigation by the U.S. Department of Education (1994) showed that, in 1988, while urban youth had the highest rates of risk factors, the number of rural eighth graders having two or more risk factors was significantly higher than eighth graders in suburban areas.

Prothrow-Stith and Quaday (1996) sum up the complexity of seeking for root causes of violence, whether rural or urban. The complex interaction between poverty; racism; drugs and alcohol; the loss of jobs and living wages; gangs, unrestricted and overabundant supplies of guns; lack of personal opportunity and responsibility; disinvestment in communities, schools and after-school activities; family violence and our national admiration of violence plays a critical role in sustaining our culture of violence. (p. 153). Given these conditions, public interest has been aroused and recommendations for restoring safety to schools and communities are becoming fairly numerous.

DISCUSSION

Probably the most obvious conclusion that can be drawn from the material presented is that incidents of violence and other crimes are increasing. Additionally, these incidents of violence are pervasive. Violence is in schools, on the streets, and in homes. Perhaps most disturbing is the observation that youth violence is one of the areas which is rising most rapidly. Finally, it seems obvious that influencing youth violence situations is going to require what is referred to as "systems thinking". Solutions cannot be located in any one place or deal with only one facet of life. Simultaneous actions on a variety of fronts will be necessary. In regard to school safety in general, Grady (1996) said, "We don't know which problem we are working to solve" (p. 33). The challenge is to determine the relevant problems, find their interrelatedness, identify the antecedents, and, finally, attempt interventions to resolve them. This effort would require the collaborative efforts of researchers, educators, parents, and communities of an unprecedented magnitude, but, when it comes to saving America's youth, do we dare to say, "It can't be done"?

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