Article

Black and Blue: The Impact of Nonfatal Teacher Victimization

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Abstract: *Because violence in public schools is seen by many as a growing problem, several studies have been conducted to look at the impact of nonfatal teacher victimization. However, a large number of these studies have focused exclusively on students as victims and failed to investigate the impact that school-related crime has on school personnel. The review of the literature indicated that (a) the lack of a definition for violence can be problematic, (b) school violence is either steady or declining, (c) urban areas are more profoundly affected than suburban or rural areas, (d) perceptions and acts of violence are two different constructs that both evoke strong reactions, and (e) efforts to determine students' potentiality for violence against faculty is in its early stages.*

Introduction

School crime and violence is not exclusively directed toward other students. Teachers and other staff members are also frequently the objects of verbal threats and physical assaults. Kaufman et al. (2001) found that between the years 1994 and 1998 there was an average of 83 reported incidences of violence per 1,000 teachers. Another researcher found that between 1996 and 2000, teachers reported being the victims of 1,603,000 nonfatal school crimes or about 321,000 crimes per year (Devoe et al., 2002); these incidences ranged from verbal and swearing to physical manifestations of aggression. Among the more serious offenses have been reports of rape, sexual assault, robbery, and aggravated assault.

Violence in public schools is not simply an American phenomenon; it is also an international one (Bon, Faircloth, & LeTendre, 2006). Although some current research data tends to indicate that there has been an overall decline in the number of student victims of school-related crimes occurring between 1995 and 2000, there are still heightened levels of concern by the general public regarding school violence (Devoe et al., 2003). Perhaps this desire to understand these phenomena of school violence has been driven, in part, by the intense media coverage and the dramatic nature of the crimes themselves. Prior to school attacks, such as those that occurred in Colorado, Florida, and Tennessee, schools in this country were historically viewed as relatively safe places for learning. Although the prevalence of such violent incidents as well as those reported to the police vary by the levels and sizes of the schools, typically the most frequently reported episodes have occurred in large overcrowded urban school districts that lacked strong leadership and in which there was a noticeable level of gang activity (Reddy et al., 2001). These incidences have generally involved male-on-male physical altercations and did not include the use of any types of weaponry (Reddy et al., 2001).

Trying to comprehend the impact of violence in an educational setting is often confusing due to operational constructs that are used by the researchers to define the behavior. For example, in one study, researchers found that the majority of the teachers responding to a questionnaire designed to solicit their definitions of teacher violence indicated that teachers had a preference for categories that included both verbal and physical threats (Bon, et al., 2006). These same respondents further extended this definition to include unsafe conditions when experienced either mentally or physically. However, Henry (2000) reported that by delimiting such a myopic view of physical violence that is based only on interpersonal relationships between either student and student or student and teacher, researchers were failing to comprehend the wider and more meaningful context in which all school violence can occur and should be examined. Flannery and Singer (1999) further advocated that violence should be viewed along a continuum because violence in primary grades may appear totally different than violence in secondary grades.

Failure of a precise definition can also have a variety of implications. For example, confusion over a definition is evident in a school principal's survey conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and entitled the *Principal/School Disciplinarian Survey on School Violence* (Heaviside, Rowand, & Farris, 1998). Because these researchers chose to define "serious crimes" for the purpose of their study as only those involving "murder, rape, or other types of sexual battery, suicide, physical attack, or fight with a weapon, or robbery," (Heaviside et al., 1998, p. iv) all other categories of physical assaults

conducted without a weapon were excluded from the findings. By using such a restrictive definition for defining violence, the results of certain serious criminal acts could not be included for reporting purposes. One example of this reporting limitation is that if an individual was the victim of a violent episode, regardless of the severity, and if the assault occurred only with the implementation of physical blows or kicks, these incidents would have been excluded from the study.

The purpose of this article is to examine the impact of nonfatal teacher victimization. Specifically, we will address the literature related to the reporting of school violence and how the perception of school safety affects personnel, with an emphasis on urban settings. Finally, current material is also reviewed to determine what, if any, universal threat assessments can be made in an attempt to provide early and appropriate interventions to violence directed at teachers.

Reporting School Violence

One key feature in attempting to understand the effects of school violence is to initially attempt to discover the extent of the problem. Prior to 1980, few comprehensive statistical sources of school data existed. Driven by a rise in crimes and particularly by youth homicides, research into school violence began to expand (Furlong & Morrison, 2000). Government data sources such as the *Annual Report on School Safety*, *Indicators of School Crime and Safety*, the *Digest of Education Statistics*, and the *Youth and Risk Behavior Survey* are a few of the recent additions to the U. S. Department of Justice's annual crime reporting instruments: the *National Crime Victim Survey* and the *Uniform Crime Reports*. Currently, however, most research findings on teacher and student victimization rates as well as overall rates for school crime uses the operational definition for violence as provided by the *National Crime Victim Survey* (Honawar, 2008). Although one key feature of this self-reporting survey is that serious violent crimes are categorized as those that may occur with or without the use of a weapon, an earlier problem noted in some research methodology—the commonly used self-reporting instruments as the only means of measuring school violence—may in itself be problematic (Furlong, Morrison, Austin, Huh-Kim, & Skager, 2001).

As discussed previously, operational definitions may be vague or unclear, and incidences of school violence may be unreported or underreported by administrative personnel who could possibly face disapproval from their supervisors and the community in which the schools exist (Heaviside et al., 1998). The only incentive for keeping rigorous data that is required by the federal government and whose sanctions can include the loss of federal funds is the accurate reporting of the number of students that are expelled for the possession of firearms (Kingery & Coggeshall, 2001). Other concerns that researchers have also linked to reporting irregularities included (a) a code of silence among students and staff members, (b) observed infractions that are not always transferred to written reports, (c) too few external audits, and (d) inadequate training for staff members that are often the product of written manuals and not the results of behaviorally rehearsed modules that can offer participant feedback. These are but a few of the plethora of problems cited by the researchers (Crosse, Burr, Canton, Hagen, & Hantman, 2001; Furlong et al., 2001; Heaviside et al., 1998; Kingery & Coggeshall, 2001).

Of equal importance are the concerns that have been raised by researchers about the use of self-reporting instruments' proclivity to provide only population-based rates of selected behaviors as they relate specifically to school safety (Yogan & Henry, 2000). Although population rate surveys are a prime source of quantifiable data and should be continued, as presently constructed, they often fail to adequately provide the researchers with much needed additional rich qualitative information such as under what conditions and context did the incidents occur? Researchers have long held the belief that by further studying the associated phenomena of school condition, context, and violence, they may be able to provide potential insight in trying to ascertain underlying causes for school violence. Yet regardless of the methodology to measure school violence, any level of reported school violence by society is considered unacceptable.

Perceptions of School Violence

But are schools really out of control and is violence at epidemic proportions? Even though one study found that teachers were three times more likely to be victims of violent crimes at school than are their students, the general level of violence reported against employees in this same study was relatively low (Kondrasuk, Greene, Waggoner, Edwards, & Nayak-Rhodes, 2005). Nonetheless many school employees felt that they were in imminent danger in public schools. One survey revealed that 27 % of teachers indicated that dealing with aggressive student behavior accounted for a significant portion of their instructional time (Crosse et al., 2001) while another study indicated that approximately 24 % of teachers consciously avoided one or more specific areas where they were employed out of concern for personal safety (Heaviside et al., 1998). The paradox of the statistically low level of nonfatal teacher victimization and teachers' fears of danger generally lies in the media portrayal of school safety issues.

People, including school personnel, judge the level of school violence as reported by mass media outlets. Closely connected with the source of information is a psychological construct that Tversky and Fox (1995) call "bounded subadditivity." Simply stated, "bounded subadditivity" is a cognitive process that causes the individual to believe that an increase in the probability that the likelihood of an event will occur in the future. It is impacted by the actual occurrence of past events that were once thought of as impossible. Inaccurate, misleading, incomplete, or salacious information tends to significantly affect decisions made.

When applied to the perception of school violence, the number and nature of school shootings has significantly altered our view of overall school safety. Perhaps adding to the public's growing fears of school violence was the shattering of long-held beliefs by recent school tragedies that school crimes were primarily the results of and generally occurred in criminally-ridden, poverty-affected, socially disorganized neighborhoods that seemed to engender inner-city schools with high rates of ethnic and racial minority students. Yogan and Henry (2000) argued that the suburban location of the shooting sprees such as those that occurred in Littleton, Colorado, and Springfield, Oregon, have significantly affected the public's overall view of school safety. Furthermore, the race of both the perpetrators and victims also served to dispel long-held stereotypes about characteristics of school violence. Table 1 provides an overview of

Table 1

Summary of 1990s School Violence Trends

Violence-Related Behaviors	Findings and Trends	Comment
School-associated violent deaths are declining (Stephens, 2000).	78.2 % decrease from 1992 – 1993 (55 deaths; first year data available) through 1999-2000 (12 deaths).	This includes suicide and all violence-related deaths on school campuses regardless of the day or time of act. Several of the acts involved adult-generated behaviors and adult victims (e.g., spouse shooting their teacher-wife on the school campus).
Physical fights on school property are declining (Brener, Simon, Krug, & Lowry, 1999; YRBS, 1995, 1996, 1998, 2000).	Physical fights on school property in past 12 months have declined by 12.3 % 1993: 16.2%; 1995: 15.5 % 1997: 14.8 %; 1999: 14.2 %	Rates by gender, racial/ethnic identification, and grade level have all been stable or decreasing. Hispanics reported an increase in physical fights (15.7% in 1999).
Possession of any weapon on school property is declining (Brener, Simon, Krug, & Lowry, 1999; YRBS, 1995, 1996, 1998, 2000).	Any weapon possession in past 30 days has declined by 41.5%. 1993: 11.8%; 1995: 9.8 % 1997: 8.5%; 1999: 6.9%	Rates by gender, racial/ethnic identification, and grade level have decreased. Weapon possession at school is down for Black and White males.
Weapons are carried more often in the community than on school property (Brener, Simon, Krug, & Lowry, 1999; YRBS, 1995, 1996, 1998, 2000).	Weapons are carried two times more often in the community than on school campus. Carried in Community 1997: 18.3%; 1999: 17.3% Carried at School 1997: 8.5%; 1999: 6.9%	Weapon possession in the community and at school has declined steadily since 1991. Youth are exposed to more violence-related behaviors and experiences in the community than at school.
Level of concern about school safety is low and stable (Brener, Simon, Krug, & Lowry, 1999; YRBS, 1995, 1996, 1998, 2000).	About 1 in 20 students report they stayed home in the previous 30 days because of safety concerns at school and/or going to/from school.	Concern about safety at school is not prevalent (Furlong, Morrison, Bates, & Chung, 1998) and it declines with age (Coggeshall & Kingery, 2001).
Males are more involved in school associated violence (Brener, Simon, Krug, & Lowry, 1999; YRBS, 1995, 1996, 1998, 2000).	Physical fight on school property in past 12 months: 18.5% males vs. 9.8 % females. Any weapon possession in past 30 days: 11.0 % males vs. 2.8% females.	School violence surveys have favored overt physical behaviors and have not attended to patterns of behavior and aggression that might be more common among females (e.g., relational aggression).
Violent behaviors vary by grade level (Brener, Simon, Krug, & Lowry, 1999; YRBS, 1995, 1996, 1998, 2000).	Physical fights on school property in past 12 months: 18.6% 9th grade; 17.2% 10th grade; 10.8% 11th grade; 8.1% 12th grade Any weapon possession in past 30 days: 7.2 % 9th grade; 6.6 % 10th grade; 7.0% 11th grade; 6.2% 12th grade	One hypothesis is that violence-related behaviors decline with age because of the students' increased maturity and because high-risk youths are more likely to drop out, be expelled, or enroll in an alternative school setting.

Note: From "Using Student Risk Factors in School Violence Surveillance Reports: Illustrative Examples for Enhanced Policy Formation, Implementation, and Evaluation" by M. Furlong, G. Morrison, G. Austin, J. Huh-Kim, & R. Skager, 2001, Law and Policy, 2, pp 274-275. Copyright Michael Furlong, University of California, Gervitz Graduate School of Education. Adapted with permission.

some of the research findings that tends to indicate a decade trend in the decline of overall school violence for the period of 1990-2000 (Furlong et al., 2001).

Effects of Violence on School Personnel

According to a National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) report (Devoe et al., 2003), most violent incidents with school personnel were related to some form of a physical altercation. Individuals who may have been the victims of such attacks may suffer from what Bloch (1976) described as the "battered teacher" syndrome. This disorder is characterized by a combination of symptoms that can include but are not limited to episodes of depression, heightened rates of blood pressure, insomnia, and headaches. In addition to the apparent physical trauma that is associated with being assaulted, many educational personnel are unable to adjust psychologically and ultimately choose to leave the teaching profession altogether (Elliot, Hamburg, & Williams, 1998). Even for those employees that had been previously victimized but decided to remain in their career choice, the experience can have profound professional affects. Some of the significant ramifications noted in teachers who have been victims of nonfatal violent attacks in school settings include increased absenteeism, decreased or strained interpersonal relationships with students, and an overall interruption of the quality of their teaching which has negatively impacted both the educational experience of the student and the entire educational process (Ting, Sanders, & Smith, 2002).

The cumulative effects of nonfatal teacher victimization have also been closely aligned to attitudes regarding workplace conditions and have resulted in high rates of teacher attrition (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003; Ingersol, 2001; Williams, Winfree, & Clinton, 1989). Although estimates as to the exact number of teachers who have left the profession vary, the resulting impact of the high turnover rates leaves little doubt (Colley, 2002; Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003). High rates of teacher turnover seriously limit an already overburdened educational system's ability to facilitate productive learning environments, are disruptive to building staff cohesiveness and unity, and negate the effectiveness of ongoing programming continuity. The loss of staff members also impacts the district's limited finances by causing many valuable and needed resources for existing programs and services to be diverted to new hires with associated costs such as recruitment efforts, substitutes, and additional professional development (Benner, 2000). Although there is strong evidence that teacher turnover rates are highest among new teachers (Plecki, Elfers, Loeb, Zahir, & Knapp, 2005) and that many novice teachers experience violence early in their respective careers (Kondrasuk et al., 2005), no studies linking the two could be found for this literature review.

Research has also revealed that another concern associated with working conditions and school violence is the major impact that it is having on staffing shortages, particularly in urban school settings. Nationally, teacher attrition rates have been reported to be as high as 50% in high poverty areas when compared to more affluent school areas (Allen, 2005). Compounding the problem is that school working conditions and student characteristics are often highly correlated, as a result, many teachers choose not to work with low-income, minority, and low-performing students due to the perceived working conditions that are associated with these students, generally found in large urban districts (Blazer, 2006). Similarly in Texas, researchers found that suburban probationary teachers who experienced problems on the job were more likely to transfer within the district while their urban counterparts were more likely to leave the teaching profession altogether (Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2001). Furthermore Horng (2005) found that clean and safe schools were of more importance to teachers than a student's ethnicity, socioeconomic status, performance, or an additional $8,000 in salary.

Threat Assessments

Although the knowledge of accurate threat assessment is in the early stages, several useful components have been developed (Morrison & Skiba, 2001; Reddy et al., 2001). First, violent episodes are rarely the result of a single spontaneous act. Usually, there are early warning signs that all school personnel must learn to accurately translate into a possible threat potential continuum. By developing a comprehensive threat assessment approach to school violence, some researchers have shown a decrease in the number of reported incidences of school-related violence (Cornell et al., 2004). On the other hand, some researchers argue that there are currently no empirically accurate sets of early warning signs or student profiles that have been shown to accurately predict a student's potential for a violent episode (Morrison & Skiba, 2001; Reddy et al., 2001). However, some previously conducted studies have shown that some commonalities in serious perpetrators of violence can be identified and have included prior victimization by bullies; alternating episodes of depression and anger; and strong familial, social and psychological factors (O'Toole, 2000; Vossekuil, Fien, Reddy, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2002). Yet, they also argue that because these traits are so common in varying degrees in a number of students, they should not be used to exclusively identify potentially violent students.

Next, even though a threat may be conveyed verbally, written, or symbolically, Rappaport (2004) has concluded that those attempting to conduct a threat assessment must do so while trying to determine if the student has the resources, intent, and motivation to carry out their intention. To aid in this process, Cornell (2006) uses the terms transitive and substantive to illustrate the process of delimiting the differences in both the likelihood and response to threats that have been made. He defines transitive threats as those that are normally the immediate expressive results of frustration or anger, or in some cases inappropriate attempts at humor, that seems to dissipate quickly and are generally spontaneous in nature. In contrast, substantive threats are viewed as being sustained long after the initial threat was made, and they have several distinguishable characteristics. They are either repeatedly conveyed to the intended victim(s) or communicated to a number of people and are usually very detailed in nature. They appear to be the end result of or in the process of detailed planning, and other individuals are routinely solicited to either become active participants or audience members. Also, there is generally some tangible physical evidence that exists of the perpetrators' intent to carry out their threats (Cornell, 2006; O'Toole, 2000).

In addition, some of the statistical literature suggests that profiles of previous criminal acts may indicate discernable patterns of nonviolent teacher victimization that may assist in future threat assessments by determining the potential for becoming a victim. Overall,

urban schools had a somewhat higher reported rate of student violence than at suburban schools, and it was three times higher than in rural schools (77%, 67%, and 28%, respectively; Devoe, et al., 2003). Specifically, urban teachers were more likely to be the victims of violent crimes than suburban teachers (28% vs. 13%) and than rural teachers (28% and 16%). Male teachers were more likely than female teachers to be the victims of violent crimes at a reported rate of 10:1, and black teachers were more likely to be the victims of crimes than white teachers. Although secondary school teachers were reported to be more likely than elementary teachers to be threatened with a form of physical assault, elementary teachers were reported to have more likely been the actual victims of physical assaults.

Finally, teachers in their daily roles and subsequent close proximity to students are an invaluable resource to early identification and intervention efforts of violence perpetrated by students (Gelfand, Jenson, & Drew, 1997). However the way teachers perceive, process, and react to any form of school violence could have significant implications for the overall school climate, perceptions of school safety concerns, and in some cases, actually induce an increase in the student's aggressive behaviors (Behre, Astor, & Meyer, 2001). For example, Beck and Clark (1997) found that any anxious situation generally induces an individual to have a propensity for processing information and behaviors in a more negative context. Coupled with McCabe's (1999) findings that those individuals who normally function at a higher state of anxiety than the general population have also been found to focus less on positive cues, some teachers attempting to accurately evaluate threat assessments could fail to appropriately distinguish between potentially violent situations and normal student reactions.

A most recent study that used a different methodology for extracting information about bullying from teachers' perspectives was that of Twemlow, Fonagy, Sacco, and Brethour, Jr. (2006). The authors asked 116 teachers from seven elementary schools to fill out an anonymous survey to report their own feelings about bullying experienced by them and how they perceived bullying among their colleagues. They found that teachers who were more likely to have experienced bullying when younger were more likely to bully students, and they also reported that students had bullied them. Moreover, those teachers were more likely to report knowing other teachers who bullied and were bullied by students.

In sum, assessing a student's threat of bullying teachers is difficult due to the complexity of the issue. Factors that affect assessment of nonfatal threats against teachers are complex because they can include: the lack of profile validity in assessing violent students, whether the student threat is of a short- or long-term nature, teachers' placement in a rural or urban setting, teachers' gender, teachers' perceptions about their own anxiety, and whether teachers have been bullied before.

Discussion

The purpose of this literature review was to examine the general impact of nonfatal teacher victimization and in particular its affect on urban educational settings. The results revealed that although victimization rates are reported through a variety of instruments, they all generally tend to indicate that the numbers of school-related crimes in all settings are either declining or at least remaining steady. Two associated problems, however, were discussed regarding current methodology: the use of a self-reporting instrument and the myriad of definitions that are used to operationally define school-related violence. Additionally, schools and school personnel must also weigh competing self-interests and stakeholders' considerations when determining how to most appropriately report incidences of violence that is perpetrated on their campuses.

Trying to get an accurate assessment of the exact level of violence in schools will continue to be problematic. The most accurate reporting method of any criminal activity is through some form of self-reported instruments, and it is only due to their anonymous nature that the most current and accurate, though not totally complete, indicators of violence can ever be obtained. Furthermore society, on a more profound level, wants to believe that schools which are inhabited by children are still relatively safe places. To associate them with rising levels of crimes and those resulting implications places enormous pressures on institutions and individuals to judiciously consider the implications before formally memorializing violence on a document.

The research has also supported that an individual's perception may play a significant role in the impact of violence on school personnel. Even though statistically violent episodes are continually declining, significant amounts of the reviewed literature found people both inside and outside the field of education who operated under the fallacious assumption that school crime was growing. Whether or not this was the direct result of media portrayals or personal biases, is still being reviewed. However, the perceived fear of being the victim of a violent crime has been empirically shown to not only affect the way in which school personnel perform their duties, but in fact impact where they choose to work and in some cases, significantly influence their decisions to completely change careers. Teachers' perceptions were also shown to significantly impact their judgments in determining appropriate responses to early intervention efforts for students' threats.

For urban schools, the impact and perception of violence on school personnel seems to only perpetuate a vicious cycle that deteriorates the standards of the school. As presented earlier, the research clearly shows a proclivity by teachers for a safe and clean environment that many associate with student characteristics that are not found in low-performing, minority, and low socioeconomic schools that are often indicative of the urban areas in which they exist (Blazer, 2006). School administrators in their attempt to increase student and staff safety, often implement more punitive measures such as metal detectors and increased security. This only further exacerbates the feeling of social isolation which eventually serves to undermine teacher confidence and increases anxiety which in turn drives teachers to more rural locations or out of the profession altogether (Devine, 1996).

School response to violence was also reviewed and the literature suggests that early and appropriate intervention is currently the most appropriate action. Teachers were continually found to be the key to any early intervention program primarily due to their relationship with most students, though specific and ongoing professional development would be a vital step in the process. Proactive and reactive contingencies must have been previously established and have been well rehearsed if student violence it to be minimized.

Limitations

One major limitation of this study was the nature and volume of material available for research. Though school violence has only begun to be seriously studied since the 1980s, there has been a vast proliferation of materials attempting to cover the topic. Understandably, the subject matter can evoke strong emotions resulting in some authors choosing to discuss the topic using little to no quantifiable data and presenting qualitative data that often has represented only personal opinions or extremely small survey samples.

Another limitation was the use of subject headings. Using a variety of search words and phrases, only a limited number of materials could be found by directly researching "nonfatal teacher victimization." After the search was expanded to included a Boolean search and including such terms as teacher violence, teacher burnout, teacher attrition, school-related violence, violence impact, and teacher assault did we begin to locate additional useful information. One interesting note was that in many cases salient information was included in related articles which had different headings that were only peripherally related to nonfatal teacher victimization.

This literature review would suggest that one future topic for research could include a more detailed study of the impact of nonfatal teacher victimization on urban schools and the immediate result on student performance on standardized tests. Although this group in particular has historically been a challenge to educate, future studies that focus exclusively on the impact of violence on student scores may begin to address reasons for significant achievement gaps.

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