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ABSTRACT

The focus of this paper is to provide insight into the real questions to be asked and answered regarding the "true" perpetrators of school violence. Specifically, it addresses the topic of recent occurrences of school violence perpetrated by youth, along with the effect of stereotypes on perceptions of potential youth offenders. It also addresses media-created stereotypes that have served to develop public understanding of the youthful violent offender, and the manners in which current media images have allowed school officials to overlook the true violent offenders in their midst. In addition, this paper offers a more accurate profile of the youthful violent offender as well as the familial and personal traits to be used in determining "at risk" children. Finally, the essential components of programs that have succeeded in correctly identifying and assisting potential violent youthful offenders are offered. It is hoped that this paper will enlighten those who interact with youth such that they may more carefully consider their target populations and devise more appropriate means of working with young people to end violence. (Contains 31 references.) (MKA)

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Running head: VIOLENCE AND THE MEDIA

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The "True" Perpetrators of Violence: The Effects of the Media on Public Perceptions of Youthful Violent Offenders.

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The "True" Perpetrators of Violence: The Effects of the
Media on School Officials' Perceptions of Violent
Offenders.

Increasingly, violence in our nation's schools is a topic of great concern. Recent incidents in places like Springfield, OR, Pearl, MS and Jonesboro, AK, inform us that a significant number of our youth consider aggressive, physical violence to be the appropriate means for solving their often powerful emotional problems. Indeed, "According to a National School Board Association survey of 700 schools, school violence is worse now than it was 5 years ago (p.332, Petersen, Pietrzak, & Speaker, 1998). .In response to these occurrences, counselors, psychologists, teachers, and other school administrators scramble to better understand the problem of school violence. Many believe it imperative that we determine both the true magnitude (or lack thereof) of the problem of school violence as well as the factors that contribute to the occurrences of violence. All too often, we as school officials are left with many questions regarding the contributing factors of these heinous crimes against our children, schools and communities. Further, due to the inconsistent nature with which our nation's schools compile statistics on the occurrences of violence, we are left to

speculate on the magnitude of the problem and the answers to the many probing questions that underlie the problem.

Numerous factors have been described as contributing to the rise in violence among our young people in the schools. In the minds of many, things such as, single parent homes, media images, video games, movies, and drug and alcohol abuse serve as the "spark" that light the flame of school violence (Pietrzak, Petersen, & Speaker, 1998). In addition, school officials have attempted to determine the environments and qualities of the violent youthful offender reeking havoc on our schools and communities. In doing so, officials have often touted research which suggests that the young person most likely to "act out" violently is one who; is male, is of low socioeconomic status, is a member of a minority group, has low self-esteem, and does not perform well in school (Chisholm, 1998; Pietrzak, Petersen, & Speaker, 1998). Given this profile of the violent youthful offender, it is no wonder that so many seemed unprepared for the tide of school violence that swept the country in the latter part of 1998. Indeed, "violence within suburban and rural schools has eroded the perception that its occurrence is an "inner city phenomenon" and that "good" schools are havens from serious crime" (p. 138 Chisholm, 1998).

It is the problem of racial stereotyping that I believe contributes so greatly to our misperceptions of who exactly is "lying in wait" to inflict violence upon our schools. Further, I believe that we as schools and communities have allowed these stereotypes to influence both what acts we consider to be violent and what children we label as "at risk" for violent behavior. It is important to note that by missing the signals given by the children who did inflict violence upon their schools in recent months, we missed our opportunities to protect our loved ones from the violence that later ensued.

I am certainly aware that it may seem odd to interject issues of stereotyping and multiculturalism into a discussion on school violence, yet I think it imperative to do so. For if we do not begin to address the contributing factors and symptomatology of violent youthful offenders, we will not ever be prepared to develop programs to curb the violence occurring in our schools.

Given the aforementioned ideas, the focus of this chapter is to provide insight into the real questions to be asked and answered regarding the "true" perpetrators of school violence. Specifically, this chapter will address the general topic of recent occurrences of school violence perpetrated by youth, along with the effect of stereotypes

on perceptions of potential youthful offenders. Further this chapter will address media created stereotypes that have served to develop our public understanding of the youthful violent offender and the manners in which current media images have allowed school officials to overlook the true violent offenders in their midst. In addition, this chapter will offer a more accurate profile of the youthful violent offender as well as the familial and personal traits to be employed in determining who our "at risk" children are. Finally, the essential components of programs that have succeeded in correctly identifying and assisting potential violent youthful offenders will be offered. It is hoped that this chapter will enlighten those who interact with youth such that they may more carefully consider their target populations and devise more appropriate means of working with young people to end violence.

RECENT INCIDENTS OF SCHOOL VIOLENCE PERPETRATED BY YOUTH

With the advent of multiculturalism and cultural diversity awareness, counselors and other school officials began to address how our differences might be incorporated into an ameliorated school and interpersonal environment. As laudable as efforts over the last 20 years have been

however, we continue to live in a society heavily driven by prejudice and stereotypes.

How prejudice and stereotypes affect our perceptions of violent youth offenders should be a topic of discussion when authorities consider means of addressing youth violence to curb and ultimately end it. Unfortunately, such attention to diversity is not always considered. In this section, we will reflect on the perceptions of youthful offenders that the media encourages and that we as school officials and mental health professionals adhere to with regard to determining which children are most likely to be a threat to public safety. It is hypothesized that media projections of lower income and minority youth as violent offenders often lead us as authority figures to target the wrong youth in violence prevention efforts. Recent incidents such as the school shootings in Pearl, MS and Springfield, OR attest to this fact and suggest that our efforts as school officials are indeed targeting the wrong populations. For example note the words of Governor John Kitzhaber of Oregon (where Kipland Kinkel killed 1 person and injured 23 others in school) who stated, "all of us should look at how we have failed as a society and how this could happen in the heart of Oregon."

In a school in Jonesboro, Arkansas, where Mitchell Johnson and Andrew Golden killed one teacher and four classmates, a teacher stated, "This is not supposed to happen at Westside" (Bragg, 1998, p. A20). Bragg, who prepared the article from which this excerpt was taken, comments that the "attack left experts grasping for explanations" (1998). Similarly, King and Murr describe the "shock value" of the three shootings in Jonesboro, Arkansas, Springfield, Oregon, and West Paducah, Kentucky. In their treatise on the rash of school shootings they quote psychologist Michael Flynn who asks the question, "Has it taken middle-class kids' shooting each other to realize something is wrong?" (King & Murr, 1998, p.33). In other articles describing the more widely publicized occurrences of school violence in 1998; Labi labels Jonesboro "a monstrous anomaly" (1998) and Lacoyo calls these "schoolboy massacres" a possible "aberration" (1998). These descriptions seem plausible only upon critical examination of society's belief that these acts of well planned senseless violence can only be attributed to "urban crime," "ghetto culture," and a societal vision of what the violent offender looks like (Blank, Vest, & Parker, 1998). Even with statistics that indicate that murder rates in general have dropped in cities and suburbs across the

country, (Witkin, 1998) and more relevantly for teen homicide in the same areas of the country (Blank, Vest, & Parker, 1998), many persist in the belief that the numerous occurrences of school violence in the past year are aberrations. The scenes caused by killers such as Michael Carneal (West Paducah, Kentucky), Mitchell Johnson (Jonesboro, Arkansas), Andrew Golden (Jonesboro, Arkansas), and Kip Kinkel (Springfield, Oregon), persist in the minds of many as not befitting society's explanations of violence. Indeed, these young White perpetrators of violence do not conform to a societal stereotype that describes who commits violent acts. Following, we will examine whom indeed we view as perpetrators of violence.

MEDIA IMAGES AND VIOLENT OFFENDERS

With regard to whom we as a public, and more specifically as school officials, see as the true perpetrators of violence, Hall writes that the violent offender is considered "most menacing," of an "imposing" figure, of skin "necessarily dark," and has a face that reveals a "look of angry lust" (1992). In stark contrast to this image, John Cloud characterizes Mitchell Johnson as "a sensitive, soft thirteen-year-old" and Kip Kinkel as small for his age (1998). Regarding Michael Carneal,

should be like" (Pedersen and Van Boven, 1997, p.30). This statement then begs the question, "then what persons do fit the mold of what an angry person should look like?"

The media created profile of the violent offender

In addressing the question of what physical traits the 'typical' angry person possesses, many stereotypes abound. June Chisholm eloquently delineates "the perception linking violence primarily with poverty, pervasive unemployment, the uneducated, and disenfranchised ethnic groups" (1998, p. 139). She comments on the specific "association between violent perpetrator and 'Black'" which continues to pervade our society's notions of who are violent offenders (1998). Further, writers such as Bridges & Steen (1998) report that "persons of color, despite having similar offense histories, are perceived differently than Whites, often as presenting images of threat and danger.(p. 555)" In addition, Duncan posits that, "one of the stereotypes most frequently applied to blacks is that they are impulsive and given to crimes and violence" (1976, p. 591).

Hall also writes of the societal stereotype of the African-American male as "a...beast with a penchant for violence aimed at the European-American community" (1992, p.77). In one example, he discusses the fabrications of White Boston businessman, Chuck Stuart, who claimed that he

various writers describe him as a "smallish ninth-grader" (Bragg, 1998); "skinny and bespectacled" (Pedersen and Van Boven, 1997); and "timid-looking" (Prichard, 1998). King and Murr (1998) begin their coverage of Kip Kinkel with a description characterizing him with a, "15-year-old.. innocent look that is part Huck Finn and part Alfred E. Neuman – boyish and quintessentially American" (1998, p.32). As a final example, note that Blank, Vest, & Parker comment on Andrew Golden stating that, "he looks less like a bully than like a bully's victim" (1998, p.20). It is interesting the ways in which the media sends subliminal messages to the public, and de facto to school officials, in their use of such language. Indeed, even in the midst of powerful evidence that these children are cold-blooded killers, most are still characterized as All-American boys who went astray. It is almost as if the media would like the public to believe that these children are not the people to fear, rather it is the people of lower socioeconomic status and from minority groups who pose the greatest threat to public safety. The general message conveyed by the media (and absorbed by the public) is summarized in the words of Principal Bill Bond of Heath High in Paducah: these young White middle-class killers do "not fit the mold of what our society says an angry person

and his pregnant wife were robbed and shot by an African American male. Willie Bennett, a poor African American male, was 'caught' and charged despite the fact that a member of the accuser's family emerged to detail a plot of deception and murder that Chuck had invented. The investigation ended when Chuck committed suicide. Hall concludes that the majority group of society needs to somehow rationalize or justify historical and present treatment of minorities; there is a need to stereotype minorities as representing something to be feared. The historical denigration by the dominant culture is validated by a "web of pernicious myths about the..African American" (Greene, 1994, p. 12).

When questioning how these stereotypes are formed, we need look no further than the media to understand how it is that we as a public come to such biased conclusions regarding what violent offenders look like. Specifically, it is often the television and print media that provide us with vivid images of violent offenders and their crimes. For often it is the, "...television news [that] makes an indelible impression because of its visual impact and its tendency...to shape and stabilize the meanings experienced from the symbols of language, (Tait and Perry, 1994, pp.195-196). In particular, the stereotypes that are

associated with people of color, especially African Americans, are quite pervasive. One need only view popular television programs such as "COPS" or even the evening news to determine that, "television [often] presents African Americans to the viewing public as deviant, threatening, and unintelligent subhumans (1994; p. 195). In studies conducted by Robert Entman (1990, 1992), he determined that, "76% of all local TV stories about Blacks fell into the categories of crime or politics, (1990, p. 332). In his analysis of one week of local Chicago newscast stories, "the key categories were crimes of violence explicitly reported as committed by blacks" (1990). For the week studied, six of eight lead stories were of violent crimes committed by African American. Furthermore, Entman observed that the accused African American criminals were "usually illustrated by glowering mug shots or by footage of them being led around in handcuffs" while none of the accused violent White criminals were shown in "mug shots or in physical custody". He also cited evidence to support the idea that while Whites' perspective on certain events dominated the broadcasts; the voices of African Americans did not directly narrate incidents. Overall, Entman concluded that, given the manners in which both Black and White offenders were portrayed, "...there were differences in

the visual treatment that may tend to reinforce whites' fears. (1992, pp. 349-350)". Generally speaking, there exists strong evidence to support the notion that African Americans are often associated with violent crime in America. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that many in our general public, and by extension in our schools, believe that the acts of children like Andrew Golden and Kip Kinkel constitute "out of the ordinary" behavior.

THE EFFECTS OF STERETYPES ON INTERVENTIONS WITH VIOLENT OFFENDERS

So how are these media created and reinforced stereotypes acted upon in school officials interactions with violent offenders? The following examples offer some plausible explanations.

When young violent offenders are caught in the act, how are they typically dealt with? Whaley cites more evidence that "the stereotype of black people as violent is still quite pervasive" (1998) and concludes that African Americans are dealt with in much more severe manners than their White peers. He refers to a study that found that violent Black adolescents were predominantly sent to local correctional facility vs. violent White adolescents who were sent to mental health hospitals (1998). This study

offers compelling evidence for the notion that young white violent offenders are behaving in aberrant manners, therefore requiring psychological assistance. Conversely, young African American violent offenders are viewed as behaving in manners 'typical' of their group, hence the need to "lock them away" to protect the public. Similarly, in an analysis of 453 violent incidents in a Connecticut state psychiatric hospital for adolescents, the number of violent acts committed by non-White patients equaled the number of violent acts committed by White patients yet staff restrained non-White patients almost four times as often as they restrained White patients (Bond, DiCandia, & MacKinnon, 1988). In seeking to explain why such was the case, hospital staff espoused the belief that African Americans are generally more aggressive, "meaner and less friendly than Whites" (1988). In Duncan's previously mentioned study, White subjects viewed and judged a videotape of an ambiguous shove by African Americans as more violent than the same act as performed by Whites (1976).

These examples point to the idea that African American and other non-white violent offenders are often considered to be more dangerous than their white counterparts thereby requiring more drastic measures of intervention.

By the same token, it is quite possible that because African American and other non-white offenders are viewed so differently by the public, those behaviors typically associated with each group might be often viewed differently. Take for example, the violent act of "bullying." In a review of the literature on school bullying conducted by Batsche and Knoff in 1994, they assert that approximately 15% – 20% of American school children suffer from being bullied by peers. Unfortunately, since the generally accepted definition of violence in our nations' schools is "...acts of assault, theft, and vandalism," (Batsche & Knoff, 1994), we overlook those children engaged in the act of bullying their peers. It has been asserted that there is a sort of acceptance of childhood fighting and bullying and that such is often a necessary evil in childhood development (Batsche et al, 1994). The problem with this passive attitude toward bullying is that the potential exists to send a positive reinforcement message to the children engaging in bullying. Indeed, in research conducted with school officials in school districts from inner city, urban, rural, and suburban settings it was found that, "...perceptions of campus violence were not associated with the presence of bullying and to a lesser extent harassment, forms of school

violence that receive intense attention in other countries (Furlong, Babinski, Poland, Munoz, & Boles, 1996, p. 34). What is particularly interesting about the findings of this study is that of the 123 school psychologists who responded to the survey, 45.6% of those from inner city schools reported having very big problems with school violence and 5% and less of those from suburban and rural settings reported having a very big problem with violence in the schools. The significance of this finding is that there were no reported significant differences in the amount of bullying occurring in all of the school districts surveyed. In another study of 291 school officials, 63% that they themselves had been verbally threatened or intimidated by students and that they perceived 37% and 38% of White and African American students respectively as the perpetrators of violence in their schools. The findings of these and similar studies might lead one to believe that we are quite selective in what we believe constitutes violent behavior. Further, when these types of findings are coupled with our notions of what racial and ethnic groups of children commit which acts, it is almost a foregone conclusion that we are dealing with our children in very different manners. Indeed, it is quite likely that because we as a society perceive certain violent acts to be more heinous than

others, we send a mixed message to children which indicates that as long as they possess the right physical traits and perform the right violent acts, we will overlook their behavior. This disregard for what is generally considered non-threatening violent behavior can only serve to reinforce the behavior, thereby allowing children to progress to more severe types of violent acts. As an example, note the numerous descriptions of Mitchell Johnson (implicated in the Jonesboro shootings) as a "swaggering bully." Is it possible that had Mitchell been reprimanded earlier in his life for bullying that he might not have escalated his behavior to include the horrible act of murder?

The aforementioned examples offer some ideas regarding how we as a society and as school officials differentiate our treatment of youthful violent offenders. It is quite possible that based on the physical characteristics of and the particular crime enacted by a juvenile violent offender, we employ vastly different means of reprimand.

A more accurate profile of the youthful violent offender

Lowry, Sleet, Duncan, Powell, and Kolbe (1995) noted that, "without a comprehensive and standardized school violence reporting system, it is impossible to identify

trends in school related homicide"... (pp.23-24). These researchers also noted that most children between the ages of 12 and 19 who were victims of crime were victimized by people of their own race and that 78% of the school districts responding to the survey of the National School Boards Association cited occurrences of student assaults on other students. Other studies have reported similar results with regard to the wide variety of students who engage in violent activity. In a large 1996 study, drawn from 4500 students in California and Oregon, 58% of urban and 52% of non urban area adolescents had engaged in some form of violent behavior (Ellickson, Saner, & McGuigan, 1997). It therefore stands to reason, given the aforementioned statistics, (i.e. school districts nationwide report incidents of student violent crimes against other students and people are usually assaulted by people of their own race) that there exists no physically racial prototype of the violent offender and that any child with certain influences is capable of violence.

Given that we now have some idea regarding how we formulate stereotypes of violent youthful offenders, it is imperative that we turn our focus away from physical characteristics and direct our energy toward understanding the real traits of a youthful violent offender. The

question we might ask is "which young people should be labeled as "at-risk?"

June Chisholm asserts that there are significant family characteristics that offer insight into who will become a violent offender. Specifically, she states that, "much research on family violence has determined a direct relationship between severity of childhood abuse and later victimization of others (1998, p. 142). Other research has concluded that violent youth are more likely than their peers to have experienced concurrent public health concerns including substance use and abuse, poorly developed self concept and/or esteem and poor academic motivation/involvement (Cornell, 1990; Ellickson, Saner, & McGuigan, 1997). It is quite possible, therefore, to correctly surmise that school officials pay attention to their students' family interactions, peers and communities when determining who is at risk. That of course is not to say that certain racial/ethnic or socioeconomic communities are at risk, it is rather to say that children, families and communities demonstrating poor patterns of behavior are more likely to have children who are risk. It is clear that we as a country and as individual communities are aware of many of the patterns that contribute to youth violent behavior, what is unclear is how we seem to be

unable to look beyond stereotypes to address the true problems and concerns.

Essential components of successful programs

The body of this chapter focused on the manners in which we as a nation and school officials have incorrectly surmised who our violence prone young people are. In this section of the chapter, we move toward identifying and recognizing those elements of programs that have been successful in labeling and assisting the violent youthful offender. By delineating these elements, it is hoped that we can provide concrete strategies to assist us in identifying and assisting our violence prone young people.

At various points in this article, we have attempted to convey a clearer picture of what components contribute to youth acting out in violent manners. In doing so, the following elements were listed as factors to be addressed when determining who is at risk for violence. The elements include family interaction patterns, human development issues, cultural issues, media images and stereotypes. With those factors in mind, we will now complete an overview of the elements essential to a successful school violence prevention program. Keep in mind that the programs identified as successful in curbing school violence address

the various characteristics of violence prone youth (as well as the misconceptions) that we as school officials harbor about certain young people.

In June of 1998, the "Safe Schools, Safe Students" study was released. This study surveyed 84 national programs developed to stem the tide of school violence. The following elements were listed as essential pieces of successful programs: activities that assist in the establishment of school norms against violence aggression and bullying; family; peer; and community training and involvement with the school; physical plant changes in the school that foster a positive environment; interactive teaching; and culturally sensitive material (Portner, 1998). Further reviews of other violence prevention programs appear to make similar claims regarding which elements are essential to truly preventing violence from occurring. In a 1994 review of violence prevention programs, Larson emphasizes the importance of cultural sensitivity by stating, "clearly, school based programs for the prevention of violent behavior must be sensitive to the unique causative and maintenance features in the population to be served" (pp.160-161). Further, he asserts that sound prevention training programs will focus on skill development and family involvement/training with the at

risk child. Other research on violence prevention in the schools suggests all of the aforementioned ideas and adds that school planning, which includes establishing a positive school climate and fostering relationships between schools and communities, is an essential component to violence prevention (Poland, 1994; Stephens, 1994).

Overall, it appears that the best programs in the country have the same general foci. It is imperative that school officials and other concerned individuals learn to adapt the recommended strategies to fit their individual environments. Just as we assert that there is no one profile to fit the potential youthful violent offender, there exists no one program to meet the needs of all schools in the country.

Conclusions

I have attempted to offer a different perspective on how we identify potential youthful violent offenders. Unfortunately, because we live in a society rife with stereotypes, we too often make assumptions about those young people prone to violent acts. Because many of our predictions regarding who is at risk are based on racial stereotypes, we are often at a loss to explain the motivations behind the supposed random acts of violence that strike our affluent and non-minority communities.

When presented with the facts of the various perpetrators' behavior prior to their acting out, it is clear that many warning signs existed. However, until we can understand and acknowledge that any child, regardless of racial origin or socioeconomic status, is capable of violence, we will continue to live with the delusion that it can only happen to "those people" and we will continue to wonder, as did the people of Jonesboro, Paducah, and Pearl, "how could this happen here?"

It behooves us as school officials to consider the available research that will assist us in determining the traits of the potential violent offender and the best practices for dealing with such children before they are able to strike out. If we are willing to acknowledge and address our biases, we can pave the way for more accurate assessment, prevention and intervention.

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