

School District Officials' and City Stakeholders' Perceptions Regarding  
School Violence and Ways to Prevent School Violence

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### **Abstract**

Violence is a problem that affects the family structure, schools, and communities. Although some violence takes place behind closed doors, the effects are devastating to society and the community. The overwhelming results are seen with the increase of visits to abuse shelters and emergency rooms. Domestic violence in households tends to continue over long periods of time with the occurrences increasing in duration and severity. The theoretical framework for this study drew from Bronfenbrenner's ecological. This case study investigated the perceptions of school district officials: the chief of school safety; the gang awareness/intervention coordinator; hearing officers; middle and high school police officers; and elementary, middle, and high school administrators. This study also investigated the perceptions of city stakeholders: the local police director, police officers, a member of the crime commission, a program manager for the Detention Services Bureau for Juvenile Court, a community gang activist, and the city mayor about the causes of acts of violence happening in this city and their plans to provide citizens with a safer environment. Open-ended interview questions were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Inductive analysis was used to discover themes. Key findings of the larger study included causes of violence in schools, what can be done to address violence in schools, programs in place to help curb the violence in schools, causes of violence in communities, programs in place to help curb violence in the communities, violence in homes, and programs in place to help curb violence in homes. For the purposes of this paper, causes of violence in schools and what can be done to address violence in schools will be discussed.

## **Introduction**

Over the past 20 years, researchers have increasingly begun to examine youth's experiences with violence in their communities, families, and intimate partner relationships (Kennedy, 2008). Violence, including its occurrence among youth, results in considerable physical, emotional, social, and economic consequences in the United States (Vivolo, Matjasko, & Massetti, 2011, p. 141). The World Health Organization (2002) defined violence as: "The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community that results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, mal-development or deprivation" (p. 5). Researchers believe violence to be one of the most important factors to generate negative outcomes in schools, communities, and homes. According to Cubukcu and Donmez (2012), violence is not only the intentional physical behaviors against another person but also unintentional verbal psychological pressure (p. 38). The trend of violence is on the rise and is creating an unsafe environment for schools, homes, and communities. Violent acts occur everywhere, including in public streets, jails, schools, the workplace, and homes. Direct exposure to violence can occur within the community, school, peer groups, and family (Basch, 2011). Overall, African American youths living in urban contexts appear to be disproportionately likely to experience cumulative violence in their communities, families, and intimate partner relationships (Kennedy, 2008). Violence is one of the foremost challenges in today's society.

## **Problem Statement**

Violence is a problem that affects the family structure, schools, and communities. Although some of it takes place behind closed doors, the effects are devastating to society and the community. The overwhelming results are seen with the increase of visits to abuse shelters

and emergency rooms. Domestic violence in households tends to continue over long periods of time with the occurrences increasing in duration and severity (Schofield & Walker, 2008). In households where the female is the primary caregiver, the effects on the family's lives, particularly the children, are even more serious. According to Hibel, Granger, and Blair (2009), 1 in 10 children in the United States is exposed to domestic violence, and the majority are under 6 years old. Children living in homes and neighborhoods where violence occurs are at risk of displaying the same type behavior or developing psychological problems.

Bradshaw, Rodgers, Ghandour, and Garbarino (2009) found a relationship between exposure to community violence and aggressive behavior in the classroom. As an educator, I have witnessed the effect community violence has on behavior at school and in the classroom. In 2008, a student argued with and shot another student in gym class. Reportedly, the fight stemmed from an argument in the community. Violence in school surfaces in the form of a threatening environment, physical harm, and emotional pressure (Cubukcu & Donmez, 2012). During the 2012-2013 school year, a third grade student cut his classmate with a razor blade brought from home; a second grade student brought a pair of surgical scissors to school and cut his classmate in the head, requiring stitches; a private middle school student shot and killed his principal because he said he did not like her. A 16 year old was recently gunned down outside a local community center. Witnesses to the crime will not testify because they fear gang retaliation. These are just some examples of the school and community violence plaguing the city.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the larger study was to investigate experienced city stakeholders' perspectives about the causes of violence in homes, communities, and schools. For the purpose

of this paper, causes of violence in schools and what can be done to address violence in schools will be discussed.

## **Review of Literature**

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this study drew from Bronfenbrenner's (1994) ecological paradigm that nests individual human experiences within a larger context and considers behaviors largely as responses to other contextual elements (Derksen, 2010). Bronfenbrenner posited a child's development is influenced by positive or negative social and physical environments. Bronfenbrenner's ecological approach to human development is very useful in trying to understand how cumulative violence exposure across different domains affect youths, as it emphasizes the ongoing interaction of a developing child within multiple, nested contexts (Kennedy, 2008). Bronfenbrenner (as cited in Wong, 2001) once remarked that the idea of his nested and interconnected ecological system originated from the traditional Russian doll, which is characterized by the embedding of a series of smaller dolls inside larger ones. His ecological theory involves a series of layers or concentric circles. These layers include a microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. The microsystem is the immediate environment, for example family and school. The mesosystem is the relationship between microsystems such as the relationship between family and school, and family and peers. The exosystem includes the larger social system where the child takes on an inactive role but is nonetheless affected by a structure in the microsystem. The macrosystem includes the cultural or subcultural context, ethnic identity, and socioeconomic status; the chronosystem encompasses change over time in relation to the child's environment. Bronfenbrenner's theory is an explanation of how internal and external factors influence violence. According to this model,

interactive powers such as family and community affect a child's physical, cognitive, and emotional growth. From an ecological perspective, experiences in one domain, such as the family microsystem, will by definition affect functioning within other domains, such as the community system and intimate partner relationships (Kennedy, 2008).

According to Wong (2001), Bronfenbrenner developed an updated bio-ecological model that encompasses the four key elements of process, person, context, and time. Proximal process and life course perspective (time and timing) emerge as two core concepts in this new model. As a key to human development throughout the life course, proximal processes refer to enduring forms of reciprocal interactions in the immediate environment, which are progressively more complex (Wong, 2001).

### **Violence in History**

For centuries, philosophers, religious leaders, and poets have struggled to understand man's inhumanity to man even though throughout the world religious texts endorse nonviolence (Malley-Morrison, Oh, Wu, & Zaveri, 2009). Researchers have identified many cases of violence between the early humans known as *Homo sapiens*. According to Liddle, Shackelford, and Shackelford (2012), even though people still do not know much about the evolutionary history of humans, archaeological evidence suggests violence between early humans is undeniable. Tools such as stone axes and wooden spears, which were necessary for inflicting severe violence, have been uncovered. Late Paleolithic paintings found in France, Spain, and Italy portraying humans being killed with arrows and spears further substantiate arguments that violent behavior existed throughout evolutionary history (Smith, 2007).

## **Moral Thinking**

The American Psychological Association (APA) (2013) defined violence as an extreme form of aggression, such as assault, rape, or murder. Social and behavioral scientists are seeking to determine empirically why so many humans are capable of treating other humans so appallingly (Malley-Morrison et al., 2009). Most of the knowledge in moral development literature depends largely on theories developed by Piaget, Kohlberg, and later theorists (Cam, Seydoogullari, Cavdar, & Cok, 2010). The Piagetian theory of cognitive developmental patterns is known as cognitive constructivism. It shows how individuals, from children to adults, become endowed with a whole range of capacities to reason, including the capacity to make moral choices (Griffin, 2011). Piaget also believed the social environment influenced a child's development. Kohlberg's (1984) concept of moral development focused on psychoanalytic, cognitive, and learning developmental theories. He believed that moral reasoning was linked to moral behavior. Kohlberg's measure of children's moral reasoning was assessed by presenting stories or scenarios in which the characters faced moral dilemmas. Walsh (2000) indicated that Kohlberg interviewed 72 white boys in Chicago, telling a story about a poor man whose dying wife needed money for a cancer drug. When the druggist would not give the drug to the man, he broke into the store and stole the drug. At the conclusion of the story, Kohlberg questioned the boys about the characters' action to determine their level of moral reasoning.

## **School Violence**

School crime is a major issue for policy makers, educators, students, parents, and concerned citizens (Chen, 2008). Violence in U.S. schools is hindering the educational, psychological, and social development of students (Johnson, Burke, & Gielen, 2011). Theriot (2008) remarked, "everyday violence, such as physical assaults and fighting, threats and

intimidation, sexual harassment, or bullying, is clearly less explicit than lethal school violence, yet the immediate and long-term consequences can be similarly devastating for those students who experience it, who perpetrate it, or who are exposed to it” (p. 223). School violence includes such acts as bringing weapons to school, bullying, fights, threats, and inappropriate language usage. It affects not only the people directly involved, but everyone who is exposed. Educators recognize that disruptive behavior by some students severely hampers effective teaching and learning for all students (Basch, 2011). Urban schools report a heightened need for metal detectors, surveillance cameras, and police presence (Chen, 2008). Schools that have adopted zero tolerance are seeing an increase in their suspensions and expulsions. High schools are more likely to report larger numbers of serious offenses than elementary schools (Chen, 2008).

The National Center for Education Statistics’ Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2011 reported:

Students who reported being in a physical fight anywhere was 31%, students reporting being in a physical fight on school property was 11% with the number of occurrences being between one to twelve or more times. In 2010 data showed that more victimization was committed against students ages 12-18 at school than away from school. Students aged 12-18 experienced about 828,400 nonfatal victimizations at school compared to about 652,500 nonfatal victimizations away from school. During the 2008-2009 school year there were 1,344 suicides of youth ages 5-18; from July 2009 to June 2010 there were 17 homicides and one suicide of school-aged youth at school, and during the 2009-2010 school year there was approximately one homicide or suicide of a school-age youth at school per 2.7 million students enrolled. During 2007-2008 teachers’ reports of being threatened or physically attacked by students varied according to the instructional level.

A greater percentage of secondary school teachers (8%) than elementary school teachers (7%) reported being threatened with injury by a student. (pp. 6-23)

As Bronfenbrenner's (as cited in Hong & Eamon, 2012) ecological systems model suggests, socio-demographic characteristics of the youth (age, race/ethnicity, and gender) and family (marital status, parental education, and financial resources) can affect interactions in immediate settings such as the home and school, and influence the quality of more distant environments such as the neighborhood. Hong and Eamon (2012) added students' perceptions of a safe school environment are altered by certain interactions and environments (p. 429).

Bradshaw et al. (2009) found that students' exposure to violence in the community leads to maladaptive social and behavioral outcomes. The students display this aggressive behavior at school and become problematic for everyone concerned. From an ecological perspective, school violence is a characteristic of a microsystem and represents a risk to physical and emotional development (Damean, 2012). Students who are victimized are more likely to report feelings of isolation, depression, frustration, and poorer school attachment (Johnson et al., 2011). Once the domain of criminal justice, aggression and violence are now recognized as an appropriate and important focus of the education and public health systems (Basch, 2011).

One particularly prevalent and troubling type of violence, adolescent dating violence, continues to be largely ignored as a form of school violence (Theriot, 2008). According to an extensive study, which included over 3,000 adolescents between the ages of 12 to 17 years, the prevalence of dating violence is 1.6% in total, 2.7% for females, and 0.6% for males (Wolitzky-Taylor, 2008). The study assessed the lifetime prevalence of sexual assault, physical assault, and drug- or alcohol-facilitated rape in the teenagers' lives. When this percentage is generalized to the U.S. population, it puts 400,000 youths in potential danger for dating violence (Wolitzky-

Taylor, 2008). Dating violence is one risk of an important developmental task that begins in adolescence: establishing and maintaining romantic relationships (Hamby et al., 2012).

Teen dating violence is a significant public health problem that can cause immediate harm and put youth at risk for long-term adverse consequences such as poorer educational outcomes (Banyard & Cross, 2008). Some children are raised in households where violence and aggressive behavior are normal. These same children become adolescents and begin dating, then they engage in aggressive behaviors, which can range from psychological abuse to physical altercations (Henry & Zeytinoglu, 2012). Adolescents exposed to violence in a dating relationship experience a range of negative mental health outcomes (Craig, L. M., Sikes, A., Healey, A., & Hays, D. (2009).). Dating violence can happen to teens at any age, no matter what gender, race, ethnic background, or religion. Dating violence can also occur in same-sex relationships (Stader, 2011). According to Rosenfield et al. (2012), the prevalence of physical and sexual violence in teen romantic relationships is surprisingly high. Rosenfield et al. (2012) demonstrated that common stressors, such as being teased and arguing with friends, are strongly associated with the perpetration of physical and sexual violence among a sample of youth that had come to the attention of the courts because of repeated truancy. This type physical violence is demonstrated by both male and female teens. Theriot (2008) agreed that though physical dating violence in adult couples is typically unidirectional with a male aggressor and a female victim, this is not necessarily true of violent adolescent relationships; instead, violence in these relationships is often mutual.

According to Bandura (1977), an explanation for mutual dating violence in adolescence is social learning theory. In his theory of social learning, Bandura (as cited in Henry & Zeytinoglu, 2012) stated that people not only learn from the consequences of their actions, but

they also learn from watching other people's behavior and use these behaviors as a model when needed. Bandura's (1973) theory proposed that violent behavior is actively learned through social observation, interaction, and modeling. Craigen et al. (2009) added, "Adolescents may be witnessing unhealthy and often violent dating relationships; this could create a cycle in which maladaptive relationship patterns are continually repeated" (p. 9). Hamby and Turner (2012) stated, "The violence perpetrated by both males and females warrants concern and should be a focus of prevention and intervention" (p. 10). Several studies document that psychological abuse is a regular experience in adolescent dating relationships and is probably the most common form of dating violence that exists on middle and high school campuses (Theriot, 2008).

At least two states, Texas and Georgia, require school districts to educate students on the issue of dating violence. Georgia law requires the State Board of Education to develop rape prevention and personal safety education programs for preventing teen dating violence for Grades 8 to 12. Texas state law requires each school district to adopt and implement a dating violence policy to be included in the district improvement plan (Stader, 2011). Stader (2011) emphasized being a frequent victim of dating violence is traumatic and has a negative effect on a person's mental and physical health, which can lead to ideas of suicide (p. 142).

### **Bullying**

Student bullying is on the rise, and disruption of classroom activities has a larger impact on all students beyond the unruly (Chen, 2008). Neiman et al. (2012) wrote, "school bullying has seen a recent increase in public and scholarly attention with reoccurring discussions of the topic in the media and academic literature stemming from isolated cases of student suicides" (p. 609). Murray et al. (2012) defined bullying as "aggressive behavior that intends to cause harm or

distress” (p. 56). Bullying can be a direct or indirect act. The direct acts of bullying involve physical contact, while the indirect acts include gestures, threats, exclusion, teasing, racial slurs, and spreading rumors. Basch (2011) suggested verbal aggression is an insidious and harmful aspect of violence. According to Murray et al. (2012), often bullying is the modeled behavior of a parent or other family member. Similarly, Murray et al. (2012) argued that when families fail to display warmth and caring, the children imitate those actions (p. 57).

School districts face lawsuits for failing to adequately protect students from bullying and harassment (Goodemann et al., 2012). On January 14, 2010, a 15 year old Irish student took her life rather than continue to be subjected to ridicules and taunts by some of her classmates. According to Goodemann et al. (2012), her school was aware of the bullying and did not effectively intervene. Nine students were charged with violations of civil rights, criminal harassment, and statutory rape (Neiman et al., 2012). As a result of her death, the state of Massachusetts established anti-bullying laws.

There are long- and short-term physical and psychological consequences of bullying. Research shows bullying and being bullied lead to physically violent behavior, gang-related activities, psychological difficulties, and social problems (Neiman et al., 2012). Craig, Bell, and Leschied (2011) indicated victims of bullying experience a lack of control and fear the power of the perpetrator’s actions, while bullies take advantage of this power in the control of others. The School Crime Supplement (SCS), a supplement to the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), collected data from students aged 12-18 in 2007 and found that almost 32% of the school students reported being bullied at school that year.

Another type of bullying gaining national prominence is cyberbullying. Brown and Demaray (2009) defined cyberbullying as “an individual picking on another person through e-

mail or text messages or when someone posts an unwelcome comment about another person online” (p. 19). This type of bullying is also known as electronic bullying or online social cruelty (Murray et al., 2012). Cyberbullying has become one of the largest threats school-aged children in the United States face on a daily basis (Siegle, 2010). Through hurtful posts on instant messaging, an individual can bully others and severely impact their mental and emotional health (Brubaker, 2012). The annual publication, *Indicators of School Crime and Safety* (2010) provides data comparing bullying at school and cyberbullying. A 2007 report showed 4% of the students aged 12 through 18 were cyberbullied throughout the school year. Cyberbullying involves harassment, unwanted contact, and harmful information being posted on social media. The Internet, YouTube, and cell phone messaging are compounding the problem by expanding the audience for the bullying (Murray et al., 2012). According to Bauman and Newman (2012), cyberbullying has garnered considerable attention from the popular media, largely in the form of reports of cases with extreme personal or legal consequences. Bullies who use the Internet for targeting other students are often anonymous, and those who use the Internet as part of their bullying behavior are frequently socially isolated (Craig et al., 2011).

Adolescent suicides have also been associated with cyberbullying. A new term has been created to identify suicide as a consequence of being bullied. According to Brubaker (2012), *Bullycide* refers to an individual who chooses to commit suicide as a result of being bullied. In 2006, a 14 year old took her own life because of a message she received via the Internet (Hayward, 2012). In January 2009, a 15 year old in the United Kingdom committed suicide after repeated bullying and cyberbullying (Norman & Connolly, 2011); in 2011, a 14 year old took his life after being bullied at school and online (McShane, 2011). Also in 2011, a 16 year old committed suicide after being abused online (Ditchburn, 2013). The Internet and YouTube are

full of other instances where victims either attributed their suicides to bullying and cyberbullying, or investigations after the fact indicated bullying or cyberbullying were to blame for these deaths (Murray et al., 2012). In an analysis of 35 articles published in peer-reviewed journals, Hinduja and Patchin (2012) found that the number of youth who experience cyberbullying ranges from 5.5% to 72% (p. 35).

Sexting, or sex texting, is sending or forwarding nude, sexually suggestive, or explicit pictures or vulgar text on a cell phone or online (Siegle, 2010) and is another trend young adults are using as a form of bullying. Sexting becomes bullying when someone forwards or posts sexually suggestive or nude photos in chat rooms, blogs, and so forth, where the original sender did not intend the material to appear (Murray et al., 2012). In 2010, an 18 year old male at Rutgers University committed suicide by jumping off the George Washington Bridge as a result of a sexting message on Twitter (Friedman, 2010). An 18 year old Ohio girl committed suicide after her ex-boyfriend shared a digital nude photo of her from the neck down with other students in her school (Siegle, 2010).

After taking a proactive look at bullying and the effects it has on students, 47 states have created and currently enforce an anti-bullying law (Brubaker, 2012). Bullycide within schools and communities has grown to be such an immense issue that many are calling for stiffer laws and penalties against bullying (Brubaker, 2012). Other countries have also established intervention strategies to confront bullying. In Australia, a *National Day of Action Against Bullying and Violence* is celebrated annually. It is a day in which students and parents join together to take a stand against bullying. By fighting this battle now, future generations of students will not have to deal with this same war that is currently raging within U.S. schools (Brubaker, 2012).

## **Violence on College Campuses**

A concern of threatening and aggressive behavior on college campuses has received attention in the news and professional journals (Baker & Boland, 2011). For example, in August 1966 a student and former marine killed 16 people and wounded 31 others on and near the University of Texas campus in Austin before being shot by police (Harris & Harris, 2012). The college campus atmosphere is often viewed as a place of academic sanctuary where opinions and feelings are openly expressed between faculty and students (Baker & Boland, 2011). This transitional period is one that fosters independent and critical thinking, but has recently been marked by acts of violence (Baker & Boland, 2011).

The 1966 shooting was considered the deadliest campus shooting until on the morning of April 16, 2007, the students of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech) woke to a tragic mass shooting by a gunman who was a student of the university. The perpetrator, a senior, killed 33 people and wounded 17 others before committing suicide (Nykodym et al., 2011). School violence, particularly on college campuses, takes on many forms such as robbery, physical assaults, and mass killings. Less than a year after the tragic event at Virginia Tech, the country was again stunned to learn that another similar event had occurred at Northern Illinois University (Nykodym et al., 2011). On February 14, 2008, a gunman dressed in black shot 21 people, five of them fatally, and then shot himself. On February 13, 2010 a biology professor at the University of Alabama shot and killed three professors and injured three others (Nykodym et al., 2011). Campus violence has far reaching implications. Faculty, student affairs, and other professional staff may feel threatened by violent or aggressive students, and some victims may leave school for fear of their safety (Baker & Boland, 2011).

## **Methodology**

The research paradigm for the larger study was a qualitative case study. This research design used qualitative data to investigate the following research questions:

1. What do school district officials and city stakeholders perceive as the causes of violence in the city?
2. What do school district officials and city stakeholders believe can be done to address the violence?
3. What programs are already in place to help curb the violence?

## **Participants**

Purposeful sampling was used to select the participants including school district officials: the chief of school safety and security; a gang awareness and intervention coordinator; a pupil services hearing officer; a middle school and high school police officer; and one elementary, middle, and high school administrator. Other participants included city stakeholders: the local police director; three police officers; a member of the crime commission board; a program manager for the Detention Services Bureau for Juvenile Court; a community gang activist; and the city mayor. These participants were recruited for the knowledge and experience they might contribute to the investigation regarding what could be done about the violence occurring in the homes, communities, and schools. According to Patton (as cited in Lodico et al., 2010), “The logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth; information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research” (p. 140). The participants provided expert knowledge about the violence occurring in the communities, homes, and local schools.

### **Data Collection**

The case study approach is a detailed, empirical investigation of a person, group, or contemporary phenomenon (e.g., a particular event, situation, program, or activity) within its natural context bounded by space and time (Hancock & Algozzine, 2011). When explaining a case study Yin, (2008) defined it as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 18). Creswell stated (2012) qualitative researchers gather multiple forms of data, such as interviews, observations, and documents, rather than rely on a single data source. Then the researchers review all of the data, make sense of it, and organize it into categories or themes that cut across all of the data sources (p. 175). This study embraced the interpretive model, which seeks the interviewees’ opinions and the events they have experienced. Each of the school district participants was interviewed separately using a semi-structured interview protocol developed from a review of the literature. City stakeholders were also interviewed separately using a different interview protocol. The in-depth interview questions were open-ended and recorded with an audio recorder and handwritten notes. Questions were asked in a nonthreatening manner and followed up with probing questions to give interviewees an opportunity to fully explain and clarify their responses. Interviews lasted approximately 45-60 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed verbatim.

### **Data Analysis**

Qualitative data analysis consists of three procedures: data reduction, data display, and drawing conclusions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Data reduction entails organizing data that have been obtained from various sources and discarding irrelevant data. Then, data should be displayed in the form of tables, charts, matrices, and other graphical formats to allow reflection

on the data. After data have been reduced and displayed, conclusions can be drawn. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), data analysis happens simultaneously and iteratively, with data collection, data interpretation, and report writing.

Data were organized and coded for themes using colors and letters. Miles and Huberman (1994) noted, “Codes are tags or labels for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study” (p. 56). The process of qualitative research is inductive; therefore, theory is built from observations and bits and pieces of information from interviews. Information organized into themes helped to interpret and understand the data. According to Yin (2008), this organized material is called the case study database. The case study database, then, is the data of the study organized so the researcher can locate specific data during intensive analysis (Merriam, 2009).

### **Evidence of Quality/Trustworthiness**

Guba’s (1981) model of trustworthiness concerning qualitative research is based on truth value (credibility), applicability (transferability), consistency (dependability), and neutrality (confirmability). *Truth value* ascertains how self-confident the researcher is with the truth of the findings; *applicability* concerns the degree to which the results can be generalized to a larger population; *consistency* means if someone else replicated the study using the identical participants, the findings would be the same; and *neutrality* refers to the degree to which the findings are a function solely of the participants and not of other biases (Guba, 1981). The researchers used reflexivity, triangulation, member checking, and verbatim quotes to enhance trustworthiness.

## **Findings**

Analysis of the data of the larger study revealed seven themes: causes of violence in schools, what can be done to address violence in schools, programs in place to help curb the violence in schools, causes of violence in communities, programs in place to help curb violence in the communities, violence in homes, and programs in place to help curb violence in homes. The study also revealed subthemes regarding the cause of violence in the communities. The themes which surfaced are lack of economic opportunity, lack of education, a feeling of no commitment to the community or from the community stakeholders, and gangs, drugs, and poverty. Regarding violence in the homes, the causes identified were job pressures, financial pressures, and the need for control over their victims. For the purposes of this paper, causes of violence in schools and what can be done to address violence in schools will be discussed.

### **Causes of Violence in Schools**

#### **Bullying and cyberbullying**

School district participants were questioned regarding their experiences with elementary, middle, and high school violence. One of the first themes to emerge was bullying and cyberbullying. One participant noted, “Bullying would be #1 and 2<sup>nd</sup> is cyberbullying. Back in the day it was called *checking*. Some kids can’t handle it.” The participants felt that young people were bullied for several different reasons: mainly their clothing, their academic achievement, and their unwillingness to be part of a clique. Participants also pinpointed Facebook and Instagram as two of the main sources of cyberbullying.

### **Mistrust and a disconnection to the schools**

Another theme that was identified as a cause of violence in schools was students' lack of connection with the school as an institution for learning. Participants cited having too many police officers at high schools as creating a negative atmosphere. One administrator found that having police officers on campus created an expectation that something bad was going to occur. In his opinion, schools should be a community where students are not prejudged but rather afforded the opportunity to grow and become true partners in their education.

Participants also perceived students' mistrust of educators and other adults as a contributor to violence in schools. One participant cited a scarcity of adults who are willing to speak up for and offer protection to children as the reason for their lack of trust. Another agreed there is mistrust between students and educators. He argued that many discipline problems in schools are directly related to how adults interact with children and how connected children are to human relationships.

### **Gangs**

Participants' statements indicated the manifestation of gangs as one of the most prevalent causes of violence. One participant underscored the notion that gang involvement can begin when youth are seeking acceptance. His belief is when students transfer from schools in the suburbs to an inner city school, they are perceived as outsiders. To fit in, some will try to mimic other students' actions. They feel assimilation is easier if they can prove they are tough enough to be a member of a gang. Another attribute identified as a characteristic of wanting to become part of a gang was the desire to belong to something or someone. Membership in a gang fulfills the need some persons have for a family unit. A gang gives them instant gratification by showing them love, and giving them money and a sense of belonging.

The consensus among the participants interviewed was many gangs are formed in housing projects because it is easier to persuade young children with whom they are in close contact. Youth in the lower socioeconomic status are easily influenced by money; therefore, they are easy targets to hire as drug runners. Moreover, in the summer when students are home with nothing positive to do, they are easy prey for gangs. Gang members will invite them to cookouts and parties which also serve as an introduction to drugs and obligations to the “family.” When gang members feel they are impressed with the family lifestyle, the initiation begins along with the demands to rob, steal, and kill.

While some school district officials believe gang violence is predominantly located in the inner city schools, participants employed by Gang Awareness and Intervention argued that it is widespread. They are convinced the media only show what they feel the public believes to be true. As residents of the suburbs, they have firsthand knowledge that gang activity exists ubiquitously.

### **Lack of parental guidance, structure, and poor parenting skills**

This theme emerged as a factor contributing to violence in both schools and communities. Participants view poor parenting skills and lack of structure in the home as two of the greatest influences on violent behavior. There was agreement among the school administrators and pupil services hearing officer that lack of structure in the home is a factor in the propagation of violence. Parents require education on how to educate their offspring. Often children are watching broadcasts on television whose ratings are for adults only. Some children are not given specific bedtimes and often eat foods that are not healthy because they are left home alone. Consequently, little or no supervision contributes to the proliferation of violence.

### **Low academic achievement levels**

One participant who works hands on with juvenile education services agreed a lack of parenting skills, really poor treatment at home, and a lack of guidance were in large part issues that contribute to violence. Students performing far below grade level were also a consideration. This participant has found that about one fourth of the students admitted to the facility cannot read. Others are functioning on a first or second grade academic level. The participants believed these students' disruptive behavior in a regular school setting manifests as a defense mechanism.

### **What Can Be Done to Address Violence in the Schools?**

Suggestions for addressing violence in the schools were in abundance. When asked what could be done to address the problem of violence, one participant shared his aspiration to pilot a program that would allow elementary school children to move away from home and attend school in another city. He believes if some children are taken out of their lower SES environment and exposed to other surroundings, they will have a more positive response to learning. Mentoring was another popular response among the participants: have churches adopt schools and appoint mentors to students; Black men and women have a responsibility to mentor young Black students; ask major businesses to adopt schools and assign mentors to students; make sure every at-risk student is assigned a mentor.

### **Implications**

Participants of the current study indicated that bullying and cyberbully are huge concerns. This finding is consistent with much of the literature. For example, Chen (2008) noted that student bullying is on the rise, and Neiman et al. (2012) discussed how bullying often leads to suicide. Basch (2011) suggested verbal aggression is an insidious and harmful aspect of violence and Theriot (2008) reported various types of bullying that include fighting and sexual

harassment. Another type of bullying is cyberbullying or electronic bullying. Siegle (2010) pointed out that cyberbullying is one of the largest threats school-aged children in the United States face on a daily basis.

Consistent with the literature, participants of the current study noted that perceived student mistrust of educators and other adults as a contributor to violence in schools. This finding is consistent with the work of Hong and Eamon (2012) who pointed out that student perception of a safe school environment can be changed by various interactions and environments (p. 429).

Participants of the current study view poor parenting skills and lack of structure in the home as two of the greatest influences on violent behavior. There was agreement among the school administrators and pupil services hearing officer that lack of structure in the home is a factor in the propagation of violence. Parents require education about how to educate their offspring. This finding is consistent with Murray et al. (2012) who mentioned that often bullying is the modeled behavior of a parent or other family member and contended that when families fail to display warmth and caring, the children imitate those actions. Henry and Zeytinoglu (2012) added that children who are raised in households where violence and aggressive behavior are normal often become adolescents, who engage in aggressive behaviors,

### **Applications and Directions for Future Research**

The United States is inundated with physically and verbally violent acts and aggressive behaviors. Evidence from the literature supports the fact that man's inhumanity to man has existed throughout history. Violence persists in schools; therefore there is a need for better violence prevention programs to effectively minimize the number of violent acts that occur. Both educators and public health specialists have identified prevention as a central and high-priority

goal (Basch, 2011). It is incumbent upon school leaders to foster programs to help youth and adults learn to practice prosocial behaviors.

One finding of the current study is that stakeholders believe that violence in this city is a problem in the homes, schools, and communities. Several factors were identified as contributors to the violent acts pervading the area. The findings of this study may be used by stakeholders to establish additional programs and antiviolence projects. These initiatives may impact positive social change by curtailing the violence in the city and by creating a safer and more nurturing community. Recommendations for further research include longitudinal qualitative and quantitative research be undertaken to determine whether the programs in place to dispel violence are actually effective. Additionally, research on more ways to confiscate guns and drugs, and eliminate gangs would benefit society.

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