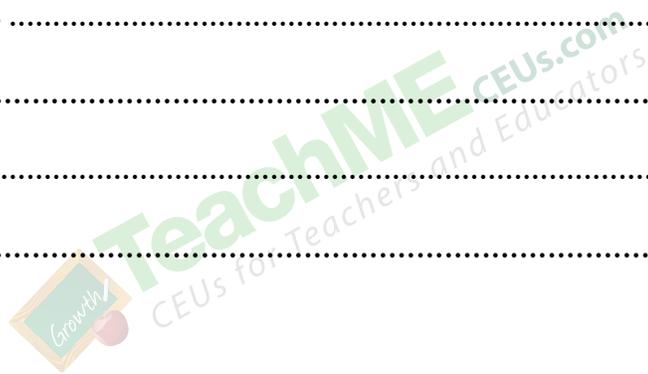


How Violence and Bullying Impact Youth



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Introduction

Violence and bullying behaviors are prevalent among school-aged youth. The term “youth violence” covers a wide range of behaviors, including bullying, fighting, teen dating violence, and gang related violence. Violence and bullying can cause emotional and physical harm to young people, and can have long-term negative impacts on their physical and emotional health. Because young people spend so much of their lives at school, educators are in the unique position to prevent youth violence by providing youth with guidance, resources, and other protective factors. In order to be advocates against youth violence and bullying, educators must know the prevalence of youth violence and bullying, be aware of specific risk and protective factors, know the impacts of violence and bullying, and be armed with specific strategies for addressing and preventing youth violence and bullying.

What is Youth Violence?

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2022) defines youth violence as, “The intentional use of physical force or power to threaten or harm others by young people ages 10-24.” Youth violence comes in many forms, including **bullying, gang-related violence, and teen dating violence**. Youth violence is considered a global public health problem, with over 200,000 homicides among 10-29 year olds occurring worldwide per year, making it the fourth leading cause of death among this age group (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020). Further, for every young person that is killed, many more sustain injuries that require serious medical treatment. “When it is not fatal, youth violence has a serious, often lifelong, impact on a person's physical, psychological and social functioning” (WHO). In fact, youth violence is considered an Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE), which is defined as a “potentially traumatic event that occurs in childhood (0-17 years)” (CDC).

Section 1: Bullying

Bullying is a form of youth violence, as well as an ACE. The CDC (2022) defines bullying in the following way: “Any unwanted aggressive behavior(s) by another youth or group of youths, who are not siblings or current dating partners, that involves an observed or perceived power imbalance, and is repeated multiple times or is highly likely to be

repeated.” Bullying can inflict physical, psychological, social, or educational harm or distress on the targeted individual (CDC). While bullying can occur at any age, research shows that it increases in late childhood and peaks during early adolescence, and typically takes place in unstructured settings like the playground, cafeteria, bus, or the hallways at school (Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia, 2020).

Bullying does not only involve the person bullying and the victim being bullied. “Bullying is a social behavior that takes place mainly at school and involves everyone who witnesses it, even if they are not directly involved in it” (Navarro et al., 2018). For example, in the case of bullying on the school playground, there is often the “ringleader,” who initiates the bullying, the victim, who is being bullied, “reinforcers,” who join in and encourage the bullying, “defenders,” who try to help the victim, and “bystanders,” who see the bullying but ignore it (Navarro et al.). In addition to the roles listed above, there might also be what is referred to as a bully victim, which means that the individual is both a bully and victim (Navarro et al.).

Types of Bullying

There are four common categories of bullying: Physical, Verbal, Relational/Social, Cyberbullying.

Physical Bullying

Physical bullying involves inflicting any type of unwanted physical harm to a person’s body or the individual’s belongings (Stopbullying.gov, 2022). This includes but is not limited to hitting, kicking, pinching, tripping, spitting, or damaging someone’s personal possessions. Physical bullying does not necessarily mean that the target gets seriously injured, but can occur in a way that just causes that person to be uncomfortable.

Verbal Bullying

Verbal bullying is saying or writing mean things about someone. Verbal bullying includes teasing, name-calling, inappropriate sexual comments, taunting, or threatening (Stopbullying).

Social Bullying

Social bullying, also referred to as relational bullying, involves hurting someone's reputation or relationships (Stopbullying). Social bullying includes leaving someone out on purpose, spreading rumors, publicly embarrassing someone, and telling others not to be friends with someone.

Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is bullying that takes place on digital devices, like cell phones, laptops, tablets, et cetera (Stopbullying). Cyberbullying can occur via text messages, social media, email, online forums, and gaming communities. Examples of cyberbullying include sending "hurtful, abusive, or threatening" messages, images, or videos to someone, spreading lies or posting embarrassing photos or videos of someone on social media or via messaging apps, or impersonating someone and making posts or sending messages to others through fake accounts (Unicef, 2022).

Special Concerns with Cyberbullying. The internet allows for quick, vast communication amongst its users. With more young people using social media, digital forums like Reddit, and various gaming platforms, content shared is not only viewed by friends and acquaintances, but can also be accessed by strangers (Unicef, 2022). The accessibility to posted content creates additional challenges when it comes to protecting the privacy of individuals, as well as protecting children from online predators. This can also lead to doxing, which is a form of online bullying meant to destroy individuals' privacy by "making their personal information public, including addresses, social security, credit card and phone numbers, links to social media accounts, and other private data" (Stopbullying, 2022). Obviously, this poses concerns not only for individuals' mental health but also for their safety.

Further, the content shared by individuals online "creates a kind of permanent public record of their views, activities, and behavior" (Unicef). Online posts are then often accessible to schools, jobs, colleges, clubs, or anyone else seeking information about an individual. Therefore, cyberbullying can damage the reputations of both the individuals being bullied and the ones doing the bullying. Unicef identifies unique concerns about cyberbullying, stating that it can be:

- **Persistent:** Technology allows for immediate communication and continuous communication 24-hours a day; therefore, it is difficult for someone experiencing cyberbullying to find an escape.

- **Permanent:** The majority of information posted online is “permanent and public, if not reported and removed,” meaning that anyone can see it, and it can’t really be gone, even if the user “deletes” the post.
- **Hard to Notice:** Sometimes teachers and parents do not have access to all of the digital platforms that their children use, so cyberbullying can go unnoticed.

Cyberbullying is particularly dangerous because it can happen quickly, reach a vast audience, and often fly under the radar of authority figures.

Why Do Some Children Bully Others?

One theory for why some children bully others is referred to as the dominance hypothesis. This theory states “that some children who bully are driven by the desire to have a dominant status in the peer group” (Navarro et al., 2018). In other words, bullies expect a positive outcome from their bullying, such as peer approval and popularity (Navarro et al.). Researchers have also found that bullies engage in behavior called moral disengagement, which describes “the process by which someone convinces himself/herself that standards of right and wrong (for example, that hurting people is negative and inappropriate) do not apply to them” (Navarro et al.).

Bully-Victims. Bully-victims are individuals that bully others but are also bullied themselves. Bully-victims “are highly rejected by their peers and show both externalising and internalising problems” (Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017). Bully-victims often come from the most difficult home environments, experiencing maltreatment and/or neglectful parenting (Menesini & Salmivalli).

Risk Factors & Protective Factors

There is no single factor that puts a child more at-risk for being bullied or for bullying other people. Instead, there are a number of factors that come into play that make someone more at-risk for either situation. It is important to note that just because individuals experience one or more of these risk factors, it does not mean that they will definitely be a bully or be bullied, but rather they are at an increased risk.

Risk Factors for Bullying Perpetration

Likewise, there is not one type of bully, or one reason why bullying occurs. Instead, it is usually a combination of reasons why someone chooses to bully other people. Gordon (2020) categorizes risk factors in the following way: 1) Family risk factors, 2) Personality risk factors, and 3) Behavioral risk factors.

Family Risk Factors. Family issues that can contribute to bullying include witnessing or experiencing abuse, having permissive parents, and seeing or experiencing bullying by siblings (Gordon, 2020).

Children that come from abusive homes are more likely to exhibit bullying behavior because “aggression, violence and manipulation” are modeled for them by trusted adults (Gordon). If children are dealing with abuse at home, they might not know how to interact with others in a non-aggressive way.

When parents do not establish rules or provide supervision for their children, young people are more likely to resort to bullying (Gordon). In this case, parents are also less likely to enforce consequences to stop the bullying. Lack of parental involvement “can create all types of issues, including bullying behavior” (Gordon).

When a child sees or experiences bullying by a sibling, that child is more likely to exhibit bullying behavior outside of the home. When a younger sibling is bullied by an older sibling, it creates a sense of “powerlessness”; “to regain that feeling of power, these kids may bully others, sometimes even emulating the older sibling” (Gordon).

Personality Risk Factors. There are certain personality traits that put an individual at a higher risk of becoming a bully including having low self esteem, relating negatively to others, craving power, showing a lack of empathy, and having a low frustration tolerance (Gordon, 2020). Kids with low self esteem are more likely to exhibit bullying behavior because it gives them a sense of power and control, which they often lack otherwise (Gordon). Gordon explains, “They may also brag about their exploits and abilities in order to cover for a low sense of self-worth.” For these children, even negative attention contributes to their need for recognition from others.

Another personality risk factor is relating to others negatively. This might present itself as making derogatory comments about another person’s appearance, abilities, or intelligence, or it might be an overall intolerance of other races, cultures, or lifestyles (Gordon). Gordon reports that “much of this prejudicial bullying comes from fear, a lack of understanding and is often learned at home.”

When children have not learned empathy, they might resort to bullying. “They are either unable or unwilling to understand how a person might feel when cruel things are said or done,” or they blame the victim rather than acknowledging their pain (Gordon, 2020). For instance, rather than apologizing for making a cruel joke, someone with a lack of empathy might defer blame to the victim by saying, “He needs to learn to take a joke!” Further, “when bullies ignore the feelings of others, it could be because they are not able to see that the victims are suffering, which might make the bullying behavior more likely” (Navarro et al., 2018).

Frustration tolerance is a skill that most children learn in early years, though it typically takes longer to be mastered. For most children, when something doesn’t go their way, they adapt to the situation and the frustration dissipates. However, for some children, not getting what they want feels “unbearable,” and “they bully others to force the desired outcome” (Gordon, 2020).

Behavioral Risk Factors. Gordon (2020) explains that sometimes kids “exhibit certain behaviors that put them at risk for solving issues through bullying rather than healthy forms of communication and collaboration.” Some of these behavioral risk factors include acting with aggression and impulsivity, using physical strength to intimidate others, excluding other children, and being picked on by others.

Children that exhibit aggression often have poor impulse control and a hot temper. Research shows that bullies are often “driven by impulsivity, meaning that they tend to act without prior reflection or thought” (Navarro et al., 2018). “Rather than using reasoning, they resort to coercion and dominance” (Gordon, 2020). Likewise, rather than having a discussion, they might resort to hitting, kicking, or yelling. Aggressive behavior often accompanies a low frustration tolerance because the child does not know how to express frustration in a healthy way. “Having attitudes and cognitions that favour aggression and low levels of empathy towards other people are associated with both general aggression and bullying” (Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017).

Children who use their size or strength to get what they want often do so through bullying. “They control situations by making other children feel weak or powerless” (Gordon, 2020). This type of behavior often occurs when children feel powerless in other ways, so they use their size and strength to control others.

Bully-prone children might try to isolate and exclude other children. “Not only do they refuse to let another person participate, but they encourage other kids to ignore the

person as well” (Gordon, 2020). Girls tend to exhibit this type of behavior more than boys do but it can happen with both sexes.

Finally, when a child is picked on by peers, he or she often bullies other people to deal with the painful feelings of being bullied. These children are referred to as “bully victims” and they “suffer from the same characteristics as a victim” (Gordon, 2020). These situations are often trickier because they cannot be solved with simple disciplinary action of the bully, but must also involve support and intervention for the bullying they experienced.

Risk Factors for Bullying Victimization

Understanding who is at the greatest risk of being bullied can help teachers and administrators in their efforts to prevent it. Stopbullying.gov (2021) explains that children that are bullied usually have one or more of the following risk factors: 1) Are perceived as different from their peers, 2) Are perceived as weak, anxious, or have low self esteem, 3) Are not accepted by peers.

Perceived as Different. “One of the most common reasons kids are bullied is because something about them makes them different from the majority” (Gordon, 2022). Children can be perceived as different for a number of reasons, including but not limited to being overweight or underweight, their clothing style, gender diversity and sexual preferences, having a disability, being unable to afford trendy clothes or toys, or even being the new kid at school. For instance, students with disabilities are two or three times more likely to be bullied than their non-disabled peers (Kids Included Together [Kit], 2021). Whether a child has a physical, emotional, or learning disability, a disability in itself leads to the perception that the child is different from peers. Further, results from the CDC’s 2019 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance showed that LGBTQ+ youth are more likely to be bullied than cisgender youth (Roberts, 2020).

Perceived as Weak / Anxious / Low Self Esteem. Bullies will often prey on children that they perceive as weak because they are less likely to defend themselves. According to the dominance hypothesis, bullies target weaker students with fewer friends because “by dominating victims like this, bullies can repeatedly demonstrate their power to the rest of the group, reinforcing their popular position without the fear of being confronted by the victim” (Navarro et al., 2018).

Not Accepted by Peers. Research shows that kids who are bullied often are less popular and not accepted by their peers. “Long before the bullying begins, these kids might be rejected by their peers or left out of social situations” (Gordon, 2022). Likewise, for whatever reason, these students also struggle to make friends. Children with fewer friends are often targeted because they do not have a group of peers to stick up for them or stand up to the bully.

Warning Signs

It is important for educators to recognize the signs that a child is being bullied; however, there are not always obvious warning signs in a bullying situation. Stopbullying.gov (2022) shares signs that suggest a bullying problem:

- Unexplainable injuries
- Lost or destroyed property (e.g. books, clothing, electronics)
- Anxiety about attending school (Note: This might manifest as faking illness, frequent stomach aches or headaches, and other psychosomatic symptoms)
- Changes in eating habits
- Sudden loss of friends or avoidance of social situations
- Difficulty sleeping or frequent nightmares
- Declining grades
- Decreased self esteem
- Self-destructive behavior (e.g. harming themselves, talks of suicide)

Recognizing the warning signs is crucial because many kids will not come to an adult for help. In fact, statistics from the 2019 Indicators of School Crime and Safety show that only 20% of bullying incidents are reported (Stopbullying, 2022).

Protective Factors

Protective factors refer to conditions and attributes that help individuals deal with stressful events, and mitigate associated risks. Protective factors can exist at the individual, peer, family, and school/community levels.

Individual. At the individual level, there are important skills that serve as protective factors against bullying. Kids with “high self-esteem, assertiveness skills, and solid social skills” are less likely to be bullied than kids that are lacking such skills (Gordon, 2022). High self-esteem and positive self-concept in particular were associated with less bullying and cyberbullying (Zych et al., 2018). Further, kids who develop resilience skills and perseverance are typically able to handle bullying situations more effectively, and kids who are able to keep a positive attitude despite being bullied will fare much better than those who dwell on what is happening to them” (Gordon). It was also noted that “social competence, intelligence and problem solving protected against victimization, as did self-related cognitions” (Zych et al.). In addition, according to Zych et al, several studies showed that high academic achievement was related to low levels of bullying victimization, but not cyber victimization.

Peer. Bullying is less frequent for individuals that have a solid circle of friends, or even one friend “to spend time with . . . who helps you and offers you consolation” (Navarro et al., 2018). Bullying is less likely to occur when an individual has supportive friends for a number of reasons: 1) A friend can report the bullying to an adult or encourage the victim to do so, 2) friendship “helps the victim to feel included, wanted, and accepted, 3) bullies are less likely to target kids that are with friends, 4) a friend can stick up for the victim and tell the bully to stop when it’s happening, and 5) a friend can involve others to show the bully that his/her actions are not cool (Navarro et al.). In addition, having “high peer status” and support were related to low bullying victimization (Zych et al., 2018).

Along with having friends and high peer status, studies also show that bystanders can make a difference in a bullying situation. Bystanders often don’t get involved in the situation because they are scared to become targets, want to avoid confrontation, or they don’t think they can stop it. However, Navarro et al. (2018) explain that “bystanders may play a key role in stopping bullying, or in allowing it to continue happening.” For example, a bystander that either speaks up to the bully or even just disengages and walks away from the situation can “can shift the attention and power away from the bully and help put an end to the behavior”; however, a passive bystander that stays silent “can be perceived as giving permission to the bully to continue his actions” (Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia, 2020). Students that experienced bullying reported that “allying” and supportive actions by peers (e.g. “such as spending time with the student, talking to him/her, helping him/her get away, or giving advice”) were the most helpful responses from bystanders (Pacers, 2020).

Family. Zych et al. (2018) cite a number of family factors that studies associated with lower rates of bullying victimization: “high socioeconomic status, a positive family environment, parental interaction, mediation in technology use, parental supervision and monitoring, authoritative parenting, parental involvement, support, communication and warmth.” These same family protective factors that prevent bullying victimization also aid in preventing bullying perpetration.

School/Community. For adolescents, school becomes a “central arena” for socialization, creating a “microsystem” that can protect them against bullying victimization (Papamichalaki, 2021). Papamichalaki defines school connectedness as “the emotions a student may have towards his/her peers and teachers, but also a sense of safety and acceptance that is forged in such a setting.” A strong school connection can serve as a protective factor for negative experiences during childhood and adolescence, such as bullying. In addition to a strong school connection, a positive school climate is identified as one of the most critical protective factors for young people. When a school climate is “supportive and encouraging . . . with strong pastoral and nurturing characteristics,” it “functions as a preventative mechanism against a student being involved in bullying, becoming estranged from the school environment and eventually dropping out” (Papamichalaki).

While there is no agreed upon universal definition of a positive climate, researchers agree that a positive school climate includes “a supportive and caring attitude on the part of the teachers, support and respect amongst students, and student attachment and dedication to the school as well as a general sense of safety, deriving from an explicit and updated set of school rules” (Papamichalaki, 2021). In a positive school environment, children develop high levels of assertiveness, empathy, and socialization, decreasing the odds of being involved in bullying, while in a negative school climate “instances of bullying increase, become repetitive and become long-term engrained behaviors” (Papamichalaki).

School staff play an important role in supporting and maintaining a positive school climate for their students. Teachers (and all school staff) are in the position to promote an environment that “fosters inclusion, respect, and pride in academic achievement, as well as introducing non-violent alternatives to resolving conflict” (Philadelphia Children’s Hospital, 2020). Having school staff that are trained in building positive relationships, as well as defusing aggression and bullying behavior are essential to keeping a positive school climate (Philadelphia Children’s Hospital). Likewise, school staff must be vigilant

in identifying more covert forms of bullying, such as social bullying, to ensure that school is a safe space.

Bullying Statistics

Unfortunately, bullying is not uncommon and most school-aged children are exposed to it in one form or another. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2019), during the 2016-17 school year, about one in five students (20.2%) in the general population reported being bullied. A higher percentage of male students reported physical bullying, whereas a higher percentage of female students reported social bullying (NCES). The most frequent reasons reported for being bullied were physical appearance, race/ethnicity, gender, disability, religion, sexual orientation (NCES). The statistics are even more grim for some of the high-risk populations discussed above. According to the CDC (2021), nearly 40% of students who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, and around 33% of those unsure about their sexual identity experienced bullying at school or online in the past year, compared to 22% of heterosexual, cisgender students.

Effects of Bullying

Bullying has been consistently associated with negative outcomes, impacting the physical, emotional, and social health of young people, and even extending into adulthood (Papamichalaki, 2021). The consequences of bullying affect the bully, the victim, and even children that are witnesses to the bullying.

Bullying Victims

Decades of studies show that children and adolescents who are victims of bullying miss more school, have poor school achievement, report higher loneliness and poorer health, and “greater levels of anxiety and depression than their non-victimised peers” (Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017). “Victimization is a major childhood risk factor that uniquely contributes to later depression, even controlling for many other major childhood risks” (Menesini & Salmivalli). Poor school achievement is often related to being anxious in the classroom due to victimization, or school avoidance altogether. In addition to depression and anxiety, students who are bullied are also at an increased risk for sleep difficulties and dropping out of school (CDC, 2021). Bullying victimization has also been linked to

the onset of eating disorders, sleep disorders, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Gordon, 2022). Gordon explains, “They also may start to show signs of emotional distress, such as difficulty managing emotions, being more irritable, acting out, or all-around just behaving differently than normal.” In extreme cases, victims of bullying become suicidal or develop suicidal ideations. The extent of these negative outcomes vary based on the severity of the victimization, as well as other risk and protective factors.

Children who are victims of bullying also have more frequent health complaints, such as stomach aches and headaches, which are often psychosomatic symptoms as a result of emotional distress. Bullying also changes the way children view themselves. As such, being bullied can lead to low self esteem and increased negative self-talk (Gordon, 2022). “Bullied students indicate that bullying has a negative effect on how they feel about themselves (27%), their relationships with friends and family (19%), their school work (19%), and physical health (14%)” (NCES, 2019). This type of internalization often makes children feel like they are less worthy and less deserving than their peers, and can lead to isolation from others.

Bullying Perpetrators

Young people who bully others are at an increased risk for substance misuse, academic problems, and experiencing violence in later adolescence and adulthood (CDC, 2021). In a 2011 meta-analysis of 28 longitudinal studies, researchers found that bullying perpetration is “a strong and a specific risk factor for later criminal offending and psychotic symptoms,” and a 2015 study added a dosed effect to this conclusion, “in which more frequent bullying involvement in childhood is more strongly associated with adult adversities” (Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017). Children who bully are also at an increased risk of getting into physical fights, verbal altercations, developing antisocial behaviors, and are less likely to take responsibility for their actions (McLean Hospital, 2022).

Bystanders

Stopbullying.gov (2022) reports that children who witness bullying are more likely to have increased use of tobacco, alcohol or other drugs, have increased mental health issues like anxiety and depression, and are more likely to miss or skip school. Likewise,

being a witness to bullying makes children feel uncomfortable and unsafe in their environment.

Section 1 Key Terms

Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) - Potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood (0-17 years)

Bully Victim - Individuals who bully others but are also bullied themselves

Bystander - Individuals who see the bullying but ignore it

Cyberbullying - Bullying that takes place on digital devices

Doxing - Destroying other peoples' privacy by making their personal information public, including addresses, social security, credit card and phone numbers, links to social media accounts, and other private data

Psychosomatic Symptoms - Developed physical symptoms that have no clear medical cause and appear to be influenced by the person's emotional state

School Connectedness - The emotions a student may have toward his/her peers and teachers, but also a sense of safety and acceptance that is forged in such a setting Youth violence: The intentional use of physical force or power to threaten or harm others by young people ages 10-24.

Section 1 Reflection Questions

1. How do adults in your school address bullying? What interventions are used? Have you seen adults "look the other way" at a bullying situation?
2. What are some of the obstacles that you face as a teacher to overcome bullying and make everyone feel safe? What can be done to help teachers overcome such obstacles?

Section 1 Activities

1. Evaluate the anti-bullying plan at your school. Use anti-bullying websites to get more information on effective plans to compare.

- a. Using the anti-bullying websites, plan an anti-bullying program for your school. If your school already has a good one, brainstorm ways to improve it.
2. Familiarize yourself with your state’s anti-bullying laws (bullying and cyberbullying).
 - a. How do these laws fit in with your school’s anti-bullying policies?
 - b. Do you think they are fair and equitable?

Section 2: Gang-Related Violence

The United States Department of Justice (DOJ) defines a gang as “organized groups of three or more people with a collective identity surrounding criminal activity” (Sonterblum, 2022). According to the National Gang Center [YGC] (2020), the following criteria is typically used to classify groups as gangs:

- Three or more members, typically aged 12-24 years old
- Shared identity among members, typically linked with a name or other symbols
- Members view themselves as a gang and are recognized by others as a gang
- Group has “some permanence” and a degree of organization
- Group is involved criminal activity

Gang involvement has detrimental long-term and short-term effects on “gang-involved” youth, their loved ones, and the surrounding communities (Youth.gov, 2022). In the United States, over one million gang members are under the age of 18, and that number only seems to be growing (Sonterblum). In demographic studies of gangs, researchers found that the typical age range for a gang member is 12-24 years old, with the average age being 17-18 (Nonprofit Risk Management Center [NRMCC], 2022). However, children as young as elementary age are recruited into some gangs. In a 2010 national survey, 45% of high school students and 35% of middle school students said there were gangs in their schools, and one in 12 youth confessed to being in a gang themselves at some point during their teenage years (Ritter et al., 2019).

Why Youth Join Gangs

There are several different factors that attract some youth to gangs: economics, relationships, protection, status, and outlaw culture (Ritter et al., 2019). Youth join gangs for “protection, enjoyment, respect, money, or because a friend is in a gang” (Youth.gov, 2022). Some children and teenagers join gangs to find “a sense of connection to define a new sense of who they are” (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry [AACAP], 2022). Children are also “motivated by peer pressure, a need to protect themselves and their family, because a family member also is in a gang, or to make money” (AACAP). Ritter et al. further explain that for some children, the expected benefits “outweigh the potentially life-destroying consequences of joining a gang.”

Economics

Some young people join gangs with the hopes that it will be financially lucrative for them. “For many young people who feel disconnected from the American dream, the economic opportunities of gang membership offer an acceptable alternative to a low-wage job in the legitimate-employment arena” (Ritter et al., 2019). Many gang-involved youth come from poverty (a risk factor discussed in more detail below), and are struggling to have their basic needs met, such as food and shelter. “Because legitimate means of income may not be accessible to youth under the legal working age of 14, or because the idea of working is unattractive due to the long hours and minimal pay, joining a gang may appeal to a youth in need of money” (Sonterblum, 2022).

Relationships

“Youth who feel marginalized, rejected or ignored — in the family, school or church — may join a gang to fill a need for support” (Ritter et al., 2019). Children yearn for connection and a sense of belonging, and view a gang as a substitute family. However, they don’t realize that the “connection” fulfilled by a gang is dangerous, unhealthy, and ultimately a relationship that they cannot escape. Likewise, some children join gangs due to peer pressure or because they have a friend or family member already involved (Ritter et al.).

Protection

Ritter et al. (2019) explain, “Although there is incontrovertible evidence that kids in a gang are more likely to be exposed to violence than kids who do not belong to a gang, this does not resonate with many young people who believe that joining a gang will protect them from violence in school or the community.” Children who live in high crime areas or experience bullying or violence at school might think that a gang will provide them with protection. Further, girls who experience physical or sexual abuse at home sometimes believe that a gang will provide the best means of protection (Ritter et al.). Gangs give their members a sense of protection “providing them with weapons and a sense of safety in numbers, or a sense that they have people who will fight with them if needed” (Sonterblum, 2022).

Status

“Gangs can be seen as a way to increase status among peers, a way to get respect, freedom and independence — self-empowerment factors that may be missing from some kids' lives” (Ritter et al., 2019). Being involved in a gang can create a false sense of grandiosity and power, which is appealing for some children.

Outlaw Culture

Some youth simply want to rebel against society. “During the cognitive-development stage of adolescence, being a part of an "outlaw culture" can, for some kids, be compelling” (Ritter et al., 2019).

Risk Factors & Protective Factors

Risk Factors

“A 13-year-old does not wake up one day and decide out of the blue to join a gang . . . The decision is a consequence of a particular life environment, behavior and way of thinking that leads a child to adopt the gang lifestyle later on” (as cited in Ritter et al., 2019). In other words, in the context of gang membership, risk factors are “forces” that “push youth toward gangs or increase the likelihood that affected youth will join a gang” (YGC, 2020). Risk factors appear across the many dimensions of a young person’s life and are grouped into five categories called domains: individual, family, school, peer, and

neighborhood/community (National Gang Center [NGC], 2020). Research shows that “the more likely he or she is to join a gang,” and “a youth’s risk for gang involvement significantly increases as he or she accrues more than two risk factors” (Youth.gov, 2022). In general, risk factors apply to both boys and girls and minorities and nonminorities, but more research has been done on male involvement in gangs than females; however, females seem to have unique risk factors.

Individual. Individual risk factors include personality traits, circumstances, and behavioral characteristics that put one at a higher risk for gang involvement. Aggression and antisocial behavior during childhood is a risk factor for crime, violence, and gang involvement later on (Ritter et al., 2019). Ritter et al. note that the “the earlier the onset of such behavior . . . the greater the severity.” While these behavioral characteristics are at the individual level, they are often the result of family dysfunctions. “Serious disruptions in parenting and family functioning are related to earlier onset of delinquent behavior, which is generally more severe and dangerous than when criminal activity begins later in adolescence” (Ritter et al.). Children whose antisocial behavior worsens with time are at a higher likelihood for joining a gang. “These behaviors include early involvement in delinquency, aggression, violence (without a weapon), alcohol or drug use, early dating, and precocious sexual activity” (Howell, 2010).

Certain mental health issues are also associated with an increased risk for joining a gang. Some of these issues include conduct disorders, externalizing behaviors, hyperactivity, depression, and alcohol and substance abuse (Howell, 2010). In interviews with gang members in juvenile detention facilities, many youth “are admitted with histories of physical and sexual abuse, substance abuse, psychiatric disturbances, posttraumatic stress disorder, cognitive deficits, poor self-esteem, and other problems” (Howell).

ACEs and traumatic stress responses increase the likelihood of youth gang involvement as well. Such circumstances can also be categorized in the family or community domains, as traumatic events typically involve another party in addition to the individual. For example, “A child who has been abused and neglected may not trust authority, schools, or other social institutions to protect or take care of people,” and might turn to a gang for this type of support instead (The National Child Traumatic Stress Network [NCTSN], n.d.). Gangs can offer children a sense of safety, control, and structure that might otherwise be missing in the lives of traumatized youth (NCTSN). Gangs also “provide a place for youth to re-enact learned patterns of behavior such as violence” (NCTSN).

Family. The majority of youth who join gangs lack positive support from “parents, schools, peers, and community” (Youth.gov, 2022). This pattern often begins at home, with low levels of parental involvement and supervision, issues within the home (abuse, drug use, mental illness, etc.), parent-child separation, parental criminality, or delinquent siblings (Youth.gov; Safeguarding Network, 2022). Oftentimes, young people who join gangs have no sense of safety in their own homes and have experienced adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Approximately 71% of gang members have experienced family violence, 42% experienced physical abuse, and 22% experienced sexual abuse, often by caregivers (Sonterblum, 2022). ACEs “create emotional adjustment problems for kids . . . Those can be cumulative and increase the likelihood of gang joining very easily” (Perez, 2020). Violent family environments, including parental substance abuse, domestic violence, and child physical and sexual abuse have been consistently identified as strong indicators for female gang involvement (NGC, 2020).

Poverty and overall financial stress are also risk factors. Poverty causes food insecurity and unstable housing, making it difficult to meet the basic needs of shelter and food insecurity. “Hunger and housing (e.g. shelter from dangerous elements and weather) are related to gang membership where food insecurity and unstable housing are predictive of involvement” (Sonterblum, 2022). Likewise, financial struggles often keep parents away from the house for extended periods of time, as they are forced to work multiple jobs. As such, there is a lack of parental involvement, not due to their own choice. However, “low family involvement, poor communication, and low parental monitoring” have all been directly related to gang involvement (Sonterblum). A 2015 study found that numerous gang-involved youth came from single-parent households, often with the mother as the sole provider (Sonterblum). Sonterblum explains, “This correlation may exist because the single parent is the family’s only source of income and may have less time to spend with the child.”

Family involvement with gangs or criminal activity is a risk factor for youth gang membership as well. Perez (2020) discusses a young girl, Lucero Herrera, who moved to San Francisco from El Salvador at age 3, living in section 8 housing while her mother worked multiple jobs to support her and her brother. While Herrera’s mother was away, her brother, a gang member, fed her and took care of her. Due to her brother’s gang involvement, Herrera was frequently profiled and eventually fell into the gang lifestyle herself. This situation is not uncommon, as the combination of low parental involvement and the seemingly positive influence of an individual involved in a gang, can make the gang lifestyle seem lucrative.

Peer. One of the greatest risk factors for gang involvement is associating with peers who “engage in delinquency” (Howell, 2010). Peer rejection is also related to increased likelihood for joining a gang (Sonterblum, 2022). When children are rejected by peers at school it takes away their sense of belonging, which they then turn to a gang for. However, friendships formed in this context are dangerous. “Aggressive and antisocial youth begin to affiliate with one another in childhood, and this pattern of aggressive friendships continues through adolescence” (Howell).

Community/Neighborhood. Children who live in areas with high levels of gang activity and violence are at a higher risk of joining a gang themselves (Sonterblum, 2022). This might be because they are exposed to this lifestyle and then follow it as a result, or because they are seeking security for themselves. Dr. David Pyrooz, Professor at the University of Colorado, explains, “Juvenile gangs form in already violent environments that are characterized with marginality and oppression” because such environments lead kids to look for safety and protection, which they think they will get from gangs (Perez, 2020).

School. School-related problems, such as academic failures, negative labeling, low academic ambition, and overall trouble at school are key risk factors for gang membership, and may be more indicative for girls than boys (NGC, 2020). In addition, children who have a “low degree of commitment to and involvement in school and weak attachment to teachers” are at an increased risk (Howell, 2010). Studies also suggest that poorly functioning schools, with “high levels of student and teacher victimization, large student-teacher ratios, poor academic quality, poor school climates, and high rates of social sanctions (e.g., suspensions, expulsions, and referrals to juvenile court)” often have a higher percentage of students who join and form gangs (Howell). Further, many students who join gangs struggle in school academically, socially, and behaviorally. Howell explains, for instance, “nearly 8 of 10 gang-involved youth referred to juvenile court in Durham, NC, had been suspended, truant, expelled, or otherwise disconnected from school.” School safety concerns in general lead to gang membership for both boys and girls (NGC).

Protective Factors

Protective factors also exist across domains, including “prosocial family, school, neighborhood, and peer environments, and individual characteristics” (NGC, 2020). Protective factors against gang involvement include: interpersonal skills (individual), parental involvement (family), family support (family), positive social connections (peer

environments), peer support (peer environments), academic achievements and aspirations (school), and reducing delinquency, alcohol and drug use (individual/neighborhood) (Youth.gov, 2022). Research also suggests that “increasing the level of positive feelings youth have for themselves and their parents, and empowering parents to better supervise teenagers’ behavior and choice of friends, are important protective factors” (NGC). In the family domain, not living with or being close to a family member who is associated with gangs is an important protective factor.

Consequences of Gangs

Youth gang involvement impacts the health and wellbeing of the individuals involved, as well as their peers, family, and community. There are both short-term and long-term consequences of gang involvement, and these consequences range in severity.

Violence & Victimization

While youth often join gangs for protection, research consistently shows “the risk and rate of victimization, especially violent victimization, increases substantially while youth are in a gang” (NGC, 2020). Researchers explain that the reason for this is that “given the ‘choice’ between seemingly random acts of street violence when not in a gang versus the more structured and less random acts within the gang culture (including the sense of group protection that being part of a gang engenders), individuals are more likely to choose to belong to a gang” (NGC). Further, while in a gang, individuals perceive the risk of violence to be more predictable and manageable (e.g. violence from a rival gang), and that is preferable to the seemingly random risk that youth not involved in gangs endure (NGC).

High-Risk Behavior & Social Consequences

Youth involved with gangs are more likely to engage in substance abuse and high-risk sexual behavior (Ritter et al., 2019). Long-term consequences, likely related to some of the high-risk behavior, include dropping out of school, early parenthood, and lack of stable employment (NGC, 2020). Researchers also found that youth gang involvement is linked to public health issues including “alcohol and drug abuse and/or dependence, poor general health, and poor mental health during adulthood” (NGC).

Incarceration

Gang involvement puts youth at a higher risk for being arrested, having a criminal record, and incarceration, “which stems from the increased involvement in criminal offending while in a gang—which further reduces the probability of a successful transition from adolescence to adulthood” (NGC, 2020). This creates additional societal issues because incarceration often does not fix the problems associated with gang involvement, but exacerbates them. Perez (2020) explains that incarceration “intensifies their affiliation . . . in a way that would not have occurred but for their involvement in the system.” While incarcerated, youth don’t build supportive networks that will help them in the futures, but rather “they are pushed deeper into these criminal subcultures” (Perez).

Section 2 Key Terms

Gang - Organized groups of three or more people with a collective identity surrounding criminal activity

Incarceration - Imprisonment; state of being confined in prison

Section 2 Reflection Questions

1. Do you feel that you and the staff at your school know how to recognize warning signs of potential gang violence, and know when, where, and how to report such threats?
2. Do you think gangs are a problem in your school and/or your community? Are you satisfied with the current response to gangs by your school, community, law enforcement, etc.?
 - a. What would you do to improve the response to gangs at your school or within your community?
3. What issues do you think most contribute to gang activity in your school and
 - a. community?

Section 2 Activities

1. Create a Google Drive folder for students at-risk for gang involvement. Include school and community wide supports, and contact information for such supports. Post a link to the folder in your Google Classroom or in some other area that lets students know it is there.

Section 3: Teen Dating Violence

Teen dating violence (TDV) is a type of intimate partner violence (IPV), which is “abuse or aggression that occurs in a romantic relationship” (CDC, 2022b). TDV can happen in person, online, or through technology, and can include the following types of behavior:

- Physical Violence
- Sexual Violence
- Psychological Aggression
- Stalking (CDC)

Physical violence is any “any intentional, unwanted contact with you or something close to your body, or any behavior that causes or has the intention of causing you injury, disability, or death” (love is respect, 2022). Examples of physical abuse include:

- Hitting, kicking, punching, choking, biting, and scratching
- Throwing objects at the other person (e.g. book, phone, shoe)
- Pulling hair
- Threatening to use or using a weapon (e.g. gun, knife, bat)
- Preventing individuals from leaving, or forcing them to go somewhere (love is respect)

Sexual violence “forcing or attempting to force a partner to take part in a sex act and or sexual touching when the partner does not consent or is unable to consent or refuse” (CDC). Sexual violence can also be non-physical, such as posting or sharing sexual photos of someone without consent, or sexting someone without consent. Examples of sexual violence include:

- Unwanted kissing or touching
- Unwanted rough or violent sexual activity
- Refusing to use condoms or restricting access to birth control
- Sexual contact without informed consent
- Threatening, pressuring, or forcing someone into performing sexual acts (love is respect)

Psychological aggression, often called emotional abuse, is the use of communication, both verbal and non-verbal, with the intent to harm a partner mentally or emotional, and exert control over that person (CDC). This type of abuse can include “name calling, making a partner feel guilty, purposeful embarrassment, or controlling behaviors such as keeping him or her away from friends and family” (Debnam & Mauer, 2019). Other examples of psychological aggression include:

- Damaging the other person’s property
- Using online communications to control, intimidate, or humiliate
- Threatening to harm other persons, their loved ones, or their pets
- Threatening to harm oneself if the relationship ends
- Gaslighting
- Threatening to expose personal data (e.g. sexual orientation, immigration status) (love is respect)

Stalking is a “pattern of repeated, unwanted attention and contact by a current or former partner that causes fear or safety concern for an individual victim or someone close to the victim” (CDC). Examples of stalking include:

- Showing up at the other person’s home or workplace unannounced
- Sending unwanted texts, voicemails, messages, letters, or emails
- Leaving unwanted gifts
- Calling and hanging up repeatedly
- Using social media or technology to track the other person’s activities

- Waiting around at places where the person hangs out

Teen Dating Violence (TDV) Prevalence

TDV is not uncommon. Data from the CDC's 2019 Youth Behavior Risk Survey revealed that among U.S. high school students who reported dating within the 12-months before the survey, about 1 in 11 female students and 1 in 15 male students experienced physical dating violence, and about 1 in 9 female students and 1 in 36 male students experienced sexual dating violence (Prothero, 2019). Female students experience higher rates of both physical and sexual violence than male students, with young women between the ages of 18-24 experiencing the highest rate of intimate partner violence (CDC, 2022b; Break the Cycle). Further, more than half of adult women (69.5%) and men (53.6%) who have been physically or sexually abused, or stalked, first experienced some type of abuse between the ages of 11-24 years old (Break the Cycle).

Risk Factors & Protective Factors

Certain factors might increase teens' risk of experiencing or perpetrating TDV. Typically, teens experience community, family, peer, and individual risk factors for TDV. Due to a lack of "longitudinal data" and a reliance on self-reported data, the relationship between risk factors and TDV represent correlations more than causality (Youth.gov, 2022b).

Risk Factors

Individual. Teens who have experienced stressful life events or trauma, including past history of sexual abuse or sexual victimization, are at a higher risk for experiencing TDV (Youth.gov, 2022b). Research shows that girls who menstruate at an earlier age are also more susceptible to TDV victimization (Youth.gov). Behavioral characteristics that increase a teen's risk of TDV include participating in risky behaviors (e.g. substance abuse, alcohol use, violence, stealing, etc.), dating at an early age, engaging in sexual activity before age 16, exhibiting maladaptive or antisocial behaviors, and having aggressive conflict-management styles (Youth.gov).

Certain personality traits and mental health issues have also been observed as a risk factor for TDV. These include having low self esteem, anger, or depressed mood, using "emotional disengagement" and "confrontational blaming" as coping mechanisms, and

having less inclination to seek help (Youth.gov). Depressive symptoms, in particular, are strongly related to TDV perpetration and victimization for both boys and girls (OJJDP, 2022). In addition to depressive symptoms, studies show that suicidal behavior and low self esteem were associated with girls being victims of physical or sexual violence (OJJDP). Likewise, teens who believe that dating violence is acceptable, or are accepting of violence against women are more susceptible as well (Youth.gov).

Students who identify as LGBTQ+ or those unsure of their sexual identity experienced higher rates of physical and sexual dating violence compared to their heterosexual peers (CDC, 2022b). Male LGBTQ+ are at a higher risk than female LGBTQ+ and heterosexual teens (CDC). In fact, “males who are unsure of their sexual identity experience the highest rates of teen dating violence, compared with LGB males and heterosexual males” (CDC).

Family. Adverse family dynamics can impact decisions and tendencies of teenagers later in life. Teens who live in poverty, come from disadvantaged homes, or who are involved with child protective services (CPS) are at a higher risk for experiencing TDV (Youth.gov, 2022). Exposure to “interparental and family violence” has been identified as a risk factor for TDV (OJJDP, 2022). Teens who experienced harsh parenting, inconsistent discipline, or lack supervision, monitoring, or warmth from a caregiver are considered at-risk as well (Youth.gov, 2022b). In general, child maltreatment is linked to a number of negative outcomes later in life, and studies show that “childhood exposure to maltreatment was a statistically significant predictor of both victimization and perpetration of dating violence” (OJJDP). Both being a victim of child maltreatment, as well as witnessing domestic violence by parents in the home, were predictors of TDV perpetration (OJJDP).

Peer. Individuals who have friends involved in dating violence, participate in peer violence, or have violent friends are at a higher risk of experiencing TDV (Youth.gov, 2022b). The reason for this is because “social groups are commonly not diverse at the adolescent stage, it is easy for norms among the group to be unopposed and become commonplace” (OJJDP, 2022). Adolescents are easily influenced by their friends, including negative behaviors and associations.

Bullying is another antisocial behavior that has been linked to TDV. Multiple studies have found that bullies are at a higher risk for becoming perpetrators of TDV, and bullying victims are at a higher risk of becoming TDV victims (OJJDP, 2022). “Adolescents may

learn that bullying others in a peer relationship can improve the social status of the bully and then apply the same behavior to a romantic relationship” (OJJDP).

Community. “The community where adolescents grow up and the attitudes toward violence to which they are exposed can affect the occurrence of teen dating violence victimization and perpetration” (OJJDP, 2022). For instance, studies show that adolescents that grew up in communities that were more accepting of abuse were more likely to experience TDV in their lives (OJJDP). Specifically, teenagers who are exposed to community or neighborhood violence are considered at-risk for TDV (Youth.gov, 2022b). Further, “violent crime rates and lower neighborhood quality were also linked to an increased chance of experiencing teen dating violence” (OJJDP).

Protective Factors

Like risk factors, protective factors can be divided into the same four categories: Individual, Family, Peer, Community.

Individual. Self-regulation, or the ability to control one’s behavior, can serve as a protective factor for TDV (OJJDP, 2022). “Adolescents who have stronger self-regulation skills tend to exhibit fewer teen dating violence perpetration behaviors, compared with those who have trouble self-regulating” (OJJDP). Healthy coping skills also serve as a protective factor against TDV, most likely because “teens with strong coping skills are more likely to deal with romantic partner conflict with problem-focused strategies rather than with violence” (OJJDP).

A recent meta-analysis of 50 studies looked at the risk factors associated with physical victimization in teen dating relationships and found that “communication skills, higher levels of self-esteem, and good physical health” were protective factors against TDV victimization (OJJDP, 2022). Lastly, a 2020 qualitative study examined why adolescent girls who had been previously involved in TDV perpetration intended to stop such behavior, and found that the girls expressed the following desires: “1) achieve life goals without being involved in the criminal justice system, 2) avoid feelings of relationship fatigue and exhaustion, 3) avoid embarrassment among peers, 4) help their current relationship stay intact, and 5) learn how to better handle conflicts in future relationships” (OJJDP).

Family. “Maternal warmth and acceptance have been shown to serve as protective factors against later teen dating violence, and this effect is still seen when children are exposed to violence and maltreatment at home” (OJJDP, 2022). Maternal warmth and acceptance aids in development of skills like self-regulation, which is also a protective factor against TDV. Higher levels of parental monitoring, as well as “parental strictness and conservative sexual attitudes” also decreased the likelihood of TDV victimization (OJJDP). Overall, parental and familial support is a protective factor against all types of teen victimization, including TDV (OJJDP).

Peer. Having a strong social support system is a key protective factor against TDV victimization (OJJDP, 2022). Unfortunately, when a teen experiences TDV, they are unlikely to report it. OJJDP reports that only 8.6% of teens who reported being in a violent relationship also reported seeking help; however, of the individuals that did seek help, 77.2% reported turning to a friend, emphasizing the importance of strong friendships. Having a strong support system of peers who encourage help-seeking behaviors also protects against future TDV victimization. Having good social skills and positive peer relationships are also protective factors, particularly for girls (OJJDP). The reason for this is that “having these positive social skills and bonds helps reduce unhealthy behaviors later in life, including deviant behaviors and actions that would put an adolescent at risk for teen dating violence” (OJJDP).

Community. While there is limited research on protective factors for TDV within the community, one study found that “perceived neighborhood support was an important protective factor for female adolescents who had experienced sexual violence/abuse in their relationships” (OJJDP, 2022). Some research has also shown that “acculturation and cultural identity” can serve as protective factors for TDV (OJJDP).

Consequences of TDV

Experiencing TDV can have a serious impact on a young person’s life and such impact can last well into adulthood. Several studies have explored both the short-term and long-term consequences associated with TDV victimization. Results of these studies show that compared to teens who have not experienced TDV, teens who experience relationship violence “are at higher risk of a range of negative physical and behavioral health outcomes” (OJJDP, 2022).

Short-Term Consequences

There are short-term health and mental health outcomes associated with TDV, and these consequences span across a teen's entire life. Youth who are victims of TDV often experience anxiety and depression symptoms, as well as engage in unhealthy behaviors, like using drugs, alcohol, and tobacco (CDC, 2022b). In a study of teen girls who experienced TDV victimization, victims "were at increased risk of substance use, unhealthy weight control behaviors (such as using laxatives to lose weight), risky sexual behaviors, pregnancy, and suicidality (including suicide attempts)" (OJJDP, 2022). For male high school students who have experienced sexual or physical abuse by a significant other, more than 25% have seriously contemplated suicide, and almost that many have made suicide attempts; for female students who have experienced physical or sexual abuse by a significant other, more than half have contemplated suicide and over 25% have attempted suicide (Break the Cycle, 2017).

TDV can impact an individual's physical health as well. High school girls who experience TDV are 2.6 times more likely to report a sexually transmitted disease (STD) diagnosis, which could also be a potential long-term consequence (Break the Cycle, 2017). Another short-term consequence of TDV is the risk of physical injury. One study examining injuries related to TDV found that "the rate of injury for all physical teen dating violence episodes was 20 percent" (OJJDP).

High school students who have been physically abused by their significant other earned grades of Cs and Ds twice as often as they earned As and Bs (Break the Cycle, 2017). Further, victims of TDV might experience antisocial behaviors, such as lying or bullying (CDC, 2022b).

Long-Term Consequences

Violence in teen relationships starts a pattern for future relationship issues, including "intimate partner violence and sexual violence perpetration and/or victimization throughout life" (CDC, 2022b). Victims of TDV in high school are at a higher risk of being victimized in college (CDC). Studies show that males who reported psychological TDV reported "increased antisocial behaviors and increased odds of suicidal ideation, marijuana use, and adult intimate-partner victimization, compared with males who reported no victimization" (OJJDP, 2022). Females who reported both psychological and physical victimization "showed greater depressive symptomology and increased odds of suicidal ideation, smoking, and adult intimate-partner victimization" (OJJDP).

A study of 1,321 adolescents, conducted over a 10-year period, found that regardless of gender, teens who experienced TDV "were associated with declines in self-rated physical

health over time” (OJJDP, 2022). Further, studies consistently show that individuals who experienced TDV “were more likely to continue to experience physical intimate-partner violence about 12 years later, compared with individuals who reported no adolescent dating violence victimization” (OJJDP).

Section 3 Key Terms

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) - Abuse or aggression that occurs in a romantic relationship

Physical Violence - any intentional, unwanted contact with you or something close to your body, or any behavior that causes or has the intention of causing you injury, disability, or death

Psychological Aggression - The use of communication, both verbal and non-verbal, with the intent to harm a partner mentally or emotional, and exert control over that individual

Sexual Violence - Forcing or attempting to force a partner to take part in a sex act and or sexual touching when the partner does not consent or is unable to consent or refuse

Stalking - Pattern of repeated, unwanted attention and contact by a current or former partner that causes fear or safety concern for an individual victim or someone close to the victim

Section 3 Discussion Questions

1. Prior to taking this course, were you familiar with Teen Dating Violence? Did its prevalence surprise you?
2. Have you witnessed any type of TDV as a teacher? What was your reaction?

Section 3 Activities

1. Create a Google Drive folder with TDV resources for students. This can include fliers that you will print, as well as informational resources to provide them. Your folder should include:

- a. TDV infographics explaining what it is
 - b. Websites, phone numbers, and other available resources
 - c. School provided resources (social workers, trauma response workers, etc)
2. Research your school's protocol for dealing with TDV. If your school does not have one, build one surrounding victim safety and perpetrator accountability.
 - a. Create a flowchart of roles and responsibilities of school personnel (include who to contact / when, and contact information)
 - b. Lay out the school's response plan
 - c. Discuss additional training needed for staff

Section 4: Youth Violence Prevention

Youth violence in all of its forms is a serious problem and can have detrimental effects on the youth involved, families, friends, and communities. Because young people spend a significant amount of their time at school, educators and school staff are in a position to lead youth violence prevention efforts. Likewise, communities as a whole can come together to support prevention efforts. The CDC (2021) identifies several strategies to reduce youth violence, along with research and rationale for each one. Some of these strategies include: Strengthening youth's skills, connecting youth to caring adults and activities, and creating protective community environments (CDC).

Strengthen Youth Skills

Strengthening youth's soft skills is a key component to violence prevention. Soft skills refer to "skills, behaviors, and personal qualities that help people to navigate their environment, relate well with others, perform well, and achieve their goals" (Soares et al., 2017). Examples of soft skills include self control, problem-solving, self-awareness, communication, self-regulation, conflict-management, and flexibility. "The likelihood of violence increases when youth have under-developed or ineffective skills in the areas of communication, problem-solving, conflict resolution and management, empathy, impulse control, and emotional regulation and management" (CDC, 2016). Research consistently shows that building youth's interpersonal, emotional, and behavioral skills

can help to prevent victimization and perpetration of violence, as well as achieve long-term positive outcomes in education, employment and health (Soares et al.).

Approaches

Universal school-based programs, sometimes referred to as Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) programs, are widely used in schools to help students develop the soft skills that they need to be successful. In addition to building and enhancing soft skills, SEL programs provide “information about violence, seek to change the way youth think and feel about violence, and provide opportunities to practice and reinforce skills” (CDC, 2016). Programs vary in terms of exact content and how it is delivered but approaches “often include guidance to teachers and other school personnel on ways to build youth’s skills, monitor and manage behavior, and build a positive school climate to reduce aggression and violence, such as bullying, and support academic success” (CDC). There are SEL programs for all age levels but they are predominantly used in elementary and middle school.

Evidence and Outcomes. Potential outcomes of school-based programs include: reductions in bullying and conduct problems, reductions in “involvement in violent and nonviolent crime in young adulthood,” reductions in substance use, reductions in depression and suicidal ideation, increases in “emotional regulation, understanding social situations, and developing effective and nonviolent solutions,” increases in academic proficiency, and increases in positive school climate (CDC,

2016). Years of research show that universal school-based programs demonstrate “beneficial impacts on youth’s skills and behaviors, including delinquency, aggression, bullying perpetration and victimization, and bystander skills that lower the likelihood of violence and support victims” (CDC). Benefits of these programs are strengthened when they are continuous throughout the school years.

Research-Based Programs. Some effective school-based programs include the Good Behavior Game (GBG), Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS), Life Skills Training (LST), and Steps to Respect (STR) (CDC, 2016). Participation in the GBG resulted in “lower levels of classroom aggression in elementary school, and some studies of the long-term effects of GBG showed significantly lower levels of aggression in middle school and lower prevalence of antisocial personality disorder and violent crime by age 19 to 21” (CDC). Participants also had lower levels of alcohol abuse, smoking, and suicidal ideation into young adulthood (CDC).

Evaluations of PATHS show impacts on “aggression, violent behaviors, and a number of developmental risk factors for violent behavior among participants in both regular and special education classrooms” (CDC, 2016). In randomized controlled trials of PATHS participants, individuals were “better able to regulate their emotions, understand social problems, develop effective solutions, and decrease their use of aggressive responses to conflict” (CDC). Further, compared to individuals in the controlled group, participants in PATHS demonstrated “greater reading and math proficiency in fourth grade and writing proficiency in fifth and sixth grade” (CDC).

Participation in STR demonstrated impacts on bullying and youth violence protective factors (CDC, 2016). One longitudinal study found that after two years of implementation, “participants had a 31% decrease in bullying and victimization, 36% decrease in non-bullying aggression, and 72% decrease in harmful bystander behavior” (CDC). Additional studies “found significantly lower levels of physical bullying perpetration among participants relative to controls, and significant increases in school anti-bullying policies, positive school climate, and positive bystander behavior” (CDC).

Connect Youth to Caring Adults and Activities

“Young people’s risk for violence can be buffered through strong connections to caring adults and involvement in activities that help young people grow and apply new skills” (CDC, 2016). Positive relationships with adults can influence a young person’s behavioral choices and reduce their risk for involvement in violence, substance use, and other risky behaviors (CDC). Caring adults can include teachers, school personnel, coaches, neighbors, or community volunteers. Exposure to positive adult role models helps young people learn appropriate behaviors, communication skills and positive relationship building. “Through positive interpersonal relationships and learning activities, youth can also develop broad and healthy life goals, improve their school engagement and skills, and establish networks and have experiences that improve their future schooling and employment opportunities” (CDC).

Positive adult relationships aid in overall healthy development. “Caring adult relationships promote motivation in school, lower rates of drug and alcohol abuse, reduce contact with the justice system, lower suicide rates and promote better overall mental health” (United Way, 2022). Young people with even one positive adult role model in their lives are more likely to grow into productive adults (United Way). Because

of the amount of time that teachers spend with their students and the relationships that they build, teachers are often the caring adults in a child's life.

Create Protective Community Environments

"Creating protective community environments in which young people develop is a necessary step toward achieving population-level reductions in youth violence" (CDC, 2016). Community environments might include schools, youth-serving organizations, or parks. Making changes to community environments are considered community-level approaches. "Such approaches can involve, for example, changes to policies or the physical and social aspects of settings in order to reduce risk factors and increase protective factors for youth violence" (CDC). Even small changes can influence youth behavior by "creating a context that promotes social norms that protect against violence" (CDC). "These approaches can improve perceived and actual safety and reduce opportunities for violence and crime and, in turn, increase protective factors, such as residents having more prosocial interactions and opportunities to support youth" (CDC).

Approaches

Modify the physical and social environment. Modifying the physical and social environment prevents youth violence "by enhancing and maintaining the physical characteristics of settings where people come together in order to foster social interaction, strengthen connectedness, and increase collective efficacy (e.g., shared trust among residents and willingness to intervene)" (CDC, 2016). Some examples of these modifications include increased lighting, managing accessibility to public spaces, creating green space, and sponsoring community events (CDC).

Reduce exposure to community level risks. "Youth violence is associated with a number of community-level risks, such as concentrated poverty, residential instability, and density of alcohol outlets" (CDC, 2016). Reducing such risks can also reduce the potential violent outcomes that they cause. Prevention approaches to reduce such risks include "changing, enacting, or enforcing laws, city ordinances and local regulations, and policies to improve household financial security, safe and affordable housing, and the social and economic sustainability of neighborhoods" (CDC).

Street outreach and community norm change. These approaches "connect trained outreach staff with residents to mediate conflicts, promote norms of nonviolence, and connect youth to community supports to reduce risks and build buffers against violence"

(CDC, 2016). These programs will vary based on the model used, staff training, and community resources. “Outreach staff typically connect with residents with known histories of engaging in criminal and violence-related activities or who are at heightened risk to engage in violence (e.g., had a recent argument, family member or friend recently harmed by violence)” (CDC). However, such approaches can also be used at a universal level as preventative measures. Further, this approach “uses public education and neighborhood events to change norms about the acceptability of violence and willingness of community members to act in ways to reduce the likelihood of violence” (CDC).

Outcomes and Evidence

Potential outcomes of protective community environments include reductions in violence-related injuries among youth, reductions in gang-related violence, reductions in community risk factors for youth violence, and increases in “normative beliefs that violence is unacceptable” (CDC, 2016). There are several different street outreach and community norm change programs available, and some are evidence-based for preventing violence. Programs like Cure Violence and Safe Streets are “associated with reductions in gun violence, homicides, gang related violence, and nonfatal assault-related injuries in some but not all implementation areas where studied” (CDC).

Additional Prevention Methods for Schools

In addition to schoolwide prevention programs, Stein and Taylor (2018) explain that conducting staff training is crucial in preventing youth violence. “All faculty members and staff should understand the magnitude of the problem of sexual harassment and assault among teens and how to implement evidence-based strategies” (Stein & Taylor). Further, staff should be trained to identify red flag behavior and warning signs of youth violence, including but not limited to physical injuries, sudden changes in behavior or student absenteeism (MAEC, 2022).

Strategies that do not work. There are some strategies that schools turn to that are just ineffective. Punitive punishments, such as suspensions, for bullies are ineffective if they are not accompanied by a long-term safety plan for the target, and further intervention for the bully (education world, 2022). Although it might seem tempting to implement zero-tolerance policies and one-size-fits-all punishments, they won’t improve the situation without additional support for the perpetrator. All of the parties involved in a bullying situation need follow-up support, though those supports will differ.

“Using peer mediation to address bullying, or any approach that puts bully and victim in the same room to ‘work it out,’” is ineffective because “bullying is an abuse-of-power dynamic, not a disagreement between equals” (education world, 2022). For this same reason, telling a victim to ignore a bully is not helpful. Adult intervention is always necessary in a bullying situation.

Schools as a Safe Space

Creating safe and supportive environments (SSE) emphasizes “aspects of the school environment that encourage students to be more engaged in their school life and feel connected to important adults at school and at home” (CDC, 2020). When schools are a safe space for students, connectedness is built, which is a protective factor against “high-risk substance use and mental health issues, and helps keep students from committing or being victims of violence” (CDC). A safe and supportive school environment is successful in “connecting adolescents to a network of caring peers and adults, including parents, other primary caregivers, and teachers” (CDC).

Having a feeling of school connectedness, “which is the belief held by students that adults and peers in the school care about their learning and about them as individuals,” is a key protective factor against youth violence, as well as a key component of a SSE (CDC, 2016). When youth feel school connectedness, they are less likely to experience poor mental health, sexual health risks, substance abuse, and violence (CDC). School connectedness is important for all students, but it is especially important for youth “who report experiencing racism, youth from racial and ethnic minority groups, and youth who identify as LGBTQ+,” as they often feel less connected at school (CDC).

Schools can help build connectedness at school through specific classroom management strategies, inclusive practices, and positive youth development programs (CDC, 2020). Classroom management approaches that promote school connectedness include teacher caring and support, peer connection and encouragement, student autonomy and empowerment, management of classroom social dynamics, consistent teacher expectations, and behavior management (CDC). At the building level, “school programs and practices that promote inclusion, such as gender and sexuality alliances (GSAs) and multi-cultural groups/clubs, increase all students’ sense of safety and connectedness” (CDC). Positive youth development (PYD) programs “provide youth with networks of supportive adults and opportunities for connectedness” (CDC). Such programs don’t focus solely on risky behaviors, but rather prioritize building positive behaviors and characteristics.

Schools as a Resource

Schools can educate students and the community on youth violence prevention and identification. When students are aware of the warning signs they are more likely to encourage victims to report an incident, or they will tell a trusted adult themselves. Schools can also “provide effective support to traumatized youth or to address the behavior and needs of perpetrators, adopt a comprehensive approach that takes into account the unique challenges that these offenses present, such as victim reluctance to report and trauma from sexual violence” (Office of Elementary and Secondary Education [OESE], 2022).

Specifics for Bullying Prevention

Schools must be upfront with their rules and policies, ensuring that students, staff, families, and the community are aware of them. Such rules and policies should be inclusive and have clearly identified anti-bullying procedures. Teachers must be able to recognize bullying in all of its forms and know how to effectively intervene when they see it. In addition to specific training, staff must monitor known bullying “hot spots,” (e.g. bathrooms, hallways, cafeteria), where frequent bullying incidents take place (education world, 2022).

Equally as important as teacher training is student training; students often witness more than teachers do and also have a greater influence on peers, so they are key in bullying prevention. Students should be taught what bullying is, what behaviors are considered bullying, and what the consequences of bullying are. Student training should also include “what to do when they witness bullying (mainly REPORT the incident and SUPPORT the target in a safe way); peer intervention, if done right, can be more powerful than adult intervention” (education world).

It is important for schools to create an “environment where students feel that if they are bullied, they will receive support from adults and peers; such an environment cannot be created via external mandate and must be a ‘grassroots’ effort that grows from internal commitment” (education world, 2022). If students believe that they will be supported then they will be more likely to report incidents of bullying.

Specifics for Teen Dating Violence Prevention

Educator Training. Educators need training in TDV and best practices for prevention and intervention. This includes learning about the risk factors, protective factors, and the appropriate language to use when talking about TDV. “Educators must be prepared to address warning signs such as physical injuries or absenteeism in students, but more subtle indicators of abuse may exist,” such as using public displays of affection (PDA) to exercise control (MAEC, 2022).

Responding to TDV. It’s important for students to know that they can turn to their teachers for help. In addition to following the school’s protocol, teachers can “give warm referrals to youth. A warm referral is when an adult introduces the youth to the service provider directly, or calls the service with them” (MAEC, 2022). Likewise, MAEC recommends using neutral language when talking about TDV with a victim because it encourages them to communicate more openly; first, name observable behavior (i.e. “I saw her scream in your face”), and then proceed with “compassionate curiosity” (“What’s going on here?”) (MAEC). “This approach prevents students from disputing what we have witnessed, while communicating our willingness to hear their perspective” (MAEC).

Teachers can explain to students why the behavior is concerning, provide them with resources and referrals, encourage them to come back and talk, and then follow up later. However, it is important not to promise secrecy since teachers are mandated reporters.

Educate Students. Students need to know what TDV is, and how to recognize it in their own relationships and their friends’ relationships. Likewise, students need to be aware of what a healthy relationship looks like. They should know that “violence is not part of affection. Students need to know how to distinguish between acts of abuse and acts of love” (Youth Dating Violence, 2022). Teachers can provide students with examples of TDV and explain how it manifests in relationships. “Educating students who aren’t currently in romantic relationships increases their capacity to help their friends and peer groups who may be involved in YDV” (Youth Dating Violence).

Youth should also be educated in consent, boundaries, and “individual agency” (Youth Dating Violence, 2022). “Students need to know that they and their potential romantic partners have control over their own body, decisions, and actions in a relationship” (Youth Dating Violence). Youth should also be educated in cyber dating violence, as this type of aggression is becoming more common. “Learning to recognize cyber dating violence is especially important, as teens may not be aware of appropriate online

relationship behaviour and boundaries” (Youth Dating Violence). Students need to know how to recognize cyber dating violence, and how to report it to an adult.

Explicit TDV Policies. “An explicit policy on Teen Dating Violence communicates to staff and students that these are issues the school district takes seriously” (MAEC, 2022). Research shows that accessible and effective policies ensure that both staff and students recognize violations and know when and how to report it (MAEC). In addition, Title IX under the Civil Rights Act protects students from discrimination based on sex, including dating violence, in any educational setting receiving federal funding (MAEC). “Schools are required to initiate a prompt, adequate, and impartial investigation of any complaint brought to school district personnel—even those that occur off-campus, such as on the school bus or online” (MAEC). Schools might also be required to give impacted students accommodations, such as counseling services, assignment extensions, or schedule changes.

Section 4 Key Terms

School connectedness - The belief held by students that adults and peers in the school care about their learning and about them as individuals

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) - An educational method that aims to foster social and emotional skills within school curricula

Soft Skills - Skills, behaviors, and personal qualities that help people to navigate their environment, relate well with others, perform well, and achieve their goals

Section 4 Discussion Questions

1. What role do you think a school plays in youth violence prevention? Do you think schools can really make an impact on this problem?
2. Does your school use any type of SEL program? Do you think it is effective? If not, what do you think would make it better?
3. Are you familiar with your district’s Title IX policies? Do you think students know that these protections exist? Why or why not?

Section 4 Activities

1. Create a Google Doc with the district's protocols for reporting Title IX violations, including the Title IX coordinator's contact information. (All districts are required to have these protocols and an appointed person)
2. Conduct a needs evaluation for your school to adopt a new SEL program. Determine your school's major needs and then compare a few programs to determine which would be the best fit.

Conclusion

Youth violence is a significant public health problem that affects thousands of young people each day. In order to be advocates against youth violence and bullying, educators must understand the magnitude of youth violence and the bullying problem, be aware of specific risk and protective factors, and have specific strategies for addressing and preventing youth violence and bullying.

Case Study

Mr. Downing is an 8th grade teacher at Hershey Middle School. Hershey has had high turnover of teachers and administration, so consistent implementation of norms, policies, and procedures has been difficult to implement. Recently, Jess, a popular 8th grade girl reported instances of students bullying Lizzie, a transgender female, also in 8th grade. Jess wants to support Lizzie but does not know where to start besides telling bullies to stop in the moment. Mr. Downing wants to help Jess and Lizzie, and also wants to help to promote kindness and inclusion for the entire school. Mr. Downing will investigate the situation further to ensure that Lizzie is protected and that those exhibiting bullying behaviors receive consequences and education about the negative impact of bullying. In addition, Mr. Downing will advocate for the review of school wide anti-bullying measures to see what improvements need to be made. Finally, Mr. Downing recognizes that Jess will be a valuable asset to assist with anti-bullying interventions, as she is a popular and well-liked student who has demonstrated compassion and the ability to intervene when necessary.

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