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PROGRAMS AND PRACTICES TO PREVENT SCHOOL VIOLENCE AND IMPROVE SCHOOL SAFETY

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Abstract: Maintaining a safe and supportive learning environment is important for students' well-being and quality of education. Schools and communities seek the most effective strategies to ensure the safety of students and staff. This literature review discusses the evidence on various school safety practices and programs. Though schools have been quick to implement strategies such as hiring police officers and installing metal detectors, research shows that schools may benefit more from investing in support staff, such as nurses and counselors, and by relying on rehabilitative practices (e.g., social skills training) as opposed to punitive discipline (e.g., suspension and expulsion).

Introduction[1]

Schools are generally one of the safest locations for youth.[1] However, intense media coverage of school shootings can elevate fears that school violence[2] is, in fact, probable, disproportionate to its actual risk.[3] Staff and students may be fearful of multiple forms of violence, including both external threats (e.g., gunmen coming into the school) and internal threats (e.g., fighting, bullying).[4] Though school violence and crime have substantially declined since the 1990s,[5] these issues remain a focus at all levels of government, as well as for parents, students, and educators, as experiencing or witnessing violence can have long-lasting negative effects on youth.[6]

Concerns for student well-being have prompted schools to respond swiftly to the perceived threat of school violence. For example, following the deadly elementary school shooting in Newtown, Conn., schools nationally spent almost $5 billion on security measures alone.[7] In addition, federal agencies offer millions in funding to schools to implement violence prevention initiatives.[8] Today, almost all schools in the United States are implementing at least one school safety measure,[9] which vary by school district and even by school building. Some schools have implemented punitive policies that suspend and exclude students for violent or disruptive behavior; others have responded by concentrating on youth development and rewarding prosocial behavior. Many schools have installed metal detectors and hired security guards or school resource officers.[10]

This article, the second in a two-part series on school safety and violence, examines the efficacy of various school safety practices and programs. Policy implications for schools are also discussed.

School-based Violence Prevention Practices

School-based violence prevention practices include general categories of programs or policies that have overlapping features. These practices are intended to prevent or reduce violence in the school setting, but they can be applied broadly, and therefore the specific characteristics may differ from school to school. The following section includes examples of commonly used practices and includes an overview of research on their effectiveness.

Threat Assessment

Behavioral threat assessment, first used by the U.S. Secret Service to assess and respond to threats of high-ranking politicians, is a method now used within the school environment to prevent and react to threats of school violence.[11] A 2019 National Threat Assessment Center report indicated school shooters often exhibited some sort of threatening or concerning behavior prior to their attack.[12] Thus, the premise of threat assessment is that this behavior can be identified and responded to appropriately before violence occurs.

[1] Many schools have moved to online or home learning in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Violence, abuse, or neglect at homes may not be detected or measured in school violence reports. Practices and programs described in this report were primarily developed to prevent school violence occurring on school campuses.

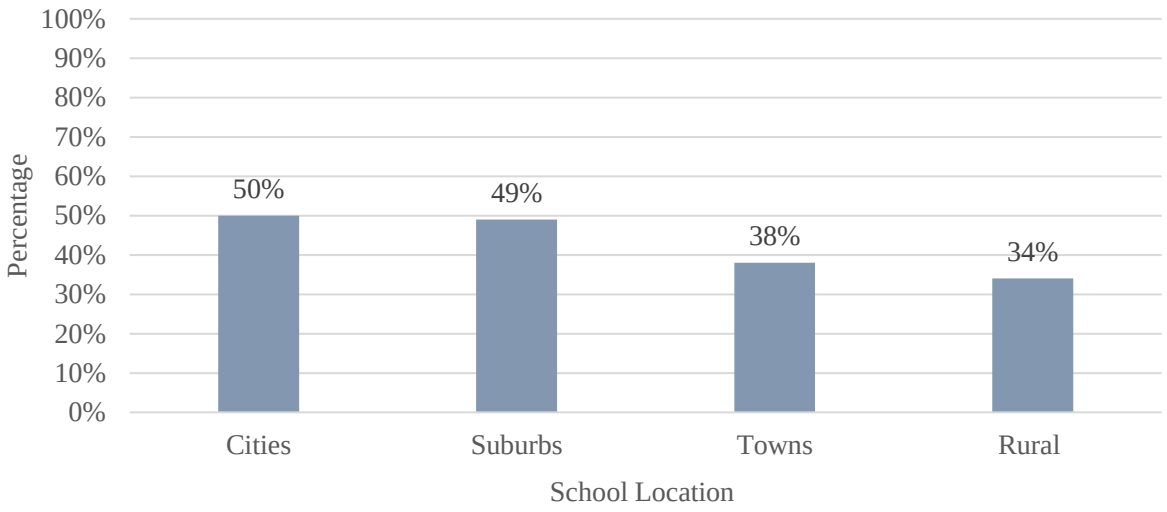
Threats are defined as any expression of intent to harm, injure, or damage; may be communicated through speech, writing, or gesture; may be explicit or implied; or may involve a gun or weapon.[13] A multidisciplinary threat assessment team of teachers, administrators, counselors, mental health providers, and law enforcement evaluate potential threats to determine whether the threat-making individual is taking concrete steps to carry out the act.[14]

The threat assessment team classifies threats as two types:

- **Transient threats**, which are an expression of anger or frustration, are quickly resolved through an apology or retraction.
- **Substantive threats** include a detailed plan for committing a violent act and indicate more serious intent. A student making a substantive threat may have a history of violent behavior, have known access to weapons, and may invite accomplices or an audience to the act of violence.[15]

Threat assessment in schools can help distinguish between these two types of threats to guide an appropriate response from school personnel and/or law enforcement.[16] Whereas responses to transient threats do not require protective actions or security measures, responses to substantive threats include notifying potential targets and the parents of the threat-maker, as well as screening the threat-maker for mental health services and increasing their monitoring.[17] Though not all schools use a threat assessment process, the practice is gaining popularity (Figure 1).

Figure 1
Percentage of U.S. Schools using Threat Assessment, by Location: 2017-2018



Source: Diliberti, M., Jackson, M., Correa, S., & Padgett, Z. (2019). *Crime, violence, discipline, and safety in U.S. public schools. Findings from the school survey on crime and safety: 2017-2018*. National Center for Education Statistics.

Overall, school threat assessment is a relatively new process, though efforts have been made to compile best practices. Researchers have indicated threat assessment programs in schools must incorporate certain components to be effective, including:[18]

- A method for identifying and collecting information about threatened violence (e.g., a tip line or campaign that encourages students to report suspected issues).
- A way to determine if a student has access to guns (e.g., talking to other students and parents or examining social media).
- Making counselors available to students to offer guidance and social-emotional support, as well as recognize when students may be exhibiting risk factors for violence.

While multiple threat assessment models exist, research on their effectiveness is limited. The Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines (CSTAG) model is one of the most extensively evaluated. Nekvasil and Cornell (2015) found that schools utilizing the CSTAG imposed fewer suspensions, reported less aggressive behavior within the student population, and reported higher perceptions of safety than schools with their own threat assessment models and schools without threat assessment.[19]

However, some researchers are critical of threat assessment and suggest schools may unfairly target certain demographics, such as students of color or those with disabilities.[20] Louvar-Reeves and Brock (2017) hypothesized that threat assessment may not be as effective when used by schools with a negative school climate in which little trust exists between teachers and students.[21] Researchers recommend schools improve relationships between staff and students and implement anti-bullying efforts when using a threat assessment approach.[22] Future research is needed to evaluate and compare schools operating with and without threat assessment, as well as various threat assessment models.[23]

Law Enforcement in Schools

School resource officers (SROs) are sworn police officers assigned by their police departments to work in the school setting. The National Association of School Resource Officers outlines three major roles of SROs— educator, mentor, and law enforcement officer[24]—though exact duties may vary by school. Some states outline specialized criteria and training for SROs, as there are no national standards.[25] An analysis from the Urban Institute found that 67% of high school students, 45% of middle school students, and 19% of elementary school students attend schools assigned with an SRO.[26] Recent decades have seen a marked increase in the number of SROs in schools. In 1970, fewer than 100 SROs were in schools in the United States; today, there are an estimated 14,000-19,000 SROs.[27] It is difficult to make an exact estimate, as SROs are not required to register in a national database and police departments are not required to indicate which officers work as SROs.

Previous research on SROs has focused on student perceptions and implementation;[28] less is known about effects on students' safety.[29] Initial findings suggest that SROs may detect more crime, such as finding weapons or drugs on students,[30] but their presence also is associated with increased use of exclusionary discipline[31] and criminalization of student behavior.[32] One study found schools with increased SRO staffing recorded higher counts of weapon- and drug-related crimes compared to schools without increased SRO staffing.[33] Ultimately, more research is needed on the impact of SROs on school safety outcomes.[34]

Role Conflict

Some SROs experience role conflict between their duties as law enforcement and member of the school community.[35] Although some officers want to provide genuine mentorship to students, students may feel unable to fully confide in law enforcement for fear of action being taken against them for disclosed illegal behaviors.[36] In addition, the presence of an SRO can create a situation in which disruptive behaviors previously addressed by teachers or counselors become the responsibility of the SRO, who may respond with arrest or a juvenile justice system referral, creating a "school-to-prison pipeline."[37] A study from Wolf (2013) found that SROs exert substantial discretion when deciding whether or not to arrest and suggested that future research should study SRO decision-making and training and how it affects student outcomes.[38]

Discriminatory Discipline

Research indicates students of color are disproportionately impacted by law enforcement in schools.[39] One study indicated Black students are punished more often and more harshly than White students,[40] and despite making up 15.5% of students nationally, Black students are arrested 33.4% of the time.[41] The American Civil Liberties Union reports Native American and Pacific Island/Native Hawaiian students are arrested at twice the rate of White students, and students with disabilities are arrested at three times the rate of students without disabilities.[42] If SROs are to remain in schools, Utt (2018) suggested SRO training should include a stronger emphasis on racism, power, and oppression and discuss how racial identity influences their work.[43] Further, Utt recommended that a diverse body of students should be asked to provide feedback on SRO responsibilities.

Zero-Tolerance Policies

Zero-tolerance school policies assume that the harsh punishment of disruptive or violent students through measures such as suspension or expulsion (i.e., negative discipline) will ultimately make schools safer. Based upon the theories of deterrence (see later text box), schools employ punitive measures to deter other students from exhibiting the same negative behaviors (e.g., bringing drugs or weapons to school, fighting, violence). Research estimates around 75% of schools have used such policies, but there is little evidence of a violence reduction effect.[44] Furthermore, suspensions and expulsions have not been shown to improve school climate or student behavior and may influence negative effects on students, such as higher rates of dropout and decreased academic achievement.[45] Many states, including Illinois, have legally restricted zero-tolerance policies due to a lack of discernible school safety benefits, as well as intense negative media coverage on overuse.[46]

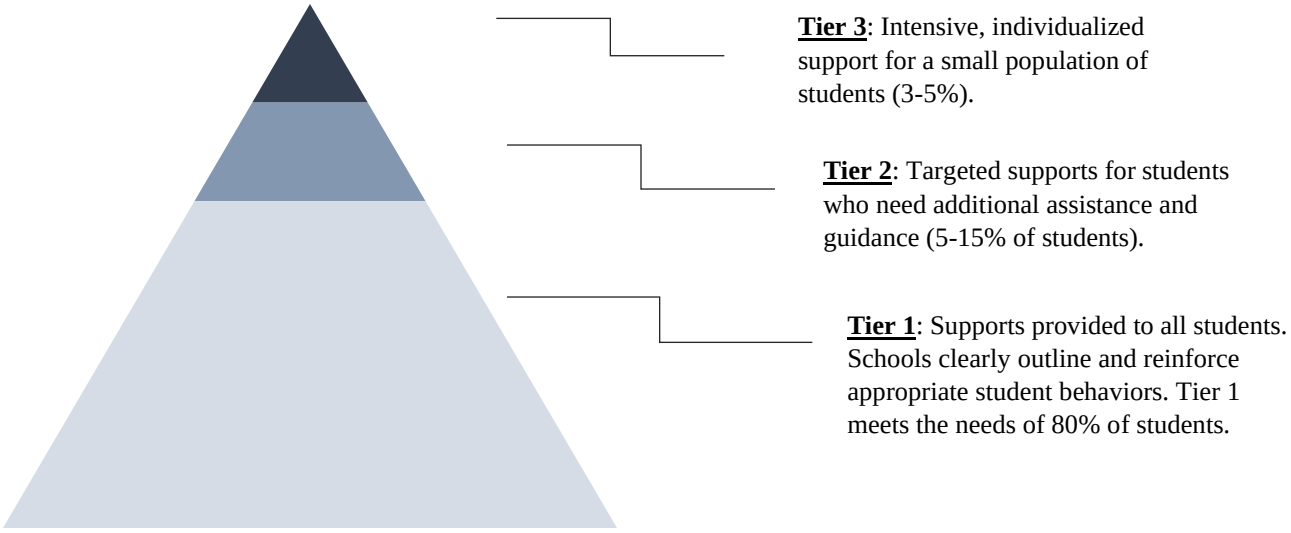
Zero-tolerance policies also have been heavily criticized for disproportionately punishing students of color. In fact, research shows that Black students are suspended at two to three times the rate of other students and also experience increased referrals and expulsion.[47] Researchers have argued that zero-tolerance policies have additionally contributed to the school-to-prison pipeline for students of color and those with disabilities.[48] Overall, research does not support the use of zero-tolerance policies to prevent violence in schools and instead shows these policies influence higher rates of recidivism and school drop-outs.[49]

School-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS)

Violence prevention practices using positive discipline focus on connecting problematic students with support (e.g., mental health services, social skills training) as needed, instead of using punishment, to prevent future disruptive or violent behavior. Schools using positive discipline react to antisocial behaviors by teaching and fairly enforcing behavioral expectations, examining the underlying motives of the antisocial behavior (i.e., viewing behavior as a form of communication), and using rewards for improved behaviors.[50]

Created by two special education researchers, the School-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS) model uses positive discipline delineated by three tiers of supports for students (Figure 2). SWPBIS is not a prepackaged curriculum or program for purchase; it is a general approach to discipline which can be altered based upon a school's cultural values.[51] This model is guided by the premise that students can learn behavioral expectations and apply them to their actions.

Figure 2
School-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS) Overview



Source: Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports. (n.d.). *What is school-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports?* https://www.pbis.org/topics/school-wide

Using this model, teachers begin the school year by clearly outlining behavioral expectations in the classroom to prevent disruptive behavior and violence (Tier 1). Teachers may revisit these expectations monthly throughout the year. Students who need additional support (i.e., those showing signs of disruptiveness or aggression) may be referred to the school counselor or nurse for a mental or physical health evaluation (Tier 2). For students in need of further support, the SWPBIS model calls for a multidisciplinary team to provide wraparound services, which may include formal mental health treatment and safety planning for students (Tier 3). Teachers may refer students who are not sufficiently aided by the three tiers to special education services, which can be tailored to the student's needs based on information gained during the SWPBIS process.

Some studies indicate SWPBIS may reduce school-based incidents of disciplinary referrals and suspensions and improve academic outcomes.[52] One study found schools that implemented SWPBIS had increased perceptions of safety compared to schools without SWPBIS, where perceptions of school safety decreased.[53] Overall, Horner, Sugai, and Anderson (2010) considered SWPBIS an evidenced-based model worthy of widescale implementation.[54] However, school administrators should carefully assess their staff's current workloads and determine whether the school is adequately staffed and resourced to effectively implement the model.[55] SWPBIS offers free, online implementation manuals,[56] though schools may incur costs for additional training workshops, if desired. Trained coordinators are available in each state to guide schools through the process of implementing SWPBIS.

Target Hardening

"Target hardening" is the process of making a school building a more difficult, or unattractive, target for violence.[57] Examples of target hardening include installing metal detectors, adding video surveillance, or using access control devices (e.g., electronic locks, keypads). Target hardening measures may range in intensity, from adding dead bolts to doors, to arming teachers with weapons. Target hardening has been a common response to the threat of school violence; during the 2017-2018 school year, approximately 95% of public schools in the United States reported using access control devices and 83% reported using security cameras.[58]

Students have cited locked doors and fences around school property as factors that make them feel safer at school.[59] However, target hardening may also increase students' fears and lower perceptions of safety.[60] Implementing visible security measures, such as metal detectors and armed guards, may signal to students that school is a dangerous place.[61] Additionally, beyond just perceptions of safety, Burrow and Apel (2008) found that physical security measures, such as metal detectors and security cameras in schools, were ineffective at reducing risk of victimization.[62] They hypothesized these measures may not significantly alter the school environment enough to influence crime. In addition, research does not support the notion that arming teachers would improve student safety; instead, research indicates arming teachers would be more likely to increase student anxiety and anticipation of a violent event.[63] Overall, critics argue that target hardening does little to address the root causes of school and gun violence.[64]

While it is unlikely that target hardening practices alone are enough to sufficiently affect long-term school safety, a comprehensive approach that includes some target hardening measures, such as maintaining door locks and conducting safety drills, in addition to other approaches may be effective.[65]

Theories Applicable to School Violence Prevention and Reduction Efforts

School violence prevention practices and programs are grounded in and guided by theoretical frameworks on why youth exhibit antisocial behavior and what could deter them from such behavior. These theories, based in criminology, include:

General deterrence, which suggests that individuals will be deterred from antisocial behavior by witnessing severe punishment of others for committing that behavior. School suspension or expulsion for first-time offenses (e.g., getting caught with a weapon) are considered forms of general deterrence.

Specific deterrence, which poses that if an individual is punished severely for antisocial behavior, that punishment will deter that individual from acting the same way in the future.

Discipline for antisocial behavior can range from being negative (i.e., punishment-based) to positive (i.e., rehabilitation-based). Negative discipline includes suspending antisocial youth from school or restricting their extracurricular activities, whereas positive discipline focuses on enrolling antisocial youth in prosocial programming or mental health services to reduce risk.

Routine activities theory, which argues that three elements must be present for victimization to occur: an available target (e.g., a school, a student), a motivated offender, and the absence of a capable guardian. In schools, a security guard or police officer theoretically would reduce violence by acting as a capable guardian in the school environment. Schools and other physical targets also could be made safer with measures that increase the difficulty of an assault (e.g., by reinforcing locks and windows or by adding metal detectors).

Social learning theory, which posits that antisocial behavior is learned and maintained through social interactions. The values and attitudes of a particular peer group may affect how individuals view deviant behavior. Practices and programs using social learning theory may teach students prosocial values starting at a young age and reinforce those ideals through rewards or other positive feedback to guard against the development of antisocial values.

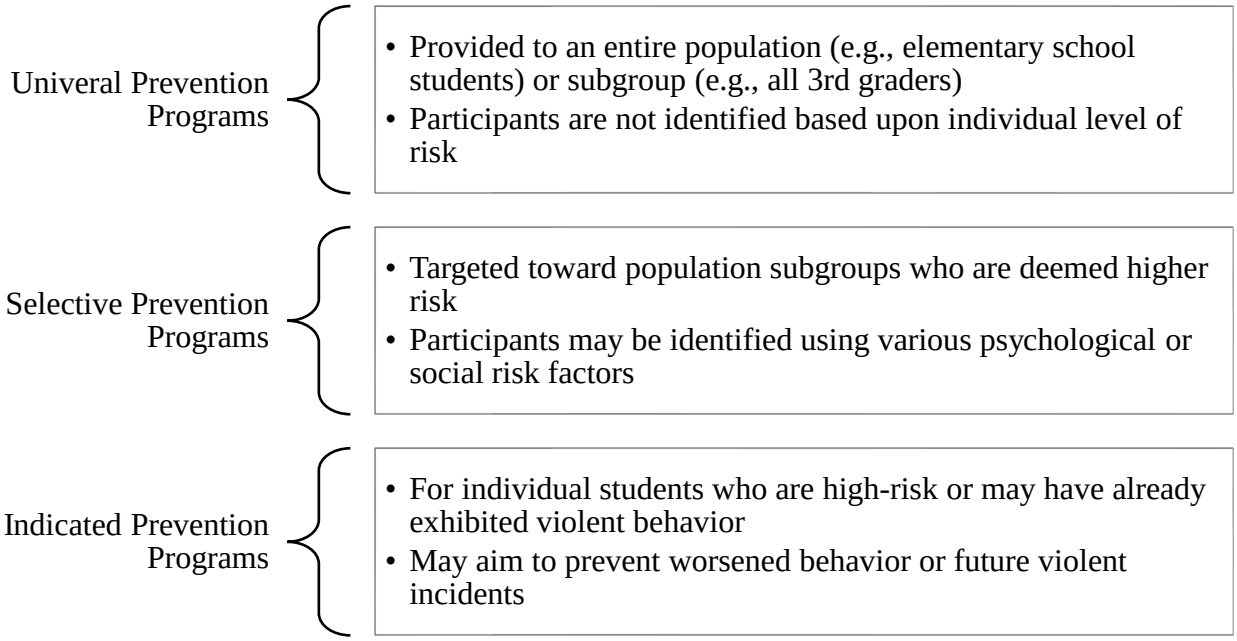
Source: Akers, R. L., & Sellers, C. S. (2012). *Criminological theories: Introduction, evaluation, and application* (6th ed.). Oxford University Press.

School-based Violence Prevention Programs

School-based violence prevention programs are packaged curriculums that are intended to be used in the same way, or with fidelity, across schools. In comparison to youth violence prevention programs which take place in the home or community, school-based programs are delivered in the school environment and often target younger students in order to prevent violence and protect against the development of antisocial values.[66]

These programs may use similar approaches to prevention as those used in public health (Figure 3). These approaches are categorized based upon the population they are intended to serve: universal programs target everyone in a particular community, selective programs target subgroups with a higher risk of violence, and indicated programs target individuals who have already been involved with or are at-risk for violence.[67]

Figure 3
Types of Approaches to Prevention



Adapted from: National Research Council and Institute of Medicine. (2009). *Preventing mental, emotional, and behavioral disorders among young people: Progress and possibilities.* The National Academies Press. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK32775/

Several evidence-informed school-based violence prevention programs are available for students.[2] The following three programs are examples of different types of school-based violence prevention programs that have been supported by previous research. These examples are not an exhaustive list and are only intended to provide information for school personnel that may be interested in implementing or developing a prevention program within their school.

Second Step

Second Step®: A Violence Prevention Curriculum is a universal program that aims to reduce aggressive and impulsive behavior in all children ages 5 to 12 by teaching social-emotional competence and emotional regulation. Research indicates that social-emotional competence is linked with positive social behaviors and reductions in aggression and delinquency.[68]

[2] Though anti-bullying programs are an important part of violence prevention in schools, they are discussed separately in other research.

Second Step contains short lessons spread over multiple weeks. The number and length of sessions varies based on student ages, but lessons are generally around a half-hour and occur once or twice per week. In Second Step, teachers, social workers, or school counselors cover three main units: empathy training (i.e., teaching students to better understand both their emotions and the emotions of their peers), impulse control (i.e., helping students evaluate consequences of their behavior regarding fairness and impact on others), and anger management (i.e., teaching students to manage their emotions through cognitive-behavioral techniques). Students engage in small group and classroom discussions and practice skills with their peers using games or exercises.

In one evaluation, Frey et al. (2005) found that in the first year of Second Step programming, teachers reported that student participants with high levels of antisocial behaviors showed greater decreases in those behaviors than those who did not participate in the program, but these effects were not observed during the second year.[69] A more recent study found that Second Step improved certain behaviors (e.g., conduct problems, hyperactivity, peer problems) and social-emotional competence in children who had been rated lower than their peers in those skills.[70] However, the researchers also noted that the program did not generate similar rates of improvement for students already rated highly in those skills.

Linking the Interests of Families and Teachers

Linking the Interests of Families and Teachers (LIFT) is a universal program for elementary school students ages 6-10 designed to prevent conduct problems and aggression. Though all students in a particular grade receive LIFT (i.e., universal), the program also has elements of a selective program, as it is typically implemented at schools that are in areas with high rates of juvenile delinquency (i.e., selective). LIFT assists with teaching children social skills and providing parents with management and communication training.

LIFT's first component involves teacher-led classroom social skills training, where students learn various communication and problem-solving techniques. This component is split into 20 one-hour sessions over 10 weeks. After learning these skills, students practice within both small and large groups. LIFT's second component incorporates a modified version of the Good Behavior Game (GBG). The GBG is an evidence-based management strategy that teaches prosocial communication and encourages positive behavior in children.[71] Teachers give students points for prosocial and positive behaviors and deduct points for negative or aggressive behaviors. The game is played on the playground at recess. The third component of LIFT involves students' parents. In small groups, a LIFT staff member teaches parents techniques related to positive reinforcement, discipline, problem-solving, and also encourages parental school involvement. Parents listen to lecture material, participate in roleplays, and complete home practice assignments in order to reduce their own negative communication styles.

In one LIFT evaluation, 671 first and fifth grade students who attended schools in areas with higher-than-average juvenile arrest rates participated in the program.[72] Teachers rated students who participated in the program higher in social skills than students who did not participate. In addition, students who participated exhibited fewer negative behaviors, such as physical aggression, on the playground (4.8 behaviors per day) versus students who did not participate

(6.6 behaviors per day). Finally, mothers with higher levels of negative communication before the program showed the largest decreases in this behavior after participation.[73]

Networks Against School Shootings

Networks Against School Shootings (NETWASS) is an indicated program for students who have displayed symptoms that are risk factors for violence. The program is designed to assist school staff with supporting students who may be experiencing a psychological crisis and is based on the same principles as threat assessment—that these psychological crises can be identified and treated before violence occurs. Though psychological crises are not a causal factor in school shootings, researchers have suggested that a shooting may be the "extreme endpoint of a critical, crisis-laden, individual development,"[74] and therefore early intervention may be key to preventing more serious violence.[75]

The NETWASS program begins by training school staff on how to identify a student in crisis. If a staff person notices a student is exhibiting violence risk factors (e.g., making threats, sharing violent intentions, acting aggressively) the staff member can notify a "prevention appointee" who is charged with reviewing the student's behavioral history and collecting new information if necessary. This information is then forwarded to a crisis prevention team for discussion. The team includes school administration, specially trained school staff, a social worker, and the student's teachers who together create an assessment of a student's likelihood for violence based upon that student's behaviors, social factors, stressors, and protective factors (e.g., family support, close peer relationships). The team also discusses appropriate measures to respond to the student's behavior. After interventions for the student have been implemented, trained staff members provide case monitoring to ensure that the responses are working as intended and to notify the crisis prevention team for new assessment if they are not.

The NETWASS program is relatively new, but there is research evaluating its effects. One evaluation of NETWASS found that staff in schools that implemented the program increased their expertise on school shootings and felt more confident to identify threats and potential youth crises.[76] Staff were also able to respond to students in emotional crises, which may have prevented future violence. However, researchers were unable to compare these results to a non-intervention control group of schools due to governmental limitations. Though these results do not explicitly indicate whether school shootings were prevented, predicting whether a school shooting would have occurred is impossible, and school shooters can vary highly in terms of demographics and motivations.[77] There is no one single path to becoming a school shooter. Instead, identifying students in crisis and providing support and case management as needed may be a promising method for preventing serious violence in schools.[78]

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Although schools are overall very safe, due in part to media accounts of violent school incidents, schools are taking various measures to improve school safety. School-based violence prevention practices intend to prevent or reduce violence in the school setting and may differ from school to school. Regardless of practices employed, schools should consider student demographics and contextual factors (e.g., campus location, school climate) when selecting appropriate safety

practices and programs. In general, research has shown that punitive measures, though seemingly necessary at times, do not address community- or school-based causes of violence, can worsen student well-being, and are often disproportionately applied to students of color.[79] Instead, research suggests the following recommendations to prevent violence in schools.

> *"A hard truth that parents, school officials, and policymakers must accept is that even the strongest security measures will not and cannot perfectly thwart those determined to commit violent acts inside schools. . . schools can do much more to prevent violence by investing in programs that build community, collective responsibility, and trust among students and educators than by using measures that rely on fear, coercion, and punishment."*
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> Source: Nance, J. P. (2013). School security considerations after Newtown. *Stanford Law Review*, *65*, 103-110. https://www.stanfordlawreview.org/online/school-security-considerations-after-newtown/

Ensure Student Access to Supports

In general, research has shown that school-based violence prevention programs can reduce or prevent violence among students.[80] School counselors, nurses, social workers, and other support staff are integral in delivering the supportive services utilized within many of these programs,[81] but many schools lack adequate staffing in these areas.[82] Hiring more personnel may not be possible in all school districts. In those cases, schools must instead work toward efficiency and sustainability.[83] This may be done by:

- Enhancing coordination between support staff and community providers.
- Using data to prioritize areas of need (i.e., determining which students or grade levels require the most support; identifying support staffs' needs through surveys or interviews).
- Providing mental health training to students and teachers that addresses their own needs and helps them identify needs in others.[84]
- Helping support staff be most efficient by identifying and, if necessary, modifying, their current duties (i.e., if support staff are tasked with duties outside of their job description, schools should transfer responsibility of those duties to more appropriate personnel if possible so support staff can focus on providing direct services).[85]

Prior research has also emphasized the importance of building relationships with students' families.[86] Engaging parents and their children—through workshops and centrally-located resources (e.g., health services, after-school activities)—may help families access supportive services that are otherwise inaccessible and distribute the violence prevention effort among stakeholders.[87] Though comprehensive strategies incorporating a combination of rehabilitative practices and programs may have the strongest effects on reducing school violence, they will require significant input and support from staff, parents, and students.[88]

Conduct Additional Research

Despite the noted effects of violence prevention programming, researchers have also asserted that programs that have shown effectiveness in controlled case studies may not be effective when scaled up to the state or national level.[89] To determine whether a practice or program is evidence-

based, data must be collected systematically in separate sites and analyzed through systematic reviews or meta-analyses.

Even though individual schools may differ in their needs, state leaders can offer schools incentives (e.g., funding) for standardized data collection and reporting in order to modify current interventions or inform future interventions.[90] Administrators should properly assess existing programs and consider which programs would be most appropriate for the unique aspects of their schools. Ineffective, costly programs should be replaced with programming proven to have a positive impact on students and safety. Ultimately, evaluating and improving school violence prevention practices and programs will continue to expand the body of knowledge related to school safety and ensure the well-being of students.

To read the first article in the school safety series, Exploring School Violence and Safety Concerns, click here.

For more information on youth development and other effective interventions, please see this ICJIA publication.

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[2] School violence is a category of youth violence encompassed by physical violence between students and/or teachers, violence involving parents or administrators, invisible violence involving threats, coercion and fear, and harms committed by institutions, such as discriminatory teaching practices or accommodating racism and homophobia. Bullying (with or without physical aggression) is often considered a form of school violence as well. School violence is not limited to the school building; it can occur anywhere on school property, during travel to or from school, and at school-sponsored events.

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