Chapter 5
Educator Experiences as Victims of School Violence:
Emerging Perspectives and Research

Kailyn Bare
DePaul University, USA

Susan D. McMahon
DePaul University, USA

Elena Gonzalez Molina
DePaul University, USA

Cori Tergesen
DePaul University, USA

Kayleigh E. Zinter
DePaul University, USA

ABSTRACT

Educator experiences with violence and aggression have traditionally been overlooked. However, growing research has found these professionals are at risk of frequent victimization in the workplace. This chapter synthesizes literature from the past two decades to provide readers an overview of violence against educators, including prevalence and types of aggression, school climate, demographic, and other precipitating factors, as well as common outcomes. Since these aggressive incidents often do not involve the criminal justice system, the potential applicability of restorative justice practices is discussed. An overview of a new APA task force to study into this phenomenon will be provided, along with a discussion of the perceived impacts of COVID-19 on teacher safety. Theory, research, practice, and policy implications for further understanding teacher experiences, reducing risk of aggression, and ensuring safe school environments are outlined.

INTRODUCTION

School violence is an area of increasing concern given the rise of school shootings in the United States (Lee, 2013). The search terms "school violence" yield over 100,000 articles on Google Scholar, demonstrating this is a popular area of study. Although we have learned a great deal, one notable criticism is that most existing research focuses exclusively on students. While the emphasis on students is valuable, excluding educator perspectives and experiences prevents schools and researchers from having a complete picture of the problem and limits the effectiveness of interventions and proposed solutions. As greater awareness spreads regarding safety risks for educators, more researchers have shifted their focus to investigate educator-directed aggression. Although educators have been invisible victims of school violence, we want to ensure their perspectives and experiences are taken into account in theory, research, practice, and policy moving forward.

This chapter introduces readers to the violent realities faced by many educators in the United States (U.S.) by summarizing literature from the past two decades. These findings suggest violence against educators is a societal issue that harms the health and safety of all members of the school system. An overview of the most updated research related to violence against educators, including prevalence rates, types of aggression, aggressors, contributing conditions and correlates, and personal and organizational outcomes are provided. This chapter highlights educator voices by incorporating quotes detailing teachers' most upsetting experiences with aggression and violence and their suggestions for improving school safety. Additionally, this chapter outlines the role of school climate in understanding and preventing school violence and victimization. We preview an emerging large, national study of school stakeholder experiences with violence prior to and since COVID-19. We present theory, practice, and policy recommendations for addressing educator-directed violence. Finally, we identify future directions to move forward with a comprehensive research agenda that includes educator experiences and perspectives.

Chapter Objectives

- Understand prevalence rates of aggressive experiences reported by educators, types of violence they report, and the various people who aggress against educators.
- Explore factors associated with educator victimization, including demographic characteristics, triggering events, and common consequences.
- Identify harmful consequences of educator victimization for individuals and schools.
- Examine the influence of school climate on educator victimization.
- Introduce new research on educator experiences with violence and aggression that takes into account COVID-19 school closures.
- Identify future research directions and recommendations for preventing and addressing violence and aggression against educators.

BACKGROUND

There is a tremendous amount of research and work dedicated to preventing and responding to violence in schools. Research to date has centered primarily on understanding and promoting school safety for students. Although this approach is extremely important, focusing solely on student perspectives and

experiences limits our understanding of its far-reaching effects on others and our ability to effectively address school violence. Over the past two decades, research has revealed that teachers and other school staff members (referred to collectively in this chapter as educators) experience alarmingly high rates of violence in the workplace. There are 8.5 million primary and secondary educators in the U.S. (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018) whose experiences with violence have traditionally been underrecognized in research, interventions, and national conversations about school violence and aggression. The voices of these professionals deserve to be heard, and their physical, emotional, and occupational safety warrant attention. We need to foster positive learning and working environments for students and educators to feel safe.

There are many terms used by researchers to describe violence against educators, including 'teacher-directed violence,' 'teacher victimization,' 'teacher-targeted aggression,' 'educator-targeted bullying,' and 'violence against teachers or educators' (e.g., Beckmann et al., 2019; de Wet, 2010; McMahon et al., 2014; Reddy et al., 2018; Sorrentino et al., 2019; Wilson et al., 2010). Additionally, individuals who engage in violence or aggression against educators have been described as 'perpetrators,' 'offenders,' and 'aggressors' (Gerberich et al., 2014; Moon et al., 2015; Soares & Machado, 2014). In this chapter, the terms violence and aggression will be used contingent upon the nature of the act. Typically, we will use the term violence to describe more extreme forms of aggression. We use the term 'aggressor' to identify the individual who is engaging in violence or aggression directed toward the educator. The terms 'perpetrator' and 'offender' have a criminal justice implication; as most acts of aggression in schools do not involve criminal justice processes, they will not be used in this chapter moving forward.

Violence against educators has many complicated causes and occurs in several forms. Understanding the ways in which violence unfolds can help individuals and schools prevent violence, address harm, and begin to remedy the root causes of violent events. Before diving into the puzzle pieces that form the picture of violence directed against educators, it can be helpful to imagine how this type of violence might play out. Let's walk through a few fictional examples inspired by responses collected through a national survey of teachers' experiences of violence (McMahon et al., 2014).

Story 1: Taylor

First, let's meet Taylor, a seventh-grade history teacher who has been working at an urban, public school for one year. One day, while passing out graded papers during in-class work time, she noticed a student with her head down. She approached the student to ask if she needed any help starting her homework. The student told Taylor to go away, so she placed her graded paper on her desk. Noticing the bad grade—the student crushes the paperwork and tosses it to the side. Taylor picked up the homework and reminded the student, "you need to keep working on this assignment—it's due today." The student, enraged by the reminder of the classwork, shouted obscenities at Taylor. Taken aback, she immediately contacted her principal, who quickly dismissed her and said, "it happens all the time."

In this story, Taylor is faced with a troubling experience of verbal aggression after providing individualized instruction to a student. These short, verbal interactions make up a significant portion of the day-to-day aggression teachers experience. Some teachers also report verbal aggression paired with threats or acts of bigotry, as illustrated in the next vignette.

Story 2: Layla

Layla loved being a school counselor even though it sometimes placed her in difficult situations, such as sharing information with parents concerning their child's challenging behavior. Anticipating a need for additional support, Layla invited a school administrator to join a meeting with a parent. Layla initiated a conversation about the student's academic progress; however, once she suggested the child may require a different learning environment due to disruptive classroom behavior, things took a turn. Defensive, the parent stood up and rejected the school's analysis of the student's behavior, insisting they raised their child better than to misbehave in class. Layla suggested the behavior may reflect a behavior regulation concern. Noticing the parent's distress, the administrator stepped in and said—"some more assessments might be needed to confirm this evaluation, please sit—we would like to work with you." Disgusted, the parent retorted, "there is nothing wrong with my child, now you better move out of my way, I'm leaving." Layla attempted to calm the parent down and further explain the situation. Tightly gripping the chair in front of them, the parent insisted that "if you say one more word, I'll throw this chair in your face." Taken aback, the school administrator suggests a follow-up meeting, called school security to show the parent out, and helped Layla create a future plan of action. Feeling supported by her school she stayed a few more years before moving to a new town and school system.

In her new school, it was difficult for Layla to connect to her colleagues, and she has heard other staff members whispering about her behind her back. Hoping to meet more of her colleagues, Layla brought her lunch to the teacher's lounge where she noticed an older staff member sitting alone at a table. She approached them and asked to sit. The staff member looked her up and down and chuckled. "What's funny?" Layla asked innocently. "Well, I've never eaten with a [racial slur]….". Dazed by the interaction, Layla immediately reported the incident to the administration who enacted disciplinary action against the staff member. Layla sought a mental health professional to work through the effects of this hateful incident and her other negative workplace experiences.

In this story, Layla experienced verbal aggression in the forms of a threat and a racial slur from different aggressors that led to anxiety and fears, which impacted her personal life and work performance. While students are often the aggressors, teachers do experience harm from parents, colleagues, and administrators, as discussed further in this chapter. Additionally, educators can face repeated acts of aggression from the same aggressor, as showcased in our next vignette.

Story 3: David

David's favorite part of his job is working with his fourth-grade students. He often engages them in creative activities to break up instruction time. After one art session, David noticed a disturbing drawing of a boy next to a man surrounded by red crayon. He asked the boy what the picture meant, and the student simply stated, "It is me stabbing you" in an off-putting tone. David reported the incident directly to his principal, who dismissed the drawing as "a child's colorful imagination" and no action was taken. A month later, the same student hit one of his peers on the playground. David immediately disciplined the student, and the angry student yelled obscenities and then created a gun symbol with his hand while stating, "I know where my dad keeps his." Frightened, David directly reported the incident to the head of the threat assessment team in his district. While the report was being processed, his principal was notified and reprimanded David for bypassing authority by going to the team directly. In the aftermath of the incident, David tried to avoid confrontation with the student, completely unaware that the student

had stolen a large pair of scissors from his desk. While aiding another student with a math problem, the aggressive student attacked David with the pair of scissors. David is eventually able to take back the scissors after receiving an injury to his arm. The student was suspended after the incident, but not removed from David's class. After hearing the student would remain in his class, David decided to leave the teaching profession for a different career.

David was faced with a challenging sequence of events that resulted in his decision to leave the profession. After experiencing a lack of support from his administration, he felt alone when dealing with escalating violent behavior from his student. In this example, it is unclear why the student targeted David. This is common for many educators who report not knowing why they were attacked.

While these fictional examples are loosely based on common themes from educator responses about their experiences with violence and aggression, there are many more—each with an individualized set of circumstances. Try to put yourself in the position of these educators… how would you feel in these scenarios? What course of action would you take? Although these situations may seem extreme, educators report these types of violent experiences are strikingly common (McMahon, 2020a; McMahon 2020b; McMahon 2020c; McMahon 2020d). Now that you are familiar with some of the types of aggression educators experience, the next section will introduce you to what we know about educator-directed aggression based on research.

EDUCATOR-DIRECTED VIOLENCE

Worldwide, between 20% and 75% of teachers reported aggression from students in a given two-year period (Longobardi et al., 2019). Perhaps unsurprisingly, students are the most common aggressors of educator-directed aggression, likely due to the high level of day-to-day interaction. Educators have reported experiencing violence and aggression from students (94%), parents (37%), colleagues and administrators (21%), and strangers (8%) (McMahon et al., 2014). In the U.S., 52% of teachers reported victimization within the past six months by their students (Bounds & Jenkins, 2016), while 80% reported aggression from students, parents, coworkers, or other aggressors within the current or past year (McMahon et al., 2014). Assessments that focus on various types of violence and timeframes across unique cultural contexts may explain this wide range of prevalence rates. Unfortunately, teacher reports of violence and aggression are rarely isolated incidents. Teachers who experience aggression are at increased risk of future violence exposure, and many teachers report being victimized by multiple different aggressors (Martinez et al., 2015; McMahon et al., 2014; Melanda et al., 2019). For example, 48% of teachers reported experiencing victimization by two or more different types of aggressors (e.g., students, parents, colleagues) within the reported current or past year (McMahon et al., 2014).

Types of Aggression

The most common types of aggression self-reported by teachers are: obscene remarks, gestures, verbal threats, intimidation, property-based offenses, and throwing of objects (McMahon et al., 2014). Physical attacks, weapon violence, and internet victimization are less frequent but also reported by educators (McMahon et al., 2014). Types of aggression can also vary by aggressor. Teachers reported parents and colleagues are most likely to use intimidation tactics compared to other types of aggression. After intimidation, parents were also likely to use obscene remarks, while colleagues most often used internet

victimization. Students use a wide range of aggression against educators; teachers reported high levels of harassment, property, and physical offenses from student aggressors (McMahon et al., 2014).

A national anonymous survey study of over 3,000 U.S. teachers, conducted by the American Psychological Association (APA) Task Force on Violence Against Teachers will be referred to throughout this chapter to illustrate teacher perspectives. The quotations highlighted in this chapter originate from teachers' written responses, including information about their most upsetting aggressive incident, such as why it happened and how it influenced their professional role. As one teacher (Black, 54-year-old female from a suburban Florida middle school) described:

The most upsetting incident this school year involved a student who used a stream of racial remarks and profanity. This student also threatened to burn up the classroom. I felt physically threatened when I asked the student to leave the room and report to the discipline office after he made verbal threats.

Another teacher (White, 39-year-old teacher from a rural Louisiana elementary school) indicated feeling powerless to ongoing student aggression.

I have been through many physical altercations in my years… the most memorable one was [when] a student left bruises all over me and broke a necklace. What is so frustrating is the teachers have no rights. There are concerns about the child's safety but not the teacher's and the students and parents are not held accountable. Students are allowed to put their hands on teachers, throw things, and threaten us without any consequences or punishment.

Weapon violence was mentioned by fewer educators, but often greatly impacted teachers' well-being (McMahon et al., 2014). One educator (63-year-old male from an urban Iowa middle school) described the aftermath of being threatened with a gun by a student on school property.

[The] student got angry - he was caught cheating. [The] parent was angry [that the] student was failed [and] blamed me for his son's failure. I am retiring—discipline is way out of line.

Another teacher (White, 57-year-old female from an urban North Carolina middle school) described:

[A] student brought a large butcher knife to school and tried to conceal it in his book bag. [...] The most upsetting thing to me was the idea that the student had been able to sneak it into the school. [...] This incident made me feel very insecure.

These reports illustrate the intensity and destructiveness of aggression against educators and the toll it takes on their well-being.

Research on educators' experiences with aggression has generally focused on teachers; however, other school employees experience aggression, with varying risks of exposure depending on their roles. For example, special education professionals are the most common targets of physical and non-physical aggression, while other education professionals also report concerning levels of violence (Tiesman et al., 2013). In fact, special education teachers are two to five times more likely to experience verbal and physical aggression compared to general education teachers (Ervasti et al., 2012). The higher rates of violence reported by special education workers may reflect underdeveloped training and resources re-

quired to support the unique developmental and behavioral challenges faced by many special education students (Landrum et al., 2003; Oliver & Reschly, 2010). Teachers across the U.S. report paraprofessional educators (individuals who provide supplementary student support in classrooms) also experienced student aggression (McMahon et al., 2014). For instance, a special education teacher (White, 55-year-old female from an urban, Pennsylvania high school) explained,

[A] student grabbed at me, broke my chain and ripped my sweater vest. She also kicked my assistant in the breast so hard that it knocked the wind out of her.

Research on violence toward paraprofessionals and other school staff is limited, so we often rely on secondhand stories through teachers. Experiences may differ depending on one's role, so it is necessary to include all school staff members and paraprofessionals in the process of addressing the culture of school violence (Pelton, 2002). Research is needed that captures the diverse experiences of all school staff to understand and address the complexities of school violence and make schools better places to work and learn.

Contributing Conditions for Aggression

Understanding the factors that contribute to aggression and violence against educators is important for minimizing incidents of aggression. Contributing conditions may include aggressor characteristics, educator characteristics, workplace conditions, and school location. In terms of aggressor characteristics, research has consistently found male students are more likely than female students to behave aggressively toward teachers (Gerberich et al., 2011; Kauppi & Pörhölä, 2012). A few studies have shown student age or year in school influence rates and types of violence against teachers. Student aggression of all types is most commonly reported by middle school teachers, who are also most likely to experience multiple types of violence (Chen & Astor, 2009; McMahon et al., under review). Although teacher-directed aggression peaks in middle school, elementary and high school teachers have their own concerns. Teachers working with students aged 13 and younger are most vulnerable to physical aggression, and harassment is prevalent throughout middle and high school (Gerberich et al., 2011; McMahon et al., 2014). These demographic-related findings indicate more work is necessary to build respectful relationships between educators and diverse school members. Educators need support to meet the unique needs of their students and to respond effectively to aggressive behavior.

Certain educator characteristics may also influence whether or not they experience aggression, although some conflicting findings have been reported. For example, some researchers have found male teachers are more likely to report aggression (Casteel et al., 2007; McMahon et al., 2014), while others have found the risk is higher for female teachers (Moon & McCluskey, 2016; Msuya, 2016; Schofield et al., 2019). Years of teaching experience may also play a role in explaining educator victimization risk factors. One study found teachers with more experience reported higher rates of violence (Casteel et al., 2007), while others have found teachers with less teaching experience reported more violence overall (Bounds & Jenkins, 2016; Martinez et al., 2015). The findings may be mixed due to methodological differences (e.g., definitions of types of aggression, measurement frequency, sample of educators and aggressors included, various cultural or geographical settings).

Beyond demographic factors, workplace conditions and school location can also affect a teacher's likelihood of experiencing violence. Teachers who perceive more control over their work process or

more social support at their job perceived less aggression from students and parents (Berlanda et al., 2019). Further, teachers who reported greater psychological demands at work were more likely to report an incident of harassment, property-aggression, or physical violence (Berlanda et al., 2019). Berlanda and colleagues (2019) also found teachers report more job demands and fewer sources of social support as they progress throughout their career, which may contribute to higher rates of victimization (e.g., Casteel, 2007). Community level factors, such as school location, also play a role in teacher experiences with violence. In general, teachers in urban settings report more violence and violence-related stress than rural or suburban teachers (Bounds & Jenkins, 2018; Gerberich et al., 2014). Specifically, verbal threats, intimidation, obscene remarks, gestures, and graffiti are disproportionately reported more often by teachers in urban schools (Bounds & Jenkins, 2018). These findings highlight the need to assess student, teacher, and school characteristics and tailor interventions to improve safety for educators across diverse settings.

We need to better understand the factors associated with aggressive school behavior and teacher victimization. Triggers for violence against teachers include student academic performance, discipline enforcement, intervention in student fights, and teacher indecisiveness or hesitancy when communicating with students (McMahon, Davis, et al., 2019; McMahon, Peist et al., 2019; Moon & McCluskey, 2020). By understanding how and why educator directed violence takes place, educators and schools can more effectively prevent and reduce violence and aggression, anticipate situations that will lead to violence, and de-escalate violence when it happens.

Impacts on Educators

It is likely no surprise that teachers who experience violence and aggression report many negative effects that span social, physical, and psychological functioning. Teachers report relationship difficulties, sleep disturbances, headaches, cardiovascular issues, and symptoms of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (De Vos & Kirsten, 2015). Even after time has passed, teachers can still experience emotional distress. Victimized teachers are more likely to report feeling afraid at their school compared to those who have not experienced violence (Wilson et. al., 2011). After reporting verbal and physical aggression from students, one teacher (White, 61-year-old male from a Michigan, suburban middle school) reported,

I have [to] take a leave from work due to the stress I have been under. I have not left my job, but I am getting help.

Violence against educators also negatively impacts the classroom environment. Wilson and colleagues (2011) found over 85% of teachers who experienced an aggressive incident reported negative effects such as decreased morale and job satisfaction. Violence and aggression take a toll on all who experience it. Educators have a right to work in a safe environment just as professionals in other settings do. As an outsider, it can be difficult to imagine confronting violence and aggression daily in your workplace.

Educators are affected by their relationships with their administrators, and similarly, their experiences with violence and aggression are influenced by how stressful and traumatic incidents are addressed. Fox and Stallworth (2010) found teacher experiences with violence were associated with emotional and physical stress, but only when teachers were dissatisfied with support from administration following their experience with aggression. In fact, a lack of administrative support can be the most upsetting as-

pect of victimization for many teachers. One teacher (30-year-old female from a rural California middle school) described:

The most upsetting incident that occurred involved a parent being verbally abusive to me. My administration did not back me up. They just watched. At the time I was untenured. My view is that I would have to look out for myself as my administrator will not… . Some situations are not worth speaking your mind about as you will not receive support if you do not have tenure.

McMahon, Reaves, and colleagues (2017) found that when administrators blamed teachers for an incident, did not take it seriously, or exhibited a lack of concern, teachers were likely to feel unsafe and powerless. Lack of support can also lead to difficulties for teachers in interacting with parents, students, and colleagues. When teachers believe their principal did not effectively discipline a violent student, took no action, or did not enforce school policies, violence may escalate or become more chronic. In some cases, teachers may seek outside support from their union or the legal system. Teachers who described lack of administrative support in relation to an upsetting incident of violence often noted this lack of support was even more upsetting than the violence itself (McMahon, Reaves, et al., 2017). This speaks to the importance of administrative support, as well as the potential to have a positive impact on school violence through training teachers and administrators, improving school policies, and improving relationships among and between school staff.

Teacher Responses to Aggression

Teacher responses to aggression depend in part upon their perceptions of why the violence occurred. When teachers attributed the cause of violence to their personality or something they had control over, they were likely to report anger, fear, crying, and other physiological responses (Anderman et al., 2018). In addition, teachers who attributed the occurrence of an incident to their personal traits were less likely to seek social support, while those who attributed it to school or aggressor characteristics were more likely to discuss the violence with colleagues (Kauppi & Pörhölä, 2012). When seeking support after a verbal or physical incident, Türküm and colleagues (2011) found more than 80% of female-identifying teachers were likely to reach out to their spouse or family. In contrast, about 50% of male-identifying teachers preferred to reach out to a colleague. These findings illustrate there is not a one-size-fits all solution to addressing violence or dealing with it when it happens. Depending on how teachers perceive the events, their personal characteristics, and the context surrounding the incident, teachers approach the aftermath of violence in different ways to heal, find support, and problem solve.

In some cases, teachers may opt to enact direct intervention strategies to communicate with their aggressor. For example, when the aggressor is a student, teachers may redirect the student's behavior or speak to the parents or a school psychologist to prevent future violence (Anderman et al., 2018). If teachers felt angry and had a physiological response, they were more likely to contact an administrator or union representative. Only 12.4% of teachers reported seeking support from a mental health professional after an event, and teachers who reported feelings of self-blame were more likely to do so (Anderman et. al, 2018).

The manner in which aggressive incidents are handled is important for providing educators closure after victimization, establishing systems that provide support to aggressors, and setting school-wide examples for future aggression. After all, if aggressors and onlookers learn that violence will be ignored or

IN THE NEWS: Educators as Victims

Educators may take on multiple roles throughout the day in a traditional school setting: teacher, friend, advocate, counselor, mentor, and at times, security personnel. Classroom management sometimes entails re-directing violent behavior among students and finding mutual solutions to issues that arise. What can often be overlooked is the effect this continued exposure to violence can directly and indirectly have on educators. Since they may be exposed to a variety of aggressive behaviors, educators are at an increased risk of victimization in the workplace. While verbal assaults are most reported, they may also endure physical assaults such as slapping or punching. As discussed in this chapter, educators are often invisible targets of violence.

Read through the short summaries of two news articles below and consider what more can be done to address violence toward educators. Who should be involved in preventing these incidents? If you were in charge of putting together a task force to address the issue, whose perspectives would you make sure to include?

Students Attacked or Threatened Thousands of School Employees

More than 10,000 New York City school employees, half of whom were educators, were victims of assault and threats during the 2015-2016 school year. Violence towards staff also spiked. A few of the reported altercations included:

A teacher from the Bronx was stabbed with a No. 2 pencil in the ribs by one of her students. The student was suspended three days prior to the stabbing incident for another misbehavior that included punching the same teacher. Harassment charges were filed; yet, the conviction was dropped and the student was sentenced to community service.

A principle was beaten by an 18-year-old student due to the principal requesting the removal of headphones. The principle suffered two black eyes and needed 7 stitches as the outcome. The student was released by the court under the condition that he remained out of trouble for three years.

https://nypost.com/2018/04/21/students-attacked-threatened-thousands-of-school-employees-last-year/.

Teacher Ends Up on Hit List

Not all victimization against educators is physically violent. As reported in a recent news article, a high school teacher was placed on a hit list (persons singled out to be targets for murder) by one of her former students. The hit list was a submitted assignment that detailed names of people the student wanted killed or had identified as enemies. The teacher noticed her name on the list. The educator pushed to open an investigation on this student but claims she was ignored by administrators. The assistant principal alleged that the student was only using humor in his assignment and should not be taken seriously.

https://www.news-leader.com/story/news/education/2019/12/05/heidi-bechard-republic-teacher-student-hit-list-sues-school-district/2608565001/.

Hailea Tepen, Student Contributor

rarely punished, these aggressive patterns may be more likely to continue. At a broad level, disciplinary responses to student behavior vary between schools, districts, socioeconomic factors, and geographic regions (Shabazian, 2015). Further, discipline is enforced disproportionally more often for Black and male-identifying students (Skiba et al., 2002). Unfortunately, many schools do not have policies in place to handle violence against teachers, leaving teachers feeling blamed, unsafe, and unsupported (McMahon, Reaves, et al., 2017). When schools do respond to acts of violence against educators, disciplinary action is

often inconsistent and evidence speaking to its effectiveness is not available. Based on teacher reports of violence, we know that common consequences include student removal from the classroom, school staff intervention, lack of response from administrators, or even police or legal involvement. Positive outcomes may include the provision of resources or a peaceful agreement between the aggressor and the victim (McMahon, Davis, et al., 2019; McMahon, Peist et al., 2019). Responses to educator-directed violence should be evidence-based and equitable. Rather than harsh and punitive practices, these responses can be considered an opportunity to provide educators justice and protection while also addressing the needs of the aggressor. School climate is another important factor to consider, especially in terms of how climate makes violence and aggression more or less likely to happen across a broad range of circumstances.

Importance of School Climate

School climate is the quality and atmosphere of school life. Think back to your time in elementary, middle, and high school. The norms in your school, typical behaviors, rules, your connections with teachers and staff all likely had an impact on how it felt to be in your school and contributed to your social and psychological well-being. School climate is important for students and educators alike and plays a fundamental role in understanding and preventing educator victimization. Numerous reviews have identified four domains of school climate: *academic*, *safety*, *community*, and *institutional environment* (Cohen et al., 2009; Huang et al., 2017; Thapa et al., 2013; Wang & Degol, 2016). Within these domains, there are several key components including school and community level beliefs and norms, interactions between school stakeholders (e.g., students, teachers, administrators, parents, community members), and organizational structures as they relate to stakeholders' perceptions of the overall school-experience (Kohl et al., 2013; Mitchell et al., 2010; Wang & Degol, 2016). Further, school climate is directly linked with teacher victimization (Gottfredson et al., 2005; Gregory et al., 2012). Table 1 illustrates the school climate domains, areas of focus, and specific examples of teacher-directed aggression.

Table 1. School climate domains and examples of educator-directed aggression

Domains	Areas of Focus	Examples
Academic	Teaching, learning, and leadership	I caught a student cheating on the final exam, when I told the student that he would receive a zero, he immediately started threatening me and saying that he didn't want to beat up a pregnant lady. [42-year old Latinx female from an urban Washington middle school]
Safety	Emotional and physical safety and discipline	A student wrote on his Facebook page that he was going to kill me. [45-year old White female from an urban Arizona middle school]
Community	Interpersonal relationships and community partnerships	Students get very little help from family, community, [and] mental health services. I feel like the schools have the burden of helping very ill/violent kids with no support. [49-year-old White female from an urban Iowa elementary school]
Institutional Environment	School conditions and resources	Overcrowding in the classroom leads to bigger discipline problems and [aggression] occurrences. [65-year-old White male from an urban Michigan high school]

Positive school climate promotes shared norms, emotional, physical, and social well-being, institutional support and leadership, and an orderly environment (Berg & Cornell, 2016; Cohen et al., 2009; Gregory et al., 2012). When school climate is constructive, students tend to do better academically and aggression is less common (Jones & Shindler, 2016; Kõiv, 2014; Steffgen et al., 2013). Although school climate has rarely been explored in relation to educator victimization, Gottfredson and Gottfredson (1985) found an association between poor school climate and more teacher-directed aggression. Further, positive school climate fostered better student-teacher relationships and less teacher stress and turnover. Understanding and promoting positive school climate is key for improving well-being for all school stakeholders (Gregory et al., 2012).

Verbal and physical aggression are common concerns for teachers (Gregory et al., 2012; McMahon, Davis, et al., 2019; McMahon, Peist, et al., 2019), so examining how different aspects of school climate affect teacher victimization can inform interventions. In general, an authoritative school climate, which emphasizes structured disciplinary practices and student support, is associated with fewer reports of teacher-directed aggression and lower levels of teacher stress (Berg & Cornell, 2016). School safety involves effective, consistent application of rules and management of discipline (Gottfredson et al., 2005). When students recognized discipline policies as both consistent and understandable, they displayed fewer antisocial behaviors (Aldridge et al., 2018). Academically, effective school leadership and teacher perceptions of administrative support were associated with teachers experiencing fewer physical attacks and threats in school (Huang et al., 2017). Fostering community relationships, increasing community involvement, and addressing structural disadvantages may improve school climate (Espelage et al., 2013) and reduce teacher-directed aggression (e.g., Bester & du Plessis, 2010; Cook et al., 2010; Overstreet & Mazzo, 2003; Salzinger et al., 2008). Facilitating supportive leadership and developing positive relationships among colleagues is one of the most useful resources for fostering teacher well-being and resilience even when aggressive situations arise (De Cordova et al., 2019). Further, lack of institutional resources and high student-teacher ratios have been linked to increased school and teacher-directed aggression (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1985). Improving school climate, including discipline policies and practices, leadership and support, community engagement, and institutional resources may provide one avenue to reduce victimization in schools for students, teachers, and other school stakeholders. Using positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) to reinforce and encourage prosocial behaviors among students provides an evidence-based approach to constructive school climate (Gage, Whitford, & Katsiyannis, 2018). In addition, considering alternatives to traditional punishment and disciplinary actions in schools is warranted.

Disciplinary Actions and Restorative Justice

Schools often experience challenges implementing and consistently applying effective discipline policies. Given that most who aggress toward educators are minors and because schools have their own discipline policies, these incidents do not typically involve the criminal justice system. One first step to assessing the extent of violence and addressing it effectively is reporting it. However, many teachers who experience violence choose not to report the incident (Anderman et al., 2020). Specifically, of teachers who experienced victimization, 81% reported physical assaults, 49% reported sexual harassment, and 43% reported thefts and incidents of property damage (Moon & McCluskey, 2016). Further, of incidents that were reported, school administrators only disciplined 58% of students who committed physical assaults, 52% for sexual harassment, and 42% for thefts and property damage. The lack of administrative response

to aggression by students leaves many educators feeling unsupported and unsatisfied (McMahon et al., 2020; McMahon, Reaves, et al., 2017; Moon & McCluskey, 2019), and may decrease their willingness to report violent events if they happen again. McMahon, Peist, and colleagues (2019) found teachers breaking up a school fight was one of the few events that sometimes led to police involvement. It is notable though that even though police were notified, teachers often did not file charges against the aggressor.

Sending our youth through the juvenile or criminal justice system and/or relying on suspensions and expulsions are less than ideal solutions to school violence, particularly if there are other viable options. Restorative justice is an alternative approach to handling school violence that often circumvents criminal justice and traditional school discipline. Restorative justice is a broad concept that is inclusive of many practices aiming to repair the harm caused by an offense (Katic et al., 2020). These practices can involve peace circles, conversations, mediations, and conferences between the victim and the aggressor. In a systematic review of restorative justice practices in school settings, these practices were associated with fewer incidents of school discipline, improved social relationships, and improved perceptions of school climate (Katic et al., 2020).

Students can often carry the weight of trauma exposure from a range of sources including community and interpersonal violence, economic strain, and systematic structures of oppression. Students with higher Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) scores, a well-known measure of traumatic events during childhood and adolescence, were more likely to engage in violence in school (Forster et al., 2020). Helping vulnerable youth heal their trauma has been identified as a potential route to preventing community and school violence. Schools and community members may consider working together to implement trauma-informed practices as a means of raising awareness and developing a sensitive and responsive school climate. An example of this kind of work can be seen in The Truth N' Trauma Project based in the southside of Chicago. This after-school program successfully engaged violence-exposed high school aged students in a range of personal development activities including trauma-informed care, leadership skills, and participatory community research (Harden et al., 2014). Although promising research indicates restorative justice practices may be beneficial for resolving aggression between students, future research is necessary to determine best practices for utilizing these strategies in response to educator-directed violence.

New APA Task Force, Victimization Study, and COVID-19 School Closures

Over the past decade, there have been many important findings from the original American Psychological Association (APA) Task Force on teacher-directed violence led by Dr. Dorothy Espelage. The research generated by this study has paved the way for understanding rates and predictors of aggression (McMahon et al., 2014), patterns of violence (McMahon, Davis, et al., 2019; McMahon, Peist, et al., 2019), teacher attributions of aggression (Anderman et al., 2018), and recommendations for addressing this social issue (Espelage et al., 2013; McMahon, Peist et al., 2020). The work of this Task Force has fostered new research in the U.S. and globally.

Ongoing challenges with school violence, the need for more voices from the front lines in our schools, and the frequent and ongoing violence directed against educators was an impetus for the creation of a new APA Task Force on Violence Against Educators, led by Dr. Susan McMahon. This team of researchers aims to build upon previous findings and expand their focus beyond teachers to address violence against administrative leaders, school psychologists, school social workers, school counselors, and other school staff.

The Task Force is working with national organizational partners, including the National Education Association (NEA), Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD—an organization that focuses on educational leadership), American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), National Association of School Social Workers (NASW), and School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA). In collaboration with these partners, priority areas were identified, including school violence and aggression, COVID-19 concerns, school climate (e.g., safety, discipline, relationships, support, resources), effectiveness of school practices (e.g., lockdown drills, metal detectors, restorative justice practices), family, neighborhood, and community influences (e.g., parent engagement, community violence, connections with community organizations), and recommendations from the front line.

There has been limited study and guidance that addresses school violence during school closures. Social distancing, protective precautions, and online and hybrid learning completely change school climate, which can affect violence and aggression and youth engagement in learning. Thus, it is important to consider the range of effects on students and educators. Masonbrink and Hurley (2020) released an immediate call to action to mitigate the education and socialization losses among children, especially for children in low-resourced settings who are disproportionately impacted by school closures.

These changes have also likely impacted educator workload, stress levels, support systems, and sense of safety. As the role of technology in education settings continues to increase, it is important to understand how educator experiences with aggression are evolving. Evidence shared in peer-reviewed and working papers examining the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on teachers highlights educators' worries for the health and well-being of their students, and their abilities to form relationships with and educate students via remote learning (Kim & Asbury, 2020; Kraft et al., 2020; Reich et al., 2020). These issues require investigation as they may contribute to the types and frequency of aggression educators experience. For instance, teachers may be more susceptible to increased frequency of cyber-bullying or verbal aggression due to the high level of stress associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and online learning. In addition, teachers are likely less susceptible to physical aggression due to not being in-person.

APA Task Force survey distribution is ongoing during 2020-2021. Preliminary data generated by this survey indicates educators are very concerned about the implications of COVID-19 and school closures on school member safety and well-being. Many educators have expressed concerns about students who may be especially vulnerable to school closures, including special education students, low-income students, and students facing racism-related stress. In addition to health-related concerns due to COVID-19, educators also expressed worry about being exposed to violence when returning to school. One educator explained,

Many of my students are violent and have massive histories of trauma. We are always at risk of violence and I worry that students bring weapons to school, mostly because they need these to feel safe. There is a high degree of burnout amongst the staff because of our stressful work environment, and we need to figure out how to deal with secondary trauma.

As our nation continues to manage its response and recovery to the COVID-19 pandemic, educator concerns and perspectives must be considered and addressed.

SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Given what we have learned so far about educator-directed violence, we have identified several recommendations for theory, practice, and policy. These recommendations may be helpful for schools, educators, administrators, educational training programs, and researchers to consider as they work toward creating safer schools.

Theory

School violence, and particularly teacher-directed aggression and violence, can be theoretically understood and evaluated using different approaches. The social-ecological model is a popular theory applied in community psychology and education research (Bronfenbrenner, 1976). This framework adopts the notion that individuals are influenced by, and in turn, influence their environmental contexts, such as family, school, and community. In the context of school violence literature, this framework offers a lens to investigate how individual acts of aggression stem from and affect *microsystems* (i.e., immediate contexts in which violence occurs, such as schools), *mesosystems* (i.e., interactions between microsystems), *exosystems* (i.e., broader social systems that indirectly interact with individuals through the microsystems), *macrosystems* (i.e., the broadest system that is comprised of cultural contexts, laws, and mores), and *chronosystems* (i.e., the historical and time-bound conditions in which the systems intersect).

Using an ecological framework reduces the tendency to consider violence as an issue that is driven exclusively by individuals with problem behaviors. Instead, this framework encourages us to consider violence from a systems perspective, examining how educators and students are affected by their individual backgrounds (e.g., economic situation, race/ethnicity, age), families, schools, and community environments. A systems perspective also allows us to assess how school environments, policies, and practices influence the ways in which violence and aggression are addressed. School violence researchers recommend using a social-ecological model to assess, understand, and address the phenomenon of teacher-directed violence (Espelage et al., 2013; McMahon, Martinez, et al., 2017).

Within an ecological framework, school climate can further guide examination of safety, academics, community, and institutional environment (e.g., Wang & Degol, 2016). The advantage of using a school climate framework is that it has many constructs that are specifically relevant to schools and violence. Theoretical frameworks can facilitate assessment of relevant constructs and processes, predictions regarding the influence of specific contextual factors on school violence, and explanations regarding why violent incidents occur or escalate. In addition, using school climate and ecological frameworks facilitate the development of interventions targeted to specific components within schools that lead to safer, more positive environments.

Practice

There are a variety of individual and school-level practices that may prevent and reduce the occurrence of teacher-directed violence. At the individual level, administrators and school leaders need to consistently support their staff and get involved when teachers are threatened with aggression (McMahon et al., 2020). Administrative support is important to teachers. As one elementary school teacher (White, 57-year-old female from an urban Florida school) stated,

Administrators should take a teacher's fears seriously when concerning specific students... I felt alone and helpless in that situation.

In addition, there are calls for teacher and administrator pre-service and in-service training to provide educators with more effective leadership, restorative practice, cultural competence, de-escalation techniques, and classroom management skills (Martinez et al., 2015; McMahon, Reaves, et al., 2017, 2020). These ideas were specifically identified by a teacher (White, 57-year-old male from a Louisiana high school) who recommended,

All teachers should receive an in-service on how to handle student fights and other aggressive behaviors.

There are now published practices available online for educators such as the Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports as well as the Restorative Practices Guide for Educators. Another idea is to pair seasoned educators with novice educators so that newer teachers can learn and seek support from more experienced teachers when they face aggression (Maeng et al., 2020). Given the diversity within school settings, all practices should incorporate developmental and cultural considerations. Further, schools need clear guidelines and effective protocols for all educators and administrators to address school violence (McMahon, Reaves, et al., 2017).

There have been very few interventions for educator-directed violence, so there is a need for systematic development and measurement of interventions. Researchers at the University of Michigan have recently engaged in a systematic review of interventions to address teacher-directed violence (Heinze et al., 2021). In their review of over 2,500 articles, there were only a handful of interventions. They highlight recommendations, including additional theory-based and randomized control trial research, improved research and training related to threat assessment and crisis intervention strategies, increased funding of opportunities to improve understanding and awareness, as well as intervention development for this type of violence.

Policy

Fair, effective policies to address and prevent school violence, and especially widespread educator-directed violence, at the school, district, city, state, and federal levels are needed (Espelage et al., 2013; McMahon, Reaves, et al., 2017). Educator experiences, perspectives, and input should be taken into account in the development and implementation of these policies. At the school level, violence and weapons policies need to include all stakeholders (McMahon, Davis, et al., 2019; McMahon, Peist, et al., 2019). One teacher (Black, 50-year-old female from an urban Louisiana middle school) urged,

Workplace bullying laws need to be passed and enforced… [because problems are both] chronic and pervasive.

At higher levels, policies should be enacted to allocate funding to the prevention and mitigation of educator-directed violence (Reddy et al., 2013), as well as protection from retaliation of teachers who report victimization (McMahon et al., 2020). At the federal level, there is a call to establish a national registry to report incidents of violence directed at teachers (Espelage et al., 2013). This would allow for anonymous reporting and accessible data so researchers, practitioners, and policymakers can make

evidence-based decisions to manage school violence. Finally, we recommend including educator voices from various roles in all levels of decision-making, particularly as it pertains to educator-directed violence. Educators' collective experiences are essential to achieving intervention feasibility, acceptability, and implementation.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Over the past decade, there has been a proliferation of research studies on teacher-directed violence and aggression. Common themes arise from this growing field regarding best research practices and questions that remain unanswered. Top research priorities include assessing patterns of violence across time, the long-term effects of violence against educators, as well as the development, feasibility, costs, and effectiveness of evidence-based prevention and mitigation strategies (Anderman et al., 2018). In addition, theoretically grounded research is needed that takes a developmental perspective and examines how youth development influences educator-directed violence (McMahon, Peist, et al., 2019). Using an ecological framework and assessing school climate will yield practical findings that can be applied to diverse school settings.

Given this field of research has only recently proliferated, the development of measures to assess the complexity of violence against educators has lagged behind. Studies have used various measures that have generally not undergone rigorous development and validation procedures (Reddy et al., 2018). This makes it difficult to compare findings across studies and can reduce the confidence we have in our findings. We need valid, reliable measures to assess educator-directed violence and associated policies, practices, school climate, context, institutional structures, as well as recommendations to better address aggression and violence in schools across stakeholders. These multidimensional assessments will inform our understanding of the risk and protective factors associated with educator-directed violence that can be used to improve school policies (McMahon, Martinez, et al., 2017). In addition, there are repeated calls for multi-level, mixed method, and longitudinal study designs (Anderman et al., 2018; McMahon, Davis, et al., 2019; McMahon, Martinez, et al., 2017). Research is needed that captures the diverse experiences of all school employees to understand and comprehensively address the complexities of school violence and make schools better places to work and learn.

CONCLUSION

Over the past two decades, research has revealed that educators experience concerning rates of violence in the workplace. Educators are an essential component of society and play key roles in shaping the future of each generation. However, their experiences with school safety have often been overlooked, their views have not been adequately taken into account, and school violence interventions have not targeted educator-directed violence. Gathering voices from diverse education professionals is necessary to gain a clear understanding of their safety concerns and to reduce overall school violence. A holistic, theory-based, ecologically grounded approach is necessary to inform assessment, prevention, and intervention in schools to improve safety and reduce violence and aggression for all school stakeholders.

Critical Thinking Questions

1. Why is it important to consider educators' experiences of aggression and violence?
2. Your friend has never heard of educator-directed aggression before.
    a. What do you think are the most important things to understand about it? For example, what types of aggression do educators experience?
    b. What are common themes related to aggressors, triggering events, or the ways in which schools respond?
    c. How common is it for teachers to experience aggression in school?
3. What factors lead to aggression against educators, and why are they important to consider?
4. What are three ways that school climate influences educator-directed aggression?
5. What recommendations do you believe will be most important and effective for future research, policies, or practices to prevent educator-directed aggression?

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Aggressor: The individual responsible for aggression or violence; the instigator of an aggressive incident.

Ecological Framework: A theoretical framework that emphasizes the interaction between individuals and their surroundings; people affect and are affected by individual, interpersonal, organizational, community, and societal factors.

Educator-Directed Aggression: Verbal, physical, or property-based aggression experienced by education workers that is related to their professional roles in schools.

Educators: Teachers, paraprofessionals, and other school staff who support or facilitate student education.

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports: A three-tiered approach to support students that includes proactive efforts, resources and interventions, and targeted intensive support.

Restorative Justice: An alternative approach to justice that seeks to repair harm caused by a violent event.

School Climate: The quality and atmosphere of a school; often focused on four domains of school life: academic, safety, community, and institutional environment.