Chapter 3  
Gang Violence in Schools: Safety Measures and Their Effectiveness

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ABSTRACT

Gang-related violence in schools can have a number of negative effects on the school environment, student achievement, and perceptions of fear. Schools that report a gang presence among students often report higher rates of victimization on school property. In response, many schools have focused on both physical and procedural safety measures to enhance security and prevent violence. However, attempts at maintaining order and ensuring safety often fall short in preventing violence and may actually enhance feelings of fear at schools. As such, schools face the difficult task of addressing violence with effective safety measures while also minimizing and balancing the prison-like feeling that comes with many of the options. This chapter aims to describe the effects of violence in schools and examine a variety of safety measures in terms of cost, effect on perceptions of fear, and effectiveness.

CASE STUDY

In an urban Northeastern public high school, there have been multiple gang-related incidents. Rival gangs have been feuding in the neighborhood, and the violence has carried over into the school with its juvenile, low-level members. More graffiti and tagging has appeared around the school in the bathrooms and on lockers, while increased tension has resulted in fist fights, threats, and general disruption to the school and classroom environment. The school administrators have worked with local police to punish the culprits and prevent further incidents by carrying out “random” locker searches, staging interventions between students, and monitoring surveillance cameras more closely. Principals have confiscated three knives and two guns in the past month, and they are fearful that more weapons are entering the school. In response, the school board has approved a new zero-tolerance policy that ensures mandatory expulsion for students involved in gang-related violence or those who bring weapons on the property. The students and staff at the school are well aware of the problems, and many fear for their personal safety on a daily basis. Parents and teachers who are concerned are calling for increased security measures.

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such as metal detectors or police officers in school, but administrators and the school board assert that with an already strapped budget, they do not have the financial or staffing resources to carry out these requests.

INTRODUCTION

In the past decade, youth violence in schools has come to the forefront of public and academic attention as a result of horrific displays of violence, most notably at Columbine High School and Sandy Hook Elementary. While tragic and shocking, these shootings may not necessarily serve as an accurate representation of youth violence in schools. School violence can range from the more frequent fist fight or minor altercation to the sensationalized school shooting and mass violence. While the latter is more publicized and documented, the former still has the potential to affect the school environment and have long term consequences for the school, the victims and the perpetrators, teachers, and society at large. More specifically, gang violence in urban schools can disrupt the learning environment, create a dangerous space for students and staff, and intimidate students or lure them into joining gangs. While not all students will be directly affected or victimized by violence in schools, they will all experience the school culture that is shaped by violent activities and fear. This chapter aims to discuss the scope of the problem of both gang-related violence in schools and the effectiveness of safety measures designed to prevent and decrease such violence. While the chapter aims to address many of these measures and outline the effect of violence in schools, it is important that the reader note that the same measures may also be used to address other non-gang issues in school such as general violence or mass violence prevention. However, a school faced with gang-related problems may look to any or all of these to address issues of gang violence for prevention and intervention.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO CRIMINAL JUSTICE?

While some may imagine that seemingly minor violence that occurs in the school realm may be outside of the criminal justice spectrum, these incidents and the school environment in which they occur can and should serve as a strong indicator of the neighborhoods, town, or geographic areas that encompass the larger environment of the children involved. The students and the school itself are a reflection of the town and a microcosm of the people who live in the area. Often, underprivileged, high-crime areas are associated with dangerous, failing schools that neglect to offer their students a safe and secure environment in which they can learn. For this reason, school and gang violence has remained a priority area of research in child and adolescent psychology, school administration and public health, and counseling or social work fields. Yet, it has major implications and ties for criminal justice research as well.

Rather than examining schools solely for their explanatory power of understanding the effects of the larger environment (e.g. community, neighborhood or census tract), a look through an optimistic lens allows researchers, practitioners, and educators to view schools as an opportunity to create long-term change in a given area. If violence, gang membership, and harassment have the potential for negative, life-altering consequences, schools should similarly present the prospect of positive change as well. Changing the face of youth violence in the environment in which they can spend the vast majority of their time can change generations of children in the coming years, thus changing the community and