Chapter 21
The Role of Teachers and School Leaders in K–12 School Violence

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ABSTRACT

While data regarding school violence are gathered on a regular basis, noticeably missing from the literature are incidents that involve violence directed toward K–12 teachers and school leaders. The scarce evidence that does exist regarding this phenomenon suggests that this population is targeted more often than one may think, and they suffer from great harm as a result of various violent behaviors such as harassment, verbal threats and intimidation, bullying, property offenses, and physical attacks. Since very little is known about violence that is directed toward K–12 teachers and school leaders, there is a significant need for more research in this area in order to provide a more comprehensive view of school violence and to develop policies and formulate effective solutions. Addressing these issues will not only allow teachers and school leaders to perform to the best of their abilities, but school environments will be safer so that learning can take place without the interruption of violence.

INTRODUCTION

In 2017, an estimated 50.7 million children attended public elementary and secondary schools in the United States during the fall term (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2017). Moreover, there were approximately 3.2 million full time teachers in the public-school system who were responsible for educating and imparting knowledge on students. Overall, these statistics resulted in a pupil/teacher ratio of 16:1. Interestingly, this ratio has increased since 2007 when the pupil/teacher ratio was 15.4:1 (NCES, 2017). Given the sheer number of students that American educators are responsible for in various types of educational settings, acts of violence are bound to occur in some form. Concern over school

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violence has increased in recent years and as a result, researchers have begun to explore the causes and consequences of school violence (Ricketts, 2007). Although there has been debate over the accuracy of prevalence rates and how to properly define school violence, there is an abundance of research on school violence and the role that it plays in K-12 education (Ricketts, 2007). Certainly, this information is vital to fully understanding the phenomenon of school violence. Although, as this chapter will demonstrate, current estimates of school violence are weak in that they do not fully capture the entirety of the problem.

Noticeably missing from the discussion on K-12 school violence are teachers and school leaders, as there is a paucity of literature that examines the impact school violence has on these individuals. Teachers and school leaders are unique bystanders to school violence because they can be both victims and perpetrators of violent behavior. In addition to being active participants in school violence, teachers and school leaders have the ability to influence and enforce school policies. Fortunately, a few researchers have taken notice of this phenomenon and have offered solutions to the problems presented within. The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the role that teachers and school leaders play in the multi-faceted topic that is school violence. Given the vital role that these individuals play in K-12 school violence, this chapter is an essential component to any text that explores the issues surrounding violence in a school setting. However, this chapter should serve as only a starting point, since much more research is needed in order to understand these issues in more depth.

THE NATURE AND EXTENT OF K-12 SCHOOL VIOLENCE

Before discussing the role of teachers and school leaders in K-12 school violence, it is important to first address the nature and extent of violent behavior as it occurs in school settings. When defining K-12 school violence, there is often a tendency to focus on incidents in terms of violent deaths, such as those that occurred during the 1999 Columbine High School shootings and the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary school massacre. While homicides of school age youth are included with prevalence rates for school violence, conceptualizations should also encompass consequences that go beyond death. For example, when researching school violence, one must also consider non-deadly physical violence. In essence, these types of behaviors include the carrying of weapons on school property, threats of violence, and bullying behaviors. Indeed, most violent incidents that occur in schools do not end in fatalities. However, in few cases, violent incidents can result in death. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2017), 31 violent deaths had occurred in public schools between July 2013 and June 2014. Though these incidents are rare, numbers show that non-fatal incidents are more common. In fact, the number of non-fatal incidents in schools are increasing. During the 2013-2014 academic year, 65% of public schools recorded one or more violent incidents, which resulted in approximately 757,000 violent incidents or 15 crimes per 1,000 students (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). These statistics are concerning and, as the following discussion demonstrates, do not only include students as the targets of violence.

When one thinks of school violence, there may be a tendency to only think of children as the victims; however, much like students, teachers can also be the victims of school violence too (Bounds & Jenkins, 2016; Ricketts, 2007). In fact, the number of violent incidents involving teachers is increasing. The National Center for Education Statistics (2017) estimates that 9% of school teachers had been threatened with injury by a student during the 2011-2012 school year. Moreover, 5% of teachers were physically attacked by a student. Figures demonstrate that these rates are higher than in any previous survey year (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Certainly, these findings are concerning and point to the need