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# Violence and Aggression in School Settings

## **Abstract**

Violence and aggression continue to cause harm to American schools and communities, which has been visibly illustrated by the continual perpetration of school shootings. In order to prevent these situations from occurring again, the etiology of violent and aggressive behaviors must be studied. Utilizing an ecological perspective, both the risk factors and protective factors of violence and aggression, also known as a dual strategy approach, are examined within an educational context. Specific risk factors reviewed include weapons exposure and social rejection, while protective factors reviewed include school connectedness and pro-social relationships. Implications regarding the prevention of violent and aggressive acts among students, with the goal of creating safer school environments, are provided for each domain.

## **Keywords**

violence, aggression, schools, children, adolescents

## **Author Statement**

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## Introduction

For the past twenty years, acts of school violence have been occurring at alarmingly high rates in the United States of America. In the first nine weeks of 2018 alone, there have been at least twelve school shootings in the nation (Simon, 2018). As these tragic events continue to unfold, schools and communities are left without answers or solutions. While schools may seem powerless in the aftermath of a school shooting, power may be reclaimed through efforts to prevent these violent events from occurring again. In order to implement successful prevention efforts, one must discern the factors that brought about the violence in the first place. While there are various solutions proposed in preventing school shootings, the general public has yet to reach a consensus on how to prevent these tragedies. Limited knowledge in the etiology of these events, coupled with the passing of time, places students at a heightened risk for experiencing violence in their classrooms.

## Defining Violence and Aggression

In order to understand violent behavior, violence must first be framed in the broader context of aggression. Aggression is defined as “a forceful action or procedure (such as an unprovoked attack) especially when intended to dominate or master” (Merriam-Webster’s collegiate dictionary, 2018). Aggression is influenced by various factors including those that are biological, psychological, interpersonal, and cultural (Leary, Twenge & Quinlivan, 2006). There are different types of aggression, including overt aggression and relational aggression. Overt aggression involves acts of physical harm, while relational aggression consists of using one’s relationships as a means to inflict social harm (Prinstein, Boergers, & Vernberg, 2001). Thus, acts of violence are considered overt acts of aggression. Specifically, violence is defined as “the use of physical force so as to

injure, abuse, damage or destroy” (Merriam-Webster’s collegiate dictionary, 2018).

## Theories of Aggression

The complexity of aggression is evident by the various theories that aim to understand its role in human nature. In order to better understand aggression, it is important to have an understanding of its etiology. For the purposes of the paper, key theoretical differences between psychoanalytic theory, learning theory, and ecological theory will be briefly reviewed. Theories of aggression include instinctive/psychoanalytic theories, physiological arousal theory, frustration-aggression theory, learning theory, social-cognitive theory, information processing model, general aggression model, and environmental/situational triggers of aggression (Bushman & Bartholow, 2011). The study of aggression, within a psychological framework, dates back to the work of psychologist Sigmund Freud during the early 1900s. Freud alternated between two kinds of theories to explain violence and aggression: aggression as an inborn biological instinct, and aggression as being motivated by emotions such as anger, hatred and hostility (Lothane, 2016). Moreover, Albert Bandura’s social learning theory views aggression as a ‘multifaceted phenomenon’ that is dependent upon the subjective judgments regarding personal responsibility and intent to harm (Bandura, 1978). According to Bandura’s theory, whether an act is perceived as aggressive or not will depend on the judgments of others (Bandura, 1978). Freud and Bandura’s theories may be viewed in opposition; While Freud viewed aggression as an internal experience, Bandura viewed aggression as more of an external experience that involved the perceptions of others.

The ecological perspective combines elements of both internal factors for each individual, and external factors of the environment. Through an ecological framework, interrelationships between

individuals and their surrounding contexts are emphasized, in addition to the interactions between micro- and macro-level systems (Harney, 2007). Ecological theory takes into consideration the work of both Freud and Bandura by examining the interactions between internal processes/characteristics and external contexts. In terms of aggression among youth, the model focuses on understanding how individual characteristics of children and adolescents may interact with environmental factors in order to promote or prevent victimization and perpetration (Espelage, 2014). By focusing on both individual characteristics and environmental factors, and how these variables interact, a comprehensive framework is provided to study aggression among children and adolescents in school settings.

Awareness and education regarding youth violence and aggression is necessary in order to provide guidance on how to take action. On the contrary, a failure to act, or a failure to prevent school violence, will present consequences for both the individual and community. Literature has shown that the domain of violence prevention is expanding towards an ecological perspective that includes factors of risk and protection at the individual, family, school, and community levels (Resnick, Ireland & Borowsky, 2004). For example, at an individual level, when students present aggressive behaviors and do not receive early intervention, they tend to have higher rates of conduct problems, antisocial behaviors, and mental health challenges (Leff, Baker, Waasdorp, Vaughn, Bevans, Thomas, Guerra, Hausman & Monopoli, 2014). Increased acts of aggressive behavior among students leads to higher conflict in classrooms, schools, and the broader context of the community, demonstrating a 'ripple effect'. Examining aggression and violence through an ecological perspective provides opportunities for positive change through the interpretation of both personal and environmental factors.

## **Risk Factors and Protective Factors**

Violence among children and adolescents may be viewed through a public health approach, which considers both risk factors and protective factors (Office of the Surgeon General, 2001). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention includes initiatives aimed at increasing cooperation between health, education, and community partners, in an effort to promote social and cognitive competence among young people (Resnick et al., 2004). Collaboration across systems follows an ecological framework for reducing violence and aggression among youth. Moreover, the identification of risk and protective factors may assist the public in designing programs in order to reduce violence, whether it be through prevention or response (Office of the Surgeon General, 2001). There are various risk factors that are predictive of violence perpetration, including weapon carrying, weak social ties/social rejection, suicidal involvement, school problems, poor physical and/or emotional health, and substance use (Resnick et al., 2004; Office of the Surgeon General, 2001). In contrast, protective factors have been found to include high academic achievement, healthy relationships with family members, pro-social relationships with peers, and school commitment/connectedness (Office of the Surgeon General, 2001).

Utilizing a dual strategy of (1) reduction of risk factors and (2) promotion of protective factors provides a comprehensive, ecological framework to address youth violence and aggression within school settings. The utility of the dual strategy approach in addressing the perpetration of violence among youth has been highlighted across studies (Resnick et al., 2004; Office of the Surgeon General, 2001; Anderson, Benjamin & Batholow, 1998; Catalano, Haggerty, Oesterle, Fleming & Hawkins, 2004). Therefore, this paper will review the literature in terms of risk factors and protective factors that have been explicitly identified through scientific

evidence. The literature regarding the specific risk factors of social rejection and weapons-carrying will be reviewed, in addition to the protective factors of school connectedness and pro-social relationships. The following four factors will be examined within a social psychological framework in relation to violence and aggression in school settings. Furthermore, implications for preventing violent and aggressive acts among students, with the goal of creating safer school environments, will be provided for each domain.

### **Risk Factors**

A risk factor is anything that may increase the probability of an individual to suffer harm (Office of the Surgeon General, 2001). As previously mentioned, risk factors for violence and aggression may include social rejection, exposure to weapons, psychological concerns, and substance use (Resnick et al., 2004). It is critical to identify and understand risk factors in order to prevent harm done to an individual or community. Through the identification of risk factors, targeted efforts for intervention may be made. For example, a student presenting a psychological concern (an identified risk factor), such as bipolar disorder, will likely benefit from mental health services. Once the school identifies this need, the school may intervene to provide mental health supports for the student. Although not directly targeting aggression, the support provided to the student may help decrease future acts of aggression in the school and/or community. However, for the purposes of this paper, the risk factors of exposure to weapons and social rejection will be examined in further detail.

#### **Exposure to weapons.**

One factor predictive of interpersonal violence perpetration has been identified as the carrying of weapons (Resnick et al., 2004). Replicated research has found that the mere

presence of a weapon may lead to more aggressive behavior in individuals, particularly when the individual is already aroused (Anderson et al., 1998). The phenomenon of the ‘weapons effect’ was initially studied over 50 years ago, by Berkowitz & LePage, in 1967 (Anderson, 1998). The weapons effect occurs when a visual of a weapon is presented, subsequently resulting in the increased accessibility of aggressive thoughts through a spreading-activation process (Anderson et al., 1998). Strong associations between guns and violence form in the long-term memory, and perceiving a gun may activate these associations, thus making aggressive thoughts highly accessible (Anderson et al., 1998). In summary, the simple identification of weapons “increases the accessibility of aggressive thoughts” (Anderson et al., 1998, pg. 312).

While schools may prohibit weapons on campus, individuals still may have access to weapons in the community. Issues surrounding accessing and purchasing weapons in society are beyond the scope of educational institutions, and remain in the hands of government officials and policy-makers. For example, American government officials have recently proposed arming teachers with weapons in an effort to combat school violence (Jackson & King, 2018). In terms of the discussion around creating safe school environments (i.e. the argument to arm teachers with weapons), there are serious risks involved in terms of aggression and violence. According to the weapons effect, increasing the exposure of weapons at school will in turn increase the accessibility of aggressive thoughts. Therefore, it is imperative for those in leadership positions to consider the scientific evidence regarding the weapons effect, and the implications it has regarding the safety of children in school settings.

#### **Social rejection.**

The connection between rejection and aggression has been documented in various

experimental, correlational, and longitudinal studies (Leary, Twenge & Quinlivan, 2006). Previous literature suggests that experiences of interpersonal rejection are associated with higher levels of aggression (Leary et al., 2006). Rejection studies have found that rejection produces strong effects on behavior (Leary et al., 2006), demonstrating a connection to the importance of pro-social behaviors and creating a sense of belonging in school environments. Moreover, the Surgeon General's report on youth violence found that social rejection (described in the report as "weak social ties") was the most significant risk factor for adolescent violence (Office of the Surgeon General, 2001). The weaker the social ties (which may be characterized as low involvement in school activities and/or unpopularity at school), the higher the risk of becoming violent (Office of the Surgeon General, 2001). Further demonstrating this effect, bullying has been linked to social rejection. Bullying may be defined as a distinct type of aggression that involves an abuse of power and repeated perpetration (Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim & Sadek, 2010). The connection between bullying and social rejection was identified in a 2010 meta-analysis by Cook and colleagues. The study found children who bullied other students appeared to have been socially rejected and isolated by their peers during childhood (Cook et al., 2010).

The connection between social rejection and violence has been studied in previous cases of school shootings in America. An analysis of fifteen school shootings in America (from 1995-2001) were evaluated to examine the possible role of social rejection in school violence (Leary, Kowalski, Smith, & Phillips, 2003). The investigators found that teasing, ostracism, bullying, and/or romantic rejection were present in twelve out of the fifteen cases (Leary et al., 2003). Considering this information, there are clear implications for educators and staff in terms of monitoring social rejection in school settings. In order to strengthen the social connections among

students, schools may want to emphasize bullying prevention and programs that support team-building skills (i.e. student organizations, community outreach activities). However, further research is needed to understand how to effectively reduce the amount of social rejection among peers in schools.

### **Protective Factors**

Protective factors include conditions, that may interact with risk factors, in order to reduce their influence on violent behavior (Office of the Surgeon General, 2001). Protective factors include "the events, opportunities, and experiences in the lives of young people that diminish or buffer against the likelihood of involvement in behaviors risky to youth and/or to others" (Resnick et al., 2006, p. 424.e4). School connectedness and the enhancement of pro-social relationships have been identified through academic literature as variables that have the potential to reduce incidents of violence and aggression within schools, and will therefore be further examined in this section.

#### **School connectedness.**

A sense of belonging, or connectedness, to one's school has been identified as a protective factor of violent behavior. A study by Duggins and colleagues (2016) utilized a resilience framework in order to examine associations between victimization and aggression in cases of school bullying. Resilience theory focuses on the processes that allow individuals to "bounce back" when faced with adversity (Duggins et al., 2016). In the study, students completed surveys of family and school connectedness at baseline. School belonging was assessed via 4 items taken from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Duggins et al., 2004). Results demonstrated that students who reported higher levels of school belonging on the measure reported fewer aggressive acts

(Duggins et al., 2016). The cross-sectional results support the compensatory models of resilience, however, the longitudinal findings were less clear. The authors conclude that school belonging may help students to avoid acting aggressively during a time where they are experiencing victimization, yet this effect may diminish over time (Duggins et al., 2016). The findings demonstrate that a sense of school belonging may decrease aggression during victimization, although further research is needed in order to determine whether these effects can be sustained over time.

Catalano and colleagues describe school connectedness as being comprised of two interdependent components: (1) affective relationships with school community members and (2) an investment in school and academic success (Catalano et al., 2004). They developed the Social Development Model, hypothesizing that children must learn patterns of behavior from their social environment (Catalano et al., 2004). The socialization process creates a social bond of attachment and commitment between the child and the social environment/institution. The creation of this social bond subsequently strengthens the child's commitment to conform the norms, values, and behaviors of social environment. Further, this social bond acts as a mediator between what is considered prosocial versus antisocial behavior in the context of the environment. Therefore, aggressive acts are judged based on the values of the social environment, which in this case, would be the social environment of the school setting.

Further, Catalano and colleagues examined two longitudinal studies to examine the impact of school connectedness in relation to school violence (Catalano et al., 2004). These studies included two interventions informed by the Social Development Model: (1) the Seattle Social Development Project (SSDP) and (2) Raising Healthy Children (RHC) (Catalano et al., 2004). Both the SSDP and RHC seek to reduce risk factors and increase

protective factors for adolescent health and behavioral issues. Data examining the effects of SSDP and RHC were promising. SSDP data revealed that, at the elementary level, as school bonding increased, problem behavior decreased (Catalano et al., 2004). Moreover, during middle and high school (ages 10-18), school bonding was significantly and negatively associated with violence in adolescence and young adulthood (up to age 21) (Catalano et al., 2004). The RHC sought to replicate and further extend the SSDP. The RHC results found that school bonding had a protective effect, particularly for children whose parents were involved in antisocial behaviors including drug use and domestic violence (Catalano et al., 2004).

Both the SSDP and RHC interventions sought to increase the competence of socialization units of school, family, and peer groups, in order to strengthen school connectedness. Outcomes of these school-wide interventions included improved academic achievement for students and reduced school problems, such as violence and aggression (Catalano et al., 2004). Reducing violence in schools will promote higher academic outcomes, as violence presents a barrier to learning (Catalano et al., 2004). Thus, support for school connectedness, as a means to reduce school violence, is grounded in theoretical and scientific evidence. In order to decrease aggression, and also increase academic achievement, the literature demonstrates that schools should target school connectedness as a way to achieve these outcomes for students.

### **Enhancing pro-social relationships.**

A strong social bond, or connection, to school has been found to reduce violence among youth (Catalano et al., 2004). In addition, the quality of relationships in educational settings has the ability to influence the school's culture and the student's ability to learn (Evans & Vaandering, 2016). School settings are inherently social environments,

therefore children and adolescents are presented with opportunities to develop relationships with peers, educators, administrators and others within the school community. The enhancement of pro-social relationships has been identified as a protective factor in preventing violence among youth (Resnick et al., 2004).

Enhancing the quality of positive/healthy relationships within school settings may be viewed through a restorative justice lens. Restorative justice (RJ) has been a grassroots movement that has been mainly driven by practice rather than theory (Evans & Vaandering, 2016). The RJ movement applied to educational settings emphasizes three aspects: the creation of just and equitable learning environments, building and maintaining healthy relationships, and healing harm in order to transform conflict (Evans & Vaandering, 2016). Restorative justice may be implemented into school settings in order to promote inclusion and nurture healthy relationships in schools. Evans & Vaandering (2016) propose two approaches for nurturing healthy relationships: (a) talking circles and (b) learning to listen and learning to ask, in order to encourage the growth of relational school cultures.

Further, restorative practices may compliment a school-wide system of positive behavior supports in a Response to Intervention (RTI) model (Winslade, Espinoza, Myers, & Yzaguirre, 2014). For example, Tier 1 interventions may include proactive prevention, relationship building, restorative conversations, and classroom circles (Winslade et al., 2014). Tier 2 may include targeted group intervention, such as undercover anti-bullying teams, while Tier 3 may involve more intensive supports, such as circles of support/accountability, re-entry interventions, and peer juries (Winslade et al., 2014). Restorative practices provide educators with specific steps on how to facilitate pro-social relationships within educational settings, which may subsequently decrease

violence and aggression, thus creating safer school environments.

While there are practical examples on how to implement restorative practices within an RTI model (Evans & Vaandering, 2016; Winslade et al., 2014), and success has been documented within school settings (Winslade et al., 2014), there remains a need to initiate scientific research in order further guide and replicate the implementation of its practices with fidelity. Developing a sound methodology to examine pro-social relationships within restorative framework, particularly among peers within school settings, would further advance this domain.

## Conclusion

There is an urgent need to reduce the amount of violence and aggression perpetrated by young people in school settings, particularly in the United States of America. To illustrate, the amount of school shootings in the United States has been continuously causing harm and destruction to both schools, their communities and society. In order to prevent these situations from occurring again, the etiology of violent and aggressive behaviors must be studied. Considering the data from the studies reviewed, how much more do we know about violence and aggression in relation to school settings? The answer to this question may be framed in terms of risk factors and protective factors within an ecological perspective. An ecological framework takes into account the individual, family, school, and community levels (Resnick et al., 2004). The utility of the dual strategy approach, through reducing risk factors and promoting of protective factors, has been demonstrated across studies. Furthermore, there are implications for preventing violent and aggressive behaviors in school settings.

When examining risk factors, controlled experiments have found that the proximity of weapons will increase one's aggressive thoughts – also known as the weapons effect



(Anderson et al., 1998). The weapons effect may be theoretically applied to school settings. For example, an increase in the exposure of weapons within school settings would lead to an increase in aggressive thoughts, and potentially aggressive behaviors, within school settings. While educators may limit the exposure of weapons at school, concerns of students accessing weapons outside of the school must be addressed by the larger community. Moreover, literature has shown that social rejection plays a role in violent and aggressive behaviors within school settings. Social rejection was identified as the most important risk factor for adolescent violence (Office of the Surgeon General, 2001). In order to decrease the amount of social rejection among peers, schools may want to emphasize bullying prevention and programs that support team-building skills, however further research is needed to support these recommendations.

In terms of protective factors, studies have found that when students feel a sense of connection to their schools, there is a subsequent decline in aggression and violent encounters (Duggins et al., 2016). Through the socialization process, a social bond is created between the child and the social environment (school). A stronger bond will increase the likelihood that the student will adhere to the school's values, such as treating others with respect. This social bond may therefore play a role in reducing the amount of aggressive and violent behaviors in schools. In addition to school connectedness, another protective factor is the development of pro-social relationships. An example of a framework for fostering pro-social relationships in school settings is restorative justice. Restorative justice is guided by practice, therefore developing a sound methodology to examine pro-social relationships within restorative framework would build upon a research base to support its implementation in schools.

A greater understanding of how social contexts, particularly schools, play a role in

violence prevention, provides a call for school professionals to work alongside students in an effort to strengthen protective factors and create safer school communities (Resnick et al., 2004). The review of literature demonstrates that addressing violence and aggression as early as possible would be most beneficial for students, as there are various factors that influence aggressive behavior (i.e. social rejection, weapons exposure). Research findings demonstrate that schools provide a context to both inhibit antisocial (i.e. violent, aggressive) behavior and also promote positive development for students, thus reducing acts of violence and aggression; Schools provide opportunities to both prevent and respond to violent situations. When school systems take the initiative in reducing the amount of youth violence, it will lead to positive outcomes at the individual, school, and community levels. Therefore, it is imperative to study how to break the chain of violence that has been plaguing American schools.

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