

## What Factors Increase the Risk of Being Involved in Violence?

### ***What Does It Mean to Be “At-Risk” of Violence?***

Risk factors are traits associated with an increased likelihood that an individual or community will be affected by or become a perpetrator of violence. Risk factors can occur at the individual, family, school, and community levels. While not everyone who is identified as being ‘at-risk’ becomes involved in violence, research shows that those individuals with more than one risk factors *and* a lack of protective factors are more vulnerable to being affected by, or involved in violence.<sup>1</sup> As an individual is exposed to more risk factors, the probability that she or he will engage in violent behavior increases.<sup>2</sup>

### ***How Does the Social Context in which Students Live Impact Their Level of Risk?***

Young people’s development occurs within a larger social context.<sup>3</sup> Family members, peers, the school, the community, and cultural and sociological forces all influence students as they learn appropriate coping skills and behavior for dealing with their environment.<sup>4</sup> Practitioners who understand the interplay social influences on students are more likely to be able to identify vulnerable youth and will have an increased chance of successfully intervening to reduce and prevent school violence, and to improve the lives of young people.

### **Individual Factors**

Factors that have in the past been associated with an increased risk of violence, such as race, income, gender, and family structure, were recently found by the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) to offer weak explanations for youth risk behaviors.<sup>5</sup> Instead, 20-50% of all the high-risk behaviors among the youth studied were linked to:

- ***Poor academic performance:*** Poor academic performance has consistently predicted later delinquency.<sup>6</sup> Academic failure in elementary school also increases risk for later violent behavior.<sup>7</sup> This relationship has been found to be stronger for females than males.<sup>8</sup>
- ***Unstructured free time:*** Truant youth and those who drop out of school before age 15 are more likely to engage in violent behavior.<sup>6</sup>
- ***Delinquent peers:*** Association with friends who engage in risky behaviors is significantly linked to students’ later involvement in violence.<sup>9</sup>

### **School Factors**

- ***School size:*** One-third of large schools with enrollments of 1,000 or more students reported at least one serious violent crime, compared with less than one-tenth of schools with fewer than 1,000 students.<sup>10</sup>
- ***Geographic location:*** During the 1996-97 school year, urban schools were at least twice as likely to report serious violent crime as schools in towns and rural locations.
- ***Gangs:*** Schools reporting the presence of drugs or gangs in their midst have a higher rate of school violence.<sup>11</sup> A report issued by the US Departments of Education and Justice found that gangs were strongly correlated with violence and the presence of drugs and guns in schools.<sup>12</sup> In addition, 41% of urban schools, 26% of suburban schools, and 20% of rural schools reported an increase in gang presence in schools from 1989 to 1995.<sup>13</sup>

**Community Factors**

- **Community deterioration:** Substandard schools and housing contribute to the feeling among youth that society does not care about them. Violence can then become an expression of students' anger and alienation.<sup>14,15</sup>
- **Media:** Media portrayals of violent behavior as a common and appropriate way to solve problems lead young people to become desensitized to and accepting of violence. Such images can also increase students' fears, which can encourage them to carry weapons or become involved in violent activities as a means of protection.<sup>16</sup>
- **Guns:** When students have access to guns and other weapons, they are at increased risk of becoming involved in violence. Recent research concludes that if adolescents have easy access to guns in the home, they are more likely to act violently towards others.<sup>2</sup> Guns also increase the likelihood that violent acts will result in mortality; even if the number of violent acts remained undiminished, there would be fewer deaths and less serious injuries if guns were not used.<sup>17</sup>
- **Alcohol and other drugs:** Nationwide, alcohol is the drug most closely associated with violence. Drugs or alcohol is cited by 39% of seventh through twelve graders as a major factor in why violence occurs in schools.<sup>18</sup> In addition, one study shows that 40% of students who drank alcohol at school also carried a weapon at school.<sup>19</sup>
- **Witnessing and experiencing violence:** Teens most likely to be involved in committing violent acts were those who had previously witnessed or been victims of violence.<sup>2</sup> Additional data show that experiencing childhood abuse and neglect increases the likelihood of juvenile arrest by 53% and the likelihood of committing a violent crime by 38%.<sup>20</sup>

**Underlying Factors**

- **Oppression:** Students may experience oppression based on their age, race, gender, and the perception that they cannot contribute to society in meaningful ways.<sup>21</sup>
- **Economics:** Poverty, high unemployment, and lack of available resources can create a sense of hopelessness among both youth and adults. In low-income areas, there are fewer support services available to youth both inside and outside of schools. Low family income contributes to an increased likelihood of becoming involved in crime and violence.<sup>22,23</sup>
- **Family dynamics:** Stressful family environments, such as role modeling of inappropriate behavior,<sup>24</sup> conflict in the home,<sup>10, 25</sup> lack of fathers in the home, inadequate parenting skills,<sup>10</sup> and poor communication can contribute to students' feelings of worthlessness- which can manifest as violence.
- **Mental illness:** Mental illness and mental disorders affect students' ability to learn, communicate, and make good decisions. Individuals with mental health problems are at an increased risk of being perpetrators or victims of violence. Untreated parental mental illness can contribute to an unstable and potentially unsafe home environment, compromising parenting, communication, and family management skills.<sup>26</sup> The stigma associated with mental illness, lack of easily accessible mental health care, and fragmented treatment services often prevent those who need from obtaining them. Children who are not identified as having mental health problems and who do not receive services often end up in jail.<sup>27</sup>
- **Gender:** Males are more likely than females to have been threatened with violence, injured with a weapon, or to have engaged in a physical fight on school property.<sup>28</sup> However, violence among girls has also increased significantly in the past two decades, and research

shows that, in schools where large numbers of boys are carrying weapons, girls are also carrying weapons at an elevated rate.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Garbarino J (1999) *Lost Boys: Why Our Sons Turn Violent and How We Can Save Them*. New York, NY: The Free Press.

<sup>2</sup> Farrington DP (1997) Early prediction of violent and non-violent youthful offending. *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research*. 5:51-66.

<sup>3</sup> Bronfenbrenner U (1977) Toward an Experimental Ecology of Human Development. *American Psychologist*. 32: 513-531.

<sup>4</sup> Garbarino J and Abramowitz R (1992) Sociocultural risk and opportunity. In: J. Garbarino (Ed.) *Children and Families in the Social Environment*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter. 38-63.

<sup>5</sup> Blum RW, Beuhring T, Shew MI, Bearing IH, Sieving RE, Resnick MD (2000) The effects of race/ethnicity, income and family structure on adolescent risk behavior. *American Journal of Public Health*. 90(12).

<http://www.peds.umn.edu/peds-adol/PDFs/10764%20Ethnicity.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Maugin E and Loeber R (1996) Academic performance and delinquency. In *Crime and Justice: A Review of Research*. 20: 145-264. Ed: M. Tonry. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.

<sup>7</sup> Farrington DP (1989) Early predictors of adolescent aggression and adult violence. *Violence and Victims* 4:79-100.

<sup>8</sup> Hawkins JD, Herrenkohl TI, Farrington DP, Brewer D, Catalano RF, Harachi TW, Cothorn L (2000) Predictors of Youth Violence. *OJJDP Juvenile Justice Bulletin*. April 2000. U.S. Department of Justice.

<sup>9</sup> Moffitt TE (1993) Adolescent-limited and life-course-persistent antisocial behavior: A development taxonomy. *Psychological Review* 100:674-701.

<sup>10</sup> Indicators of school crime and safety (1998) *Nonfatal Student Victimization Student Reports*. National Center for Education Statistics.

<sup>11</sup> Howell JC, Lynch JD (2000) *Youth Gangs in Schools*. *OJJDP Juvenile Justice Bulletin*. U.S. Department of Justice.

<sup>12</sup> Chandler KA, Chapman CD, Rand MR, Taylor BM (1998) *Students' Reports of School Crime: 1989 and 1995*. Washington, DC: US Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement. National Center for Education Statistics and U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics.

<sup>13</sup> National Youth Gang Center. (1999b) *1997 Youth Gang Survey*. Washington, D.C: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

<sup>14</sup> Hawkins JD, Farrington DP, and Catalano RF (1998) Reducing school violence through the schools. In: DS Elliott, B Hamburg, KR Williams (Eds.) *Violence in American Schools: A New Perspective*. 127-155. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>15</sup> Maugin E, Hawkins JD, Catalano RF, Hill K, Abbott R, Herrenkohl T (1995) Risk Factors Measures at Three Ages for Violence at Age 17-18. Paper presented to the American Society of Criminology, Nov 1995, Boston, MA.

<sup>16</sup> Slaby S (1992) *Television Violence: Effects and Remedies*. Testimony to the U.S. House of Representatives Judiciary Committee's Subcommittee on Crime and Criminal Justice. December 15, 1992.

<sup>17</sup> Cook PJ (1991) The technology of personal violence. In: *Crime and Justice: An Annual Review of Research*. 14th ed. Ed: M. Tonry. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.

<sup>18</sup> *The Metropolitan Life Survey of the American Teacher, 1999: Violence in America's Public Schools - Five Years Later*, Metropolitan Life, 1999.

<sup>19</sup> Bell C. Strategies for the prevention of youth violence in Chicago public schools. In: M. Shafii, S. Shafii (Eds.) *School Violence: Contributing Factors, Management and Prevention*. American Psychiatric Press; upcoming.

<sup>20</sup> *Combating Violence and Delinquency: The National Juvenile Justice Action Plan/Report* (1996) U.S. Department of Justice, March 1996.

<sup>21</sup> McCord J and Ensminger M (1995) Pathways from aggressive childhood to criminality. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 37:1477-1486.

<sup>22</sup> Sampson R and Lauritsen J (1994) Violent victimization and offending: Individual, situational, and community-level risk factors. In: A.J. Reiss, J.A. Roth (Eds.) *Understanding and Preventing Violence*. Vol 3, Social Influences: 451-81. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press

---

<sup>23</sup> Henry B, Avshalom C, Moffitt TE, Silva PA (1996) Temperamental and familial predictors of violent and non-violent criminal convictions: Age 3 to age 18. *Developmental Psychology*. 32:614-623.

<sup>24</sup> Farrington DP (1989) Early predictors of adolescent aggression and adult violence. *Violence and Victims* 4:79-100.

<sup>25</sup> Elliott DS (1994) Serious violent offenders: Onset, developmental course, and termination. The American Society of Criminology 1993 presidential address. *Criminology* 32:1-21.

<sup>26</sup> Dobowitz H, Black MM, Kerr MA, et al. (2001) Type and timing of mothers' victimization: Effects on mothers and children. *Pediatrics*. 107(4): 728-735.

<sup>27</sup> Webster DW, Gainer PS, and Champion HR (1993) Weapon carrying among inner-city junior high school students: Defensive behavior versus aggressive delinquency. *American Journal of Public Health*. 83: 1604-1608.

<sup>28</sup> Centers For Disease Control (1998) Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance - United States. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 47(No. SS-3):7-8, 44.

<sup>29</sup> Webster DW, Gainer PS, Champion HR (1993) Weapon carrying among inner-city junior high school students: Defensive behavior versus aggressive delinquency. *American Journal of Public Health*, 83, 1604-1608.