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Creating a Safe and Secure Learning Environment

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ABSTRACT

Improving the partnership between local law enforcement and the community is relevant to contemporary law enforcement because school districts need to be safer environments for children to live and learn in. The purpose of this research is to examine ways in which local law enforcements and the community can enhance children's learning environments. The method of inquiry used by the researcher included a review of articles, Internet sites, periodicals, journals, and an analysis of meetings that were held evaluate a community-wide strategic plan to create and maintain safer schools and healthier childhood development. The researcher discovered that the themes commonly revealed in the meetings were bullying, violence, out of control behavior (sex), and substance abuse in adolescence.

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INTRODUCTION

The problem or issue to be examined considers in what ways community members can partner to enable local law enforcement and the community to create safer schools. The relevance of creating safer schools to law enforcement is that they create a safe learning environment for students. The purpose of this research is to examine how to become proactive in safe school environment. The research question to be examined focuses on the ways the community would like to assist in creating a relationship with law enforcement to better the children of the community. The intended method of inquiry includes a review of pertinent literature relating to juveniles, safety, schools, law enforcement, and the community. In addition, focus group meetings were held, and they will be examined for the types of themes that are commonly revealed. The anticipated finding of the research is that through the use of a community partnership, local law enforcement can create a safer environment for children. The field of law enforcement will be influenced by the conclusions because children are the future, and by creating this type of partnership, law enforcement can continue to not only keep children safe, but create a bond with community.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There have been reports of school shootings, bullying, fighting, and sexual assaults, and these have renewed cries of alarm from news media, politicians, and the general public about what appears to be a trend toward an increase in violence in schools. These violent acts against students have become more common in the United States, and the U.S. Education and Justice Departments noted that "in 2003 there were about 738,700 violent crimes involving students at schools, and 846,400 crimes away

from schools. Such violence included 28 crimes of rape, sexual assault, robbery, and physical assault for every 1,000 students". However, "the incidence of crime in schools during 2003 was only half that of 1993, and crime in general reached a 30-year low. The rate of school violence dropped dramatically between 1993 and 2000, which left school violence remain at a constant level" (Sherman, 2005). The most common types of violence were fist fights, bullying, and showing matches. These "studies of bullying suggest that three out of every 10 students were involved in bullying-13% as bullies, 11% as victims, and 6% as both bullies and as victims" (Hawkins, Farrington & Catalano, 1998, p. 188- 216). Reports show that "for children in grades 6 through 10, this translates to 3.7 million children who bully other children each year and 3.2 million who are victims" (Osofsky & Osofsky, 2001, p. 285-295). In the 2000 school year, reports showed that 15% of students in grades 9 through 12 reported being in a physical fight on school property (Osofsky & Osofsky, 2001, p. 285-295).

According to Sexton " these physical attacks without a weapon and vandalism were far more frequent than such violent crimes as rape, sexual assault, robbery, or aggravated assault that were reported by about 20% of schools" (Sexton-Radek, 2005, p.?). Bowen and Bowen (1999) found that "student crime has typically risen in grades 6 through 8, peaked at grade 9, and declined through grade 12" (p. 319-342). Teen violence has been a problem for a long time, but statistics show that this problem is growing and getting more violent each year. It is a problem that should not be taken lightly, and it is necessary to understand what causes it and how to prevent it. Since 1992, there have been 220 violent deaths on school grounds, an average of 37 per year, which is causing concern for many American families with school aged children.

Vincent Schiraldi, Director of the Justice Policy Institution in Washington, blames the recent wave of school violence on the accessibility of weapons: "It's nuts to think that kids are any crazier today than they ever were before," he says. "I think they're just better armed."

In Texas, the Cypress-Fairbanks Independent School District in suburban Houston has emerged as a national model for violence prevention, anger control, and mental health counseling in schools. The local school superintendent has made violence prevention his priority. In addition, the 1995 Texas Legislature addressed school safety by revising safety and security provisions of the Texas Education Code. According to the revised statutes, each public school must adopt a student code of conduct setting the limits of permissible behavior. On a national level, the growing awareness that not all schools are safe places of learning contributed to the seventh goal of the U.S. Department of Education's National Education Goals: "All schools in America will be free of drugs and violence and the unauthorized presence of firearms and alcohol, and offer a disciplined environment that is conducive to learning." Subsequently, Congress passed the Safe and Drug Free Schools and Communities Act of 1994 to support drug- and violence-prevention programs. In effort to keep schools a safe environment, school administrators, teachers, students, and parents have banded together to sensitize one another to the potential for violence and develop approaches for heading off dangerous confrontations.

Child development theory's eminent violence researchers Garbarino, Kostelny, and Dubrow (1991a, 1991b) state that it needs to be recognized that in urban environments in America, children are growing up in a violence-saturated war zones.

Garbarino and his colleagues repeat the 1960s antiwar slogan, "War is not good for children and other living things." Garbarino, Kostelny, and Dubrow (1991a) stated, "Children and violence don't mix-that's what we'd like to believe, at least" (p. 46).

Yet a look at a few statistics tells that violence and youth do mix; they have an affinity that is impossible to deny. The "onset of criminal violence is greatest between ages 14 and 16, while its prevalence peaks between ages 15 and 19" (Loeber & Stouthamer, 1998; Williams, Guerra, & Elliot, 1997 pg. 53). For most perpetrators, their involvement will be short lived (from 1 to 3 years); they will be in their late teens perhaps early twenties when they desist. Since those committing violent acts often choose their age peers as victims, victimization is also disproportionately inflicted on youth. Based on figures from the National Crime Victimization Survey, which focuses on gathering information on assault, burglary, larceny, motor vehicle theft, rape, and robbery, Macmillan (2001) noted that the risk of being victimized reaches its peak in adolescence and slowly declines in early adulthood.

An adolescent is 23 times more likely to be assaulted than is an elder. While this overall behavior is age related, victimization and perpetration is not new, and the problem of youth violence is getting worse. First of all there is an increased lethality of violence involving youth, with homicide becoming the second leading cause of death among adolescents (Fraser, 1996). While the incidence of homicide from 1976 to 1995 remained constant or even declined overall, there was a dramatic increase in homicides committed by adolescent males. African American males were disproportionately involved, both as perpetrators and victims. At the same time, the use of handguns in the commission of homicides increased dramatically; the involvement of drugs in homicides

also jumped sharply (Macmillan, 2001). Teenagers see their schools as becoming more violent.

One study, for example, revealed that over half of teenagers experienced concern about being physically attacked in or around school (Harris & Associates, 1996). The disconnect between crime statistics and adolescents' perceptions may stem from the invisibility to authorities of much of students' victimization. Research drawing information directly from students reveals much higher rates of victimization than reported in official records (Elliot et al., 1998). The concentration of violent offending within a fairly narrow age range and awareness that involvement in violence has the potential to derail movement toward developmental goals suggests that there is a need to developmental perspective when considering prevention and reduction options (Sexton-Radek, 2005). Sexton-Radek (2005) considered involvement in violence as both a manifestation and a distortion of some so-called normal development trends during this period.

Violence is the expression of physical or verbal force against self or other, compelling action against one's will on pain of being hurt and is intimidating of another person (Sexton-Radek, 2005). Aggression takes a variety of forms among human beings, and it can be physical, mental, or verbal. Aggression also can be called combativeness, which refers to behavior between members of the same species that is intended to cause pain or harm (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996). Some forms of aggression employ physical force while others do not, and some forms seem less concerned with harming than with controlling another person. As Fraser (1996) pointed

out, the consequence of aggression is that the child becomes increasingly isolated from social learning opportunities with prosocial peers.

Neither parents nor peers offer the child a chance to learn negotiation, bargaining, cooperation, or willing acquiescence in the face of social conflict. Furthermore, these students' disruptive, confrontational stance toward the teacher and fellow students may put them at further risk for academic failure. Assignment to a special education class then increases association with similarly aggressive, socially rejected, and alienated children. They will bring out the worst in each other. From this cascade of negative effects will arise the deviant peer group of middle childhood, the precursor of the adolescent delinquent group or gang (Dishion, Patterson, Stoolmiller, & Skinner, 1991; Patterson, DeBaryshe, & Ramsey, 1989). Even after the early starter male is no longer associated with the adolescent group, he is likely to continue to engage in violence and other forms of antisocial behavior (Loeber & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1998).

Television can be a powerful influence in developing value systems and shaping behavior. Much of today's television programming is violent. Studies of the effects of TV violence on children and teenagers have found that children may become "immune" or numb to the horror of violence; may gradually accept violence as a way to solve problems; may imitate the violence they observe on television; and may identify with certain characters, victims, and/or victimizers. Extensive viewing of television violence by children causes greater aggressiveness. Research evidence that television, which contains so much violent content, has a great influence on the subsequent aggressive

behavior of viewers (as cited in Huesmann, Moise, & Podolski, 1997; Sanson & diMuccio, 1993; Wood, Wong, & Chachere, 1991).

Studies by George Gerbner, at the University of Pennsylvania, have shown that children's television shows contain about 20 violent acts each hour. They also showed that children who watch a lot of television are more likely to think that the world is a mean and dangerous place. Children who watched the violent shows were more likely to strike out at playmates, argue, disobey authority and were less willing to wait for things than those children who watched non-violent programs. In one longitudinal study, children's preference for violent television shows at age 8 was related to the seriousness of criminal convictions by age 30 (Huesmann, 1986). But other macrosystem elements gain expression through the systems already mentioned, such as school boards. Social disorganization theory (as cited in Laub & Lauritsen, 1998; Bowen & Bowen, 1999; Sampson, 1997; Wandersman & Nation, 1998) provides an explanation of why it is so difficult for parents to keep their adolescent offspring's out of trouble in inner-city disadvantaged neighborhoods.

The argument is that as children move to adolescence, they spend more time away from parents, with peers and with neighborhood associates. They are more prone to react with gut instinct when they process emotions, but as they mature into early adulthood, they are able to temper their instinctive gut reaction response with rational, reasoned responses. This gut instinct, combined with raging hormones, peer pressure and the stresses of life, can equal some otherwise intelligent teens to make some stupid decisions, including experimentation with drugs and alcohol, self-injuring such as cutting, racing cars, unsafe sexual practices, acts of aggression or violence, petty

crimes such as theft. Certain features of an impoverished, inner-city neighborhood make it harder to monitor adolescents and reduce violence.

Due to the lack of resources offered to them they are not able to provide a constructive outlet for their children to be productive in the community, which in turn produces a problem in the control of their behavior. Also in these communities there is less parental supervision because they are working and are not around to supervise the children (Lawson, 2005).   Additionally, the inhabitants often lack the formal and informal social ties to the larger community outside the neighborhood that could be used to press for economic and social investment. Add to this illegitimate opportunity structure (e.g., drug trafficking), and it becomes harder to keep young men and women from gravitating toward gangs or other peer groups that have an antisocial agenda (as cited in Hawkins, Farrington, & Catalano, 1998). To paraphrase an often quoted saying "It takes a neighborhood to raise an adolescent," Bronfenbrenner's theory indicates that it takes a host of mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem supports to raise a neighborhood. In summary, the literature seems to suggest that development and environment play vital roles in substance abuse and violence during adolescence. It is within these realms that monitoring and interventions must occur to assist children in developing healthy outcomes.

METHODOLOGY

The research question to be examined considers whether or not a community-wide plan can help identify ways for local law enforcement and school districts to work together to create safer schools. The researcher hypothesizes that the community will give guidance in how safer schools and a stronger relationship between law

enforcement and the community can be realized. The method of inquiry will include a review of literature related to children, schools, the community, violence.

There will also be an analysis of focus group meetings held by the community to determine common themes. The instrument that will be used to measure the researcher's findings will include a qualitative analysis of community meetings with the focus being on extracting four common themes. This meeting was held in the Lancaster Independent School District Police Department in 2007. The attendees of the meeting were students, parents, and community leaders. There was no sign-in sheet, but there was estimate was between 20 and 30 people. The meeting was called to order, and it followed by introduction of the speakers. After they talked, it ended with a question and answer.

The information obtained from this meeting will be analyzed by determining four common themes throughout the meetings and revealing the community's thoughts on them. The following community partners have come together to develop, implement, evaluate, and support a comprehensive ongoing community-wide strategic plan for creating and maintaining safe and drug-free schools and promoting healthy childhood development. At regularly scheduled meetings each week during the months of April and May of 2007, the coalition met to discuss a needs assessment of the community. Each agency was able to voice concerns from its perspective. After each meeting, data was collected and each agency was given a project to determine how to tackle the problem.

FINDINGS

One theme the meetings revealed was bullying. Another theme that emerged from the analysis was violence. An additional theme that surfaced was out of control behavior (sex). A final theme that commonly was discussed in the meetings was substance abuse in adolescence.

The researcher concluded from the findings that the partner agencies combine their efforts to create a safe school environment; train teachers on the early warning signs; equip students with the tools needed to avoid substance abuse and violent behaviors; and supply them with the necessary funds to access mental health services. This will help students with the themes commonly revealed in the meetings, which were bullying, violence, out of control behavior (sex) and substance abuse in adolescence.

DISCUSSIONS/CONCLUSIONS

The problem or issue examined by the researcher considered how the community can partner with law enforcement to create safer schools. The purpose of this research was to determine common themes revealed in community meetings that the community would like to work with law enforcement to encourage safer schools. The research question that was examined focused on the ways in which the community and law enforcement can work together to promote safer environments for children.

The researcher hypothesized that the community would be able to assist in narrowing the ways in which law enforcement can work with the community to develop ideas for bettering school and childhood environments. The researcher concluded from the findings that there were four common themes revealed by the community. The themes commonly revealed in the meetings were bullying, violence, out of control

behavior (sex) and substance abuse in adolescence. The findings of the research did support the hypothesis. The reason why the findings did support the hypothesis is probably due to the community and law enforcement both being aware of the critical need to enhance children's environments during childhood development. Limitations that might have hindered this study resulted because the meeting encompassed only one city in Texas. Also, there were only 24 community partners, and a larger amount of community partners could have created different themes or emphasis as the ways in which the community could help. The study of creating safer schools through law enforcement and community partnership is relevant to contemporary law enforcement as violence occurs more and more often in the schools, it is necessary to find ways in which law enforcement and the community can bond in attempting to create a better environment for children. Law enforcement, schools, and the community stands to be benefited by the results of this research because each is a stakeholder in empowering the youth of today to survive until tomorrow.

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APPENDIX

<u>COMMUNITY PARTNERS</u>

Schools Students & Families:
Lancaster Independent Schools District PTOs
Lancaster ISD Student Government
Higher Education and Businesses:
Cedar Valley Community College
Wal-Mart
University of North Texas Graduate Center

Health & Social Services/ Law Enforcement:
Local Mental Health Center
Local Public Health Department
Lancaster Medical Center
LISD Police Department
City of Lancaster Police Department
Dallas County Sheriff Department
Texas Department of Human Services (Child Protection Services)
Lancaster Outreach. Center
Lancaster Parks and Recreation
Lancaster Library

Juvenile Justice Authorities/ Civic Organizations:
Local Juvenile Justice Officials
District Attorney's Office
Local Lancaster Lions Club
Community Coalitions/ Faith Communities:
Dallas County Domestic Violence Task Force
Dallas County Substance Abuse Task Force
Local Churches in the City of Lancaster
Lancaster Chamber of Commerce
Local Lancaster Kiwanis Club