
Rethinking the Bystander Role in School Violence Prevention

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Public concerns about school shootings and safety draw attention to the role bystanders can play in preventing school violence. Although school violence prevention plans are often required, there is little guidance about whether these should address the roles of bystanders and what actions bystanders should take in different circumstances, from more common instances of bullying and fighting to rare, but potentially lethal, threats and use of weapons. Literature pertaining to bystanders is reviewed and applied to the school setting. The definition of bystander is expanded, including parents, teachers, and other school staff as well as youths and those who have information about potential violence as well as those who witness its occurrence. Barriers preventing bystanders from taking positive actions are discussed. The authors call on health promotion researchers and practitioners to work with school communities to identify norms, attitudes, and outcome expectancies that shape bystander behaviors to inform prevention efforts.

Keywords: *bystander; school violence; youth violence; school shootings; violence prevention; school safety*

School shootings and public concerns about school safety have drawn attention to the important role bystanders can play in preventing school violence. Shootings in Littleton, Colorado; Paducah, Kentucky; Bethel, Alaska; Santee, California and elsewhere made headlines not only because they occurred in communities where serious youth violence was unexpected but also, more important, because youths, and sometimes adults, knew in advance about the per-

petrators' intentions or observed warning signs and failed to intervene. One recent review of school shootings estimates that in more than three quarters of such cases, students as well as adults were privy to information that, if acted on, could have prevented the violence (Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2002).

Such incidents, as well as the many cases of less lethal school violence, have prompted calls for students and adults to become more alert to warning signs of potential violence. Also called for are efforts by parents, school officials, and community leaders to create pro-social environments that encourage bystanders to take more active roles in violence prevention (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2001). But what should these roles entail? For example, under what circumstances should youth and adult bystanders come forward with information about potential violence? When should bystanders try to defuse violent situations themselves, when should they involve authorities, and when should they "mind their own business"?

Despite increased attention to the behavior of bystanders and their potential role in preventing school violence, the steps bystanders must take to play that role effectively and the types of supports required are not well defined. Editorials and news reports, for example, have exhorted youths to break the "code of silence" when friends and acquaintances threaten violence (Butterfield, 2001a, 2001b), but dealing with the consequences of doing so has not been well addressed. Some school districts have adopted policies requiring students and staff to report threats (Rasicot, 1999). Government agencies such as the Secret Service (Fein et al., 2002; Vossekuil et al., 2002), the Department of Education (Dwyer & Osher, 2000; Dwyer, Osher, & Warger, 1998), and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (O'Toole,

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2000), as well as the American Psychological Association (n.d.) and several violence prevention centers, have developed risk and threat assessment tools. However, these tools have been criticized as being ineffective at identifying youths at risk of committing serious violence and potentially stigmatizing students (Mulvey & Cauffman, 2001). In addition, many of the recommendations attached to these tools depend on the willingness of bystanders to get involved yet provide little guidance for how school communities can ensure that this does indeed happen.

School policies pertaining to bystander behavior will largely affect the most frequently occurring forms of youth violence, such as physical threats, pushing and shoving, bullying, and fights. However, these types of violence have produced even less discussion than school shootings regarding what bystanders usually do, should do, and can do to prevent them. It is safe to assume that there will be disagreement from one school community to another as well as within school communities on these issues. Such differences of opinion are likely to translate into mixed messages and ambiguous policies regarding how student bystanders should respond in a range of circumstances, and extend to the expectations parents and school staff have for one another when they witness violence or have information that it may occur.

In this article, we review literature pertaining to the role of bystanders in school violence prevention identified through an iterative procedure that included database (e.g., Medline, PsycInfo) and Internet searches, discussions with colleagues, and examination of bibliographies of publications. We begin by expanding the definition of bystander and discussing how bystanders may influence school violence. We then identify barriers that may prevent bystanders from taking positive actions, underscoring the dearth of information about what influences bystander behaviors. Finally, we turn to implications for violence prevention planning.

► LITERATURE REVIEW OF BYSTANDER ROLES IN SCHOOL VIOLENCE PREVENTION

Who Are Bystanders?

According to the *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary* (2002), a bystander is an individual who is present but does not take part in an event or situation. Synonyms include passerby, onlooker, witness, and spectator. In the context of school violence, we typically think of bystanders as students who witness fights or other acts of physical aggression. However, this perspective is overly restrictive. It focuses on altercations and aggressive events that bystanders observe in the “here and now” and neglects situations about which bystanders may possess information (e.g., overheard conversations, veiled threats, changes in behavior) that makes them believe that future violence is likely. In addition, by-

standers to school violence are not limited to students but include a wide range of adults, such as parents, teachers, guidance counselors, school psychologists, bus drivers, librarians, cafeteria workers, and school security officers. These adults, in the course of their daily activities, also witness aggressive acts on school grounds and frequently have knowledge that, if acted on, could prevent or diffuse violence. Furthermore, bystanders are not passive observers; through both their actions and inactions, they often influence whether and how volatile situations unfold.

Consider the following opportunities for bystander involvement: the students who see a fight break out during lunch and run to watch; the adolescent who sees another youth with a knife or handgun on the bus; the parent who wonders what to tell a son or daughter about dealing with a school bully; the school bus driver and passengers who hear one student threaten another; the aide who sees two students arguing and shoving each other in the hallway; the teacher who overhears one student threaten to beat up another after the school football

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game. In each of these situations, there are one or more bystanders whose reactions affect the chain of events.

How Are Bystanders Involved in School Violence?

Although schools vary in the extent to which violence occurs on campus (DeVoe et al., 2002), when violence does erupt, evidence suggests that bystanders are usually present. According to 1993 to 1999 estimates from the National Crime Victimization Survey, a large, ongoing household survey of males and females 12 years of age and older, 80% of assaults and robberies occurring at schools involved one or more third parties, as did 71% of incidents occurring on the way to or from school. About three quarters of all violent crimes reported by teenagers took place in the presence of third parties, a larger proportion than reported by older respondents (Planty, 2002). These results are consistent with research on less severe, but still consequential, forms of aggression, including bullying. Craig and Pepler (1997) found that at least one peer was present in as many as 85% of the bullying episodes they observed among elementary school students, with two or more peers present in more than half of the incidents (O'Connell, Pepler, & Craig, 1999).

Youths also hear about potential violence. In a Harris interactive Internet survey of 2000 students in Grades 7 through 12, 19% had heard about "someone who has made a plan to shoot someone"; 20% had "heard another kid talking about shooting somebody at school" (Gaughan, Cerio, & Myers, 2001). As noted above, more than three quarters of the youths who became "school shooters" told peers or adults of their plans or engaged in behavior that alerted others to the possibility of violence. In nearly two thirds of those cases, two or more people had information about the attack prior to its occurrence (Vossekuil et al., 2002).

We know that news of less serious fights and threats travels quickly through adolescent peer networks, creating bystanders to potential violence. However, little is known about the extent to which school personnel witness aggressive behavior or are part of a grapevine about impending violence and even less about what parents see, know, or suspect. Still, research does provide some evidence regarding how bystanders are involved in and can influence violence.

Some studies suggest that the presence of bystanders, be they youths or adults, frequently provides the pivotal social sanction in promoting or preventing violence (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996; Fagan & Wilkinson, 1998; Sampson & Lauritson, 1994; Siegel & Kohn, 1959; Slaby, Wilson-Brewer, & DeVos, 1994; Tedeschi & Felson, 1994; Tremlow, Sacco, & Williams, 1996). The mere presence of bystanders in a verbal dispute between parties of the same gender increases the likelihood that the dispute will turn violent (Felson, 1982).

Research on bullying and fighting provides much of what we know about how adolescent bystanders

actively and passively promote peer violence (Olweus, 1991, 1992, 1993, 2001; Salmivalli, 1999, 2001; Slaby, 1997; Slaby et al, 1994; Tremlow et al., 1996). Active bystanders, who often sympathize with the aggressors, foster violence when they prevent others from intervening in an altercation, enthusiastically encourage aggressive behavior (e.g., cheering on a fight), or serve as accomplices or co-perpetrators (Salmivalli, 2001; Slaby, 1997; Tremlow et al., 1996). In some cases, youths foster violence by daring friends to make good on their threats. Passive bystanders, although doing nothing to actively instigate or encourage violence, do nothing to prevent it from escalating. Their very presence may foster violence because peers feel greater pressure to demonstrate their toughness, prove their superiority, or defend their honor. The presence of passive bystanders may also encourage future violence by sending the message that aggressive behavior is acceptable (O'Connell et al., 1999; Tremlow et al., 1996).

Of course, there are many instances of students taking steps to diffuse or prevent violence. For example, they try to dissuade friends from carrying out threats, stand up for the victim, break up fights, or confide in an adult. This latter behavior—seeking help from adults—is at the core of many youth violence prevention strategies that attempt to identify and stop aggressors before they engage in violence. It is also at the core of violence prevention plans that advise adolescent bystanders to report students who carry weapons, use or deal drugs, or fight at school. However, most students do not seek out adults when they suspect that violence is about to occur. Many acknowledge their reluctance to confide in parents or school staff about such matters, and older adolescents are less willing than younger students to involve an adult (Gaughan et al., 2001; Tisak & Tisak, 1996a, 1996b). When asked in a Harris survey what they would do if they heard a fellow student talking about shooting someone, only 54% of middle- and high-school students reported that they would tell an adult (Gaughan et al., 2001). Even more alarming is the behavior of bystanders prior to the school shootings: Virtually no one reported what they knew. If students are reluctant to report potentially lethal violence, how likely are they to report less immediate threats or less severely aggressive acts?

Also lacking is research that elucidates how adult attitudes and behavior shape bystander responses. Some evidence suggests that the presence of teachers on playgrounds and open areas can deter bullying (Olweus, 1993), and the presence of third parties deters crime (Shotland & Goodstein, 1984). Indeed, violence prevention guidelines typically encourage adult oversight not only in classrooms but also on playgrounds and at school events (CDC, 2001). However, adult presence may not be a deterrent if adults are perceived as tolerating or condoning aggression (Siegel & Kohn, 1959).

Furthermore, there is minimal information on how the demographic, social, and cultural characteristics of adults or youths shape bystander responses. For exam-

ple, how does gender influence the way males and females frame the role of bystander, and what actions are considered appropriate in a given situation? Are mothers and fathers equally likely to report a potential fight, threat, or weapon to school authorities? To what extent does their behavior depend on the prevalence of violence in the school community and their perceptions of what constitutes a serious enough offense or sufficiently credible evidence to call for intervention? Are male and female teachers and other school staff equally likely to step in if they witness bullying? Would male and female students take similar or different actions? The diversity of voices on this issue has not been heard, in large part because the questions have not been asked. These unanswered questions impede the development of empirically informed guidelines or prescriptions for bystander behavior and their inclusion in violence prevention plans.

What Influences Bystander Behaviors?

To better understand how individuals within a community respond as bystanders, it is important to identify factors that influence their behavior. Here we turn to the broader literature on third-party intervention, especially research on helping behavior and bystander apathy, and the literature on behavior change. This work provides theoretical models for understanding bystander decision making and empirical evidence regarding contextual factors that influence bystander behavior in schools and other settings.

Two theoretical models are especially relevant to bystander issues. Latané and Darley (1969), who initiated research on how bystanders respond during emergencies, developed the first model. They noticed that emergency situations are often unfamiliar and ambiguous and thus require complex judgments on the part of bystanders. They proposed a five-step decision-making process that bystanders must complete before intervening. According to this model, bystanders must (a) notice that something is happening, (b) interpret the situation as calling for intervention, (c) assume personal responsibility for intervening, (d) decide what to do, and (e) possess the necessary skills and resources to act (Latané & Darley, 1969; Latané & Nida, 1981). Bystanders can be deflected from acting at each stage of this process; they can misperceive, misinterpret, disavow responsibility, and/or lack a plan or the wherewithal to carry it out. This theoretical model has been usefully applied to a variety of bystander situations, including emergencies, less serious helping situations, and criminal acts (Latané & Nida, 1981; Shotland & Goodstein, 1984). It seems especially relevant for understanding why students and adults are slow to intervene in ambiguous but potentially serious situations when the intentions of the aggressor and the responsibilities of the bystanders often become clear only in retrospect.

Although Latané and Darley (1969) described an individual decision-making process that is specific to

bystanders, Ajzen (1991, 2002) outlined social and cognitive factors that influence the behavioral choices that individuals make. His theoretical model of planned behavior focuses on how individuals (in this case, bystanders) weigh the benefits and costs of different courses of action (sometimes referred to as outcome expectancies), how they evaluate the normative expectations of others, and how they assess their competence to act (i.e., self-efficacy). According to this model, youths and adults are less likely to intervene if they believe that the costs of acting are excessive, believe that significant others would not intervene or expect them to do so, or perceive substantial barriers to acting effectively.

Laboratory and field studies have identified a range of contextual factors that are consistent with both of these models and relevant to school communities. Not surprisingly, the more ambiguous and less serious a situation, the slower bystanders are to notice warning signs and the less likely they are to intervene (Latané & Nida, 1981; Shotland & Goodstein, 1984). What constitutes a clearly serious situation, however, is likely to vary from one community to another, depending on the level and type of violence that is considered normative.

Individuals are also less likely to intervene when multiple bystanders are present, as is often the case with school violence. Not only is responsibility diffused in such situations but bystanders also run a greater risk of being embarrassed should they misjudge the situation and overreact. This is especially relevant to adolescent bystanders, whose fear of embarrassment in the peer group is often greater than that experienced by adults because of the heightened importance of approval by peers. Furthermore, groups of bystanders are more likely to misperceive and underestimate the gravity of situations. Observational studies show that bystanders look to one another for clues to guide behavior, leading each to refrain from taking the first step (Latané & Darley, 1969; Latané & Nida, 1981). If schools want students and staff to report instances or suspicions of violence, they must take active steps to overcome this group-inhibition effect.

The relationships among aggressors, victims, and bystanders also influence bystander action. Adult bystanders are more likely to intervene in disputes between men and women than in violent conflicts between two males (Felson, 2002). The degree of intimacy or “relational distance” between an aggressor and victim also affects bystander behavior. Witnesses are less likely to notify police about violent disputes between men and women who are thought to be couples than those who appear to be strangers, especially for relatively minor assaults (Shotland & Goodstein, 1984). Similarly, adolescent bystanders are more likely to intervene, pro-socially or otherwise, when family members are involved in violent or potentially violent situations than when acquaintances or even friends are involved (Tisak & Tisak, 1996a, 1996b). Whether parents and school staff make similar distinctions in the context of school violence has not been investigated.

Relationships among bystanders also matter, as does the normative environment in which bystanders act. Laboratory experiments show that socially cohesive groups of bystanders are more likely to respond to emergency situations than are strangers, sometimes overcoming the group-inhibition effect discussed above (Rutkowski, Gruder, & Romer, 1983). This is important for the prevention of school violence because youth and adult bystanders often know one another and in many cases are friends. However, whether cohesive groups respond in positive or negative ways depends on the normative environment and the extent to which norms promoting social responsibility are salient (Horowitz, 1971; Latané & Nida, 1981; Rutkowski et al., 1983). As noted above, bystanders to school violence often act in ways that support bullying, fighting, and other aggressive behavior. Such behavior raises questions about whether school communities are setting clear standards and presenting clear normative expectations.

In addition to social norms, Ajzen's (1991, 2002) theory of planned behavior highlights the likely importance of outcome expectancies on bystanders' decisions. One of the few studies addressing this issue with adolescent bystanders was conducted by the Safe Schools Coalition (reported in Verlinden, Hersen, & Thomas, 2000). When asked why they failed to notify adults about incidents of violence, students listed a variety of reasons for maintaining their silence: They did not think the school assailants would act on their threats, were afraid of retribution, were concerned about the well-being of the aggressor or some other party, did not know where to go for assistance, doubted they would be believed, or did not think anything would be done if they reported what they knew. In addition, some students feared that sharing information would reflect negatively on them or result in unfair disciplinary actions (Verlinden et al., 2000). Zero-tolerance policies that treat all infractions equally and do not calibrate sanctions to the severity of the violation may reinforce such bystander concerns (Mulvey & Cauffman, 2001).

Although even less is known about how adult bystanders to youth violence assess different courses of action, the American Association of School Administrators found that teachers typically refrain from reporting violence for reasons that are similar to those of youths (Steuteville-Brodinsky, 1981). They are afraid of being blamed, have trouble identifying the offender, fear the offender will retaliate, wish to avoid litigation, and are reluctant to take measures that may stigmatize adolescent aggressors. In addition, school procedures may be ineffective; for example, school policy may dictate that fights be reported to security personnel who are difficult to locate or too far away to intervene effectively. The results of this study were published more than 20 years ago. Since then, the severity and lethality of school violence have increased substantially, making the responses of teacher bystanders of greater consequence.

Also missing from most bystander research on school violence are the views of parents. For example, what do they want and expect their children to do when they witness or know about school violence? Although it is likely that most parents would want their child to report some forms of violence to school authorities, it is also likely that they—like students and school staff—recognize the advantages of not getting involved.

Finally, self-efficacy influences bystander behavior. Bystanders are more likely to act if they know what to do and feel that they possess the necessary resources; they are less likely to act if they believe that other bystanders are more competent than they (Beaman, Barnes, Klentz, & McQuirk, 1978; Cramer, McMaster, Bartell, & Dragna, 1988; Midlarsky, 1971; Pantin & Carver, 1982). This finding suggests that students may be less likely to intervene if they know, or believe, that an adult is present or has knowledge about the violence. Sometimes feelings of psychological distress and moral obligation prompt bystanders to action (Piliavin & Piliavin, 1972; Shotland & Goodstein, 1984), especially if there are victims with whom they empathize.

In summary, both theoretical models and empirical findings highlight the complexity of bystanders' decisions. Whether and how bystanders react are influenced by contextual factors, such as the novelty, ambiguity, and seriousness of the situation, the presence and competence of other bystanders, and the relationships among aggressors, victims, and bystanders. Such factors, in turn, influence the benefits and costs of intervening, normative expectations about whether action is called for, and bystanders' feelings of self-efficacy. Without clearly defined policies and procedures that address such issues, it is not surprising that even well-intentioned adolescents and adults may fail to report incidents and threats of violence or other warning signs.

► DISCUSSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR HEALTH EDUCATORS, RESEARCHERS, AND SCHOOL COMMUNITIES

Although it seems clear that comprehensive school violence prevention plans or codes of conduct should include a role for bystanders, there are few bystander-specific programs and resources to help school administrators achieve this aim. Therefore, the question must be asked: How can school communities encourage responsible action on the part of bystanders?

Effective program and policy development typically begins with school and community assessments that help define the scope of the problem, identify points of agreement and disagreement among various stakeholders, and encourage buy-in from segments of the community whose cooperation is needed for success. Programs and policies developed without community input are likely to be ineffective. We suspect that few school administrators have had the opportunity to conduct such an assessment or have access to tools that would help them gather this information. Therefore, we

suggest use of the following procedures to formulate programs and policies that are empirically informed, locally acceptable, and relevant.

Assess Bystander Behavior

School systems are likely to be aware of how students and staff respond when they see aggressive behavior in public areas. However, they may be less knowledgeable about what bystanders do when they witness more concealed displays of aggression, have information about violent events that may happen, or observe nonspecific warning signs of violence risk. The first step is to identify what bystanders actually do in these situations. Such information, which can be collected through observations, discussions, and brief surveys of potential bystanders, can raise awareness about bystander issues and provide a benchmark for measuring change.

Assess Local Norms Regarding Bystander Behavior

To encourage bystanders to take more active roles in violence prevention, school administrators must know what kinds of behavior are considered appropriate and feasible. Again, it is informative to seek input from constituencies who may hold different perspectives and whose cooperation is needed for implementing school policy. We have learned that there are two slightly different ways to pose this question: What is the “right” thing to do? and, for adults, What would you want your child (or student) to do? The first version tends to elicit what are considered socially correct, moral responses; the second elicits a perspective that is tempered by the potential repercussions of different bystander actions.

In our work, we use hypothetical scenarios to trigger discussion about appropriate bystander behavior and to identify points of consensus and disagreement among constituencies. If normative expectations vary from one constituency to another, then bystanders are likely to be receiving mixed messages. We also compare expectations with reports of actual behavior to determine whether and where there are discrepancies. Such information helps define the scope of the problem and provides information about where and how to proceed.

Identify Barriers to Involving Bystanders in Violence Prevention

To bring bystander behavior in line with expected or desired behavior, school administrators need to explore and address barriers that keep bystanders from acting to prevent violence. Ajzen’s (1991, 2002) theory of planned behavior points to the importance of exploring bystanders’ beliefs about the consequences of acting, their assumptions about what others want them to do, and their feelings of self-efficacy. Here again we have found hypothetical scenarios to be useful for eliciting beliefs about the feasibility and effectiveness of differ-

ent bystander options and the ramifications for bystanders, victims, and perpetrators. Empirical evidence about the types and patterns of violence experienced in a community is necessary for understanding and addressing the specific context-bound obstacles that deter bystanders from taking desired actions.

Clarify Expectations and Procedures

If students and adults are to be held accountable for their behavior as bystanders, then it is important to set clear standards about what kinds of situations call for intervention and what bystanders are expected to do. Students and adults need guidance about what kinds of situations warrant calling in a teacher or other adult and what kinds can be handled informally. For example, should students, school staff, and parents report every punch thrown or threat issued in anger? Every note found with violent imagery? Every overheard conversation about an impending fight? Every suspicion that a student may be carrying a weapon? For situations that warrant calling in an authority, what procedures should be followed and to whom should bystanders report? Schools need to tailor expectations and procedures to different types of violence, considering the frequency of occurrence and severity of outcome along with the certainty and credibility of the information. This tailoring is best done when there is empirical evidence of what local constituencies identify as pressing issues and appropriate responses.

Establish Protections

For most schools, responding to reports of school violence, particularly reports of potential violence, means walking a thin line between providing confidentiality to the bystander and safety to potential victims while protecting the rights of the accused. Given that it is not always possible to predict violence with accuracy, schools face something of a dilemma about how to act on bystander reports. Giving the “accused” an opportunity to deny or rebut allegations may inadvertently identify the bystander, leading to retaliation and other repercussions. Reporting procedures that maximize bystander confidentiality, such as anonymous tip lines, however, make it more difficult to establish the credibility of bystander reports. Establishing procedures with checks and balances and cultivating an environment perceived as fair are challenging but critical tasks, as is getting community input to identify concerns about potential repercussions for bystanders and feedback on whether procedures put in place are useful and sufficient to protect all involved. At the same time, the research community must expand its investigations beyond the decision making of individual bystanders to how school environments influence options for bystander actions and how different school-community members perceive the ethical issues that come into play in prescribing what bystanders should do.

► CONCLUSION

In this article, we have provided an expanded framework for thinking about bystander behavior. We have identified gaps in the research literature on bystander behavior that must be filled before school communities can develop and evaluate bystander policies and procedures. Our discussion of implications is purposely short on specifics because we know that a one-size-fits-all approach will not work. Rather, we have focused on questions that call for answers at the local level, from identifying discrepancies between bystander behavior and community norms to recognizing and addressing local barriers to positive bystander responses.

School shootings have also focused attention on the legal ramifications of bystander inaction. Although courts have been reluctant to hold schools and individual bystanders liable when one student physically harms another, the legal liability of bystanders continues to evolve (Janofsky, 2000; Lewin, 2001; Rapp, Carrington, & Nicholson, 1992). Questions persist about the duty of schools and their staff to foresee and prevent student violence and the responsibility of parents and other adults for anticipating children's violent behavior. Although discussing legal issues pertaining to bystander behavior is beyond the scope of this article, it is important to recognize that courts are likely to draw on community standards in their decisions. Thus, clarifying who bystanders are and what they should do is important for moving forward community practices and informing legislative efforts and the law. Health promotion researchers and practitioners must work with school communities to identify social norms, attitudes, and outcome expectancies that shape bystander behaviors to inform prevention efforts.

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