What Can Student Bystanders Do to Prevent School Violence? 
Perceptions of Students and School Staff

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ABSTRACT. Incidents of school violence have prompted calls for school communities to create environments that encourage student bystanders to act responsibly and proactively when they confront a range of violent incidents, from bullying and fights to weapon carrying and other serious threats to school safety. It is not always clear, however, what bystanders would—or should—do when faced with violent or potentially violent situations. This article describes findings from focus
groups conducted with 54 middle school students and 97 staff in an urban, predominantly African American school district with relatively high levels of community violence. Discussions addressed bystander norms, attitudes, and behaviors, and identified barriers that prevent youth as well as adult bystanders from taking positive action. Findings inform violence prevention strategies for building consensus and supporting positive bystander responses.

KEYWORDS. School violence, bystander, violence prevention, school safety, bullying, school shootings

INTRODUCTION

When school violence occurs, invariably, one of the first questions asked is, “Why didn’t someone do something to stop it?” This is especially the case when it becomes evident that there were others present before or during the event. Although student aggression and violence have been taking place in the nation’s schools since their establishment in the 1800s, the number and severity of incidents have increased over the years. So, too, has the focus on that “someone” who could have played a role in preventing it; the bystander.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 2001, students 12-18 years old were the victims of 764,000 violent crimes—rape, sexual assault, robbery, and both simple and aggravated assault—at school (DeVoe et al., 2003). Younger students (i.e., 12-14 years old), both male and female, were more likely than older students to be the victims of violence.

Whether the violence takes place in cafeterias, on playgrounds, in hallways, or elsewhere within schools, other students are often privy to information about an impending event. In a survey of students in grades 7-12, 20% reported having heard a student talking about shooting someone at school, and 19% had heard second-hand about a student planning to shoot someone (Gaughan, Cerio, & Myers, 2001). A review of fatal school shootings also revealed that in nearly three-quarters of cases, the school shooters had told others of their plans or engaged in behavior indicative of potential violence (Voskuil, Fein,
Reddy, Borum, & Modeleski, 2002). An even larger number of students are observers of less severe, but more common, forms of school violence, although often they remain silent. More than two-thirds of high school youth polled in a nationwide survey reported that there is a group at their school that intimidates others, but only 16% said that bystanders intercede when a fellow student is being intimidated or embarrassed (Knowledge Networks, 2002).

As more has been learned about the nature and scope of school violence, the importance of intervening with bystanders, especially students, is receiving increased attention. So, too, is the definition of bystander. Over time, the words innocent and bystander became inextricably linked. In addition, the term bystander was used almost exclusively to describe a person who is present but does not take part in a situation or event. Such a narrow definition of the bystander as chance spectator is no longer applicable, especially in relation to school violence, which by its nature involves large groups of bystanders. The meaning has been expanded to include those who possess knowledge about potential violence as well as those who are present when an incident occurs. Clearly, all members of the school community can be bystanders to violence, and the actions of both adolescent and adult bystanders must be the focus of intervention efforts. But because students are most likely to possess detailed information about impending events, to possess information earlier than others, and to be present when school violence occurs, their role in the school violence equation is of particular interest. However, it is essential to understand students' perceptions of the support—or lack of it—they receive from adults, and the viewpoints of school staff, who also have an important role to play in preventing school violence.

While a range of situational and individual factors governing adult bystander behavior in general has been documented (e.g., Kazden, 2000; Latane & Nida, 1981), far less is known about adolescent bystanders, including why they respond as they do to aggressive behavior at school. Also inadequate is our understanding of how the larger school environment supports bystander actions that discourage or encourage violence and whether school staff are in agreement regarding what young people should—and should not—do (Stueve, Dash, O'Donnell, Tehrani, & Wilson-Simmons, in press).

The research described here addresses this gap in our knowledge by focusing on middle schools, where violence is often most pronounced (DeVoe et al., 2002; U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1998). During this time, peer involvement and in-
fluence also increase (O'Brien & Bierman, 1988; Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986). Working in a small urban community with relatively high levels of violence, we examine norms and attitudes regarding student bystander actions as well as points of consensus and disagreement about what youth and adult bystanders should and actually do. In such schools, attention tends to focus on perpetrators and victims, with the role bystanders can play in prevention overlooked.

METHODS

This paper addresses three questions: (1) How do students and school staff think student bystanders should respond to aggression at school? (2) What situational factors influence bystander behavior? and (3) Is there agreement among students and school staff regarding what bystanders should do and what they actually do?

Community Profile and Recruitment of Focus Group Participants

Participants were recruited from five middle schools in a northeastern metropolitan city in the United States with a total population of 70,000. The ethnic/racial composition of the city is 90% African American, the median household income is $40,000, 15% of families live below poverty level, and three-quarters of residents live in rental units (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000a). The city has violent crime rates that are 3 to 4 times greater than state and national rates (New Jersey Department of Law and Public Safety, 2003).

Purposive sampling was employed to recruit students and school staff for focus groups. An information packet was developed that consisted of a fact sheet that described the study purpose, procedures, confidentiality issues, potential risks and benefits; and project contact information. We worked with the district’s Safe and Drug-Free Schools coordinator as well as school administrators, who provided opportunities to talk about the study, distribute information packets, and answer questions at parent-teacher and faculty meetings. To obtain parental permission for student participation, we provided postage-paid information packets to mail home to parents or guardians of interested students. Parents willing to have their child participate signed and returned the appropriate permission form. We conducted 10 discussion groups with 97 school staff, including teachers, guidance counselors, administrative as-
sistsants, security guards, and custodians. A total of 54 students in grades 6-8 participated in 8 focus groups.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

We developed several hypothetical vignettes that depicted a range of situations in which students witnessed or heard about actual or future violence (see Table 1). Vignettes varied in terms of immediacy of danger, severity of violence, ambiguity of situation, people involved, and places where the violence occurred or might occur. At the beginning of each focus group, trained facilitators described the nature of the discussion, summarized the types of questions that would be asked, outlined group rules, and explained how confidentiality would be maintained. After a vignette was read, participants were asked to assume a bystander perspective. They were asked how bystanders typically respond and why, and the perceived advantages and disadvantages of different responses. In addition, participants were asked about help-seeking strategies and supports that bystanders might use to respond to such situations. They were permitted to digress and discuss related issues and other typical situations. Responses were summarized and repeated by the facilitator for confirmation. Research assistants took notes and discussions were taped if all participants, including parents/guardians in the case of minors, agreed. On average, three vignettes were discussed within each group, which lasted 60-90 minutes.

Focus group facilitators discussed findings and impressions from the sessions with the entire research team. Participants’ responses were summarized, using a template that categorized them by topic area. These categories included typical bystander behaviors, bystander behaviors considered to be appropriate, adult expectations of students as bystanders, and consequences of different bystander actions. Coded responses were clustered by students and staff, then examined for consensus and disagreement within and across groups.

**RESULTS**

Overall, students and school staff were in agreement regarding the types of aggressive and violent acts that take place in the middle schools and the lack of action on the part of student bystanders. However, the views of these two groups differed on the types of actions school staff often take to support student bystander involvement. They also differed
Vignette #1: Witnessing Bullying Behavior at School

Kevin, an eighth grader, is always messing with Jackson, a sixth grader. Today, Kevin intentionally bumped into Jackson in the lunchroom and made him spill his food. Kevin and his friends stood back and laughed. Latonya is standing there and sees Kevin kick Jackson. Her teacher is on the other side of the lunchroom and Latonya isn’t sure she has seen what Kevin is doing. One of the men working in the cafeteria sees what’s happening, but looks busy.

Vignette #2: Seeing a Friend in a Fight at School

Antoine is walking down the hall between classes when he sees a fight in front of his history teacher’s door. There’s a crowd of five or six students standing around watching, and a few are cheering. When Antoine makes his way to the front of the crowd, he sees that one of the kids fighting is his best friend, Doug. Antoine’s not sure what to do. He looks into the classroom and sees that the teacher isn’t there.

Vignette #3: Hearing a Friend Threaten to Beat Up Another Student at School

Brian and Serita are 7th graders. Brian told his friend Serita that he planned to beat up Jack after school tomorrow and do some serious damage. Jack had been bothering Brian lately, talking bad about Brian’s little brother, shoving Brian in the hall, and that sort of thing. Serita was worried and told her mother what Brian said. Serita’s mother then called Brian’s parents and let them know what her daughter had told her. Brian was furious because he got into trouble and he told Serita he would never speak to her again. Now Serita is wondering whether she did the right thing.

Vignette #4: Learning that a Friend Has Access to Guns

Trevor, a 6th grader, is over at his friend Patrick’s house hanging out after school. Patrick goes to his closet, reaches into an old shoe box, and pulls out a handgun and some bullets. He shows the gun to Trevor and asks if he wants to hold it. When Trevor says no, Patrick puts the gun and bullets back in his closet.

Vignette #5: Hearing a Friend Threaten to Bring a Gun to School

Later that night, Patrick calls Trevor on the phone and tells him he’s going to bring the gun to school because lately some kids have been calling him names and just messing with him. Patrick says he’s tired of it and wants some protection. He wants to be able to show those kids at his school that he deserves respect.

regarding what they thought student bystanders would do and should do in different kinds of violent or potentially violent situations at school, as well as the reasons for student responses. These differences are illustrated by responses to each of the vignettes.

Vignette #1: Witnessing Bullying Behavior at School

Students and school staff agreed that bullying incidents such as this one occur frequently, and that an adult should, but may not, intervene. “It’s basically like a daily occurrence, really. I mean, these things go on regularly,” was the reason offered by one staff person, who added that adults will stop what they are doing and intervene if the situation escalates. Although some thought this situation was not severe enough to lead to a fight, most staff agreed that it could.
Both students and adults agreed that there was one major reason why youth may not step in: most school settings, such as this crowded lunchroom, afford little, if any privacy; therefore, it is likely that students who intervene or report a behavior will be stigmatized and rejected by other students, and retaliated against by bullies and their friends. In addition, many students explained why they might not report the bullying to a teacher. They felt teachers often see what is taking place but are not willing to intervene, particularly if a fight breaks out. Several students and teachers described times when teachers attempted to break up student fights and were injured. As one student related, “If the teacher tries to stop the fight, some kids . . . they’ll swing at the teacher because they don’t like teachers to put their hands on them.” Among teachers, there was general agreement that school staff must think carefully before intervening, with several describing not only incidents that resulted in teacher injury, but also disciplinary action and legal liability. Said one teacher, “It’s as if we’re guilty until proven innocent,” adding that teachers must be wary of getting involved, even if their natural inclination is to help. According to one teacher, whose view was supported by others, students know that teachers are hesitant to intervene and so consider themselves immune from authority. Thus, students “push the boundaries” of teacher authority. He added, “This represents a shift in the way students in the past interacted with teachers.”

School staff also spoke candidly about the difficult position of the student bystander. As one staff member explained: “If Latonya gets involved, no one’s going to protect her. There are cafeteria workers, and they’re not doing anything . . . She would have to walk to school, to the library, and home when her parents are working. Latonya will think there’s nobody to help her, and no way to stop Kevin from turning on her.” Said another staff member, “If you want to survive in middle school, you pretty much need to keep your mouth shut.” Similar sentiments were expressed by students, who suggested “walking away” and “minding your own business” as the best options available to the bystander, and as the advice often given to them by parents.

The “entertainment quality” that student altercations offer was acknowledged by both students and school staff, who agreed that students enjoy watching fights and frequently encourage them by cheering or laughing along with the bully. As one student described, “Yeah, even if there isn’t a crowd when it jumps off, there’s one before it’s over . . . When you see a kid push another kid, you know something might happen, and everybody starts running over there to see what’s what . . . People start yelling and trying to make them fight.” It is important to note
that neither students nor staff expressed much sympathy for the victim. School staff felt the victim should stand up for himself and tell someone, rather than expect assistance from bystanders. This opinion was echoed by students, who said they did not like the victim, with one participant describing him as a "punk" for not doing anything to defend himself.

Responses were tempered by the fact that the bystander’s relationship to the perpetrator or the victim was not specified. In all focus groups, participants emphasized that the relationship between the bystander and the aggressor as well as the bystander and the victim would not only determine whether a bystander opts to intervene in a bullying situation, but also what type of intervention would be attempted. Being friends with or related to the victim increased the likelihood that a bystander would report the incident to an adult in the school, ask the aggressor to stop, or become physically involved. However, the same types of relationships with the bully would prevent the bystander from reporting his or her behavior to adults.

This scenario also generated discussion about female involvement in aggressive and violent behavior. While both youth and adult discussants agreed that the vast majority of serious physical violence is male to male, they also concurred that both boys and girls engage in violence, and that girls bully both girls and boys. One teacher described the following incident in which a boy bullied a girl and she retaliated with physical force in the presence of a crowd: “We had a situation upstairs, right in front of my classroom . . . where a boy was harassing a girl. The girl, she felt that this boy was going to, you know, he’s stronger than her and everything. But the crowd incited her in such a way that she ended up beating up the boy.” Several students suggested and others agreed that fights involving girls often draw more male and female bystanders than fights among boys, in part because such fights are less frequent occurrences.

Vignette #2: Seeing a Friend in a Fight at School

The importance of “standing up” for one’s friend was a theme echoed throughout the student focus groups that discussed this vignette. School staff, too, acknowledged that if a student bystander witnesses a fight that involves a friend—especially a best friend as is the case here—he or she feels compelled to do something to stop it. For the majority of school staff, the appropriate ways for students to get involved would be to find an adult or ask other students nearby to get help from an adult.
However, they know that if a fight is already in progress and there are no adults in close proximity, these options may not be feasible. Most said that the student bystander would jump into the fight to help his friend and would not look for an adult.

Although many students voiced ambivalence about jumping into a fight if it was “one on one” or their friend was “winning,” the majority might attempt to stop the fight if a friend or relative was being beat. Several also admitted to being afraid of getting hurt if they tried to stop a fight, and voiced concern over interfering in fights in which the combatants may have gang connections. Nonetheless, students indicated that they would try to stop the fight, either by jumping in or seeking adult assistance, if they perceived it as being serious (e.g., one or both of the combatants were badly injured and/or bleeding). In contrast, school staff seemed confident that jumping into fights to help friends and family was the standard or, as one male teacher put it, the student “code” of behavior. A female teacher explained: “They believe they’re doing the right thing. If you ask them why, they say things like this, ‘That was my friend. I had to help my friend,’ or ‘That was my cousin.’ So in their minds, they feel that they’re doing the right thing.”

School staff introduced the issue of potential negative repercussions for being disloyal to a friend or relative. As one male teacher put it, “If Antoine’s friend sees him, and sees that he walked off, then he’d have to deal with his boy later.” Among students, more concern was expressed about getting a friend in trouble than about being disloyal. During several focus group discussions, students stated that they would avoid informing an adult because doing so would likely result in their friend facing punishment. Depending on the school, the type of punishment ranged from having a parent called in for a school conference to being suspended.

The topic of parental influence was also discussed in relation to this vignette. As with the first vignette, the majority of both staff and students said that one of the major reasons students do not get involved is because most parents have counseled their children to mind their own business. Staff commented on the lack of positive adult role models and positive messages regarding violence prevention. Said one teacher, “We have parents who are in jail for the way they resolve issues. . . . Therefore, as a school system, we have to put something in place where we can model a positive proactive approach to these things that are going on within the community.” However, in several groups, students stated that while parents do give explicit instructions regarding not getting involved in “someone else’s fight,” they do not discourage telling
an adult—if students can share such information without putting themselves in jeopardy. However, several teachers stated that some students receive conflicting messages from their parents on how to handle situations such as this one. For example, a guidance counselor explained: “Parents are going to send mixed signals. They’re going to tell the child not to get involved on one aspect, and the other aspect is ‘well, if it’s your best friend, you have to do what you need to do.’”

Students and staff reiterated that many students find fights exciting and entertaining and want to watch until they end. According to staff, the presence of such crowds makes it extremely difficult to seek adult assistance. Therefore, it is only when students see a teacher or other adult approaching that they might do more than watch. Said one teacher, “[Bystanders] will break up the fight when they see somebody coming to keep from getting into trouble.” On the other hand, several teachers expressed the belief that students want to intervene but do not for many of the reasons previously cited, and are relieved when an adult approaches.

Vignette #3: Hearing a Friend Threaten to Beat Up Another Student at School

Many students viewed this vignette as unrealistic, in part because they did not think a student would tell her mother that one student had threatened another, and because they didn’t think the student bystander’s friend would keep his promise of never speaking to her again. Still, the vignette did produce discussions about the limited amount of communication that takes place between children and parents regarding threats made at school and the lack of interaction that takes place among parents. Although some thought the “right thing” to do would be to tell a parent if violence was likely to occur, most also expressed uncertainty regarding what their parent might do in response.

When teachers were asked what they thought parents would do if they were given such information, several stated that most parents are not acquainted with one another, thus making it unlikely that they would know how to contact another parent—or feel comfortable doing so, especially when the message to be conveyed would be a negative one. On the other hand, school staff considered parents to be the best candidates for reporting this situation to the school, partly because potential violence reported to school staff by students is not likely to remain confidential. One teacher felt telling one’s parents may not be viewed as “tattling.”
However, the majority of student responses were similar, in that they felt parents would tell them to mind their own business. Said one student: “I mean, it would be different if Brian was going to beat me up, but I know my mom would tell me that it was Brian’s problem, not mine, even if he’s my friend. Plus, she’d probably say that Brian was just trying to defend himself and his family, so the other kid was probably going to get what he deserved.” Although responses differed across student focus groups, students named guidance counselors, principals, and security guards as school staff who could be trusted with reports of potential violence: Several students stated that guidance counselors would be more inclined to keep the bystander’s identity confidential, while principals and security staff would be more likely to take immediate action and investigate. Both students and staff agreed that in contrast to the previous two vignettes, where the violence was already taking place and “audiences” had formed, this scenario is one that offers more potential for safe bystander intervention.

There were several lengthy staff discussions that focused on the need for anonymous reporting, which they considered a viable method for students to share information with the school. Several participants stated that a lack of open communication and trusting relationships with adults prevents students from confiding in them. Teachers added that students not only need to feel safe when they reveal information about potential violence but also to know that adults will act on the information in a responsible manner. Students echoed this concern, expressing the view that schools do not make the effort to protect the identity of students who report problems to the office.

Finally, this vignette, more than any other, elicited the student response that the bystander has a responsibility to attempt to dissuade her friend from fighting. Some students expressed the view that if a student is determined to fight, then a fight is going to take place, no matter what a friend does or says. Stated one student: “If I don’t fight you today, I’m going to fight you two weeks from now, or, maybe, tomorrow.” However, many students felt that friends can convince friends not to fight, especially when other students are not yet involved and rumors of an impending fight have not spread.

**Vignette #4: Learning that a Friend Has Access to a Gun**

Widespread access to guns in urban communities and the fascination young males have with firearms were both acknowledged during consideration of this vignette, especially in staff focus groups. There was
almost no disagreement across groups of students and staff about the potential dangers this situation posed—both to the individual students involved and to the school community. However, the majority of students and adults indicated that the typical student bystander response in this situation would be to examine the gun, to touch it, and/or to hold it. Still, both students and staff expressed the view that the bystander’s response in this situation was the right one—that is, he said he was not interested in holding the gun. However, most added that neither the bystander’s actions, nor those of the other student—who responded by putting the gun away—was realistic. So while school staff—from teachers to security guards—agreed that most parents and other adults warn young people to avoid touching or playing with weapons, such warnings often go unheeded, especially among boys. One teacher termed the fascination a “forbidden fruit syndrome.”

Vignette #5: Hearing a Friend Threaten to Bring a Gun to School

This vignette produced little disagreement among school staff regarding what they thought student bystanders would and should do. Without hesitation, school staff agreed that the student bystander should immediately inform either his parents and/or an adult at school. They recommended anonymous reporting as the preferred method of sharing information with the school because law enforcement would be involved and criminal charges could result. However, school staff added that although all schools have reporting procedures related to weapons on school grounds and teachers and other school staff are well versed in the process, students and parents are frequently unsure of how to proceed in order to ensure their anonymity. In several cases, school staff suggested that a person or persons be identified as the school contact to whom students could report such situations. Without a reporting mechanism, several said, it is difficult for a student to feel safe taking the appropriate action, even with parental support.

Among students, however, responses were not as consistent. Although most believed that a student who threatens to bring a gun to school will probably do so, a few disagreed, explaining that the majority of students who voice such a threat are unlikely to follow through and are “just talking.” Several students said that the bystander should know if the threat is real or not because “if that’s your friend, then you know how they are.”

So while the majority of students thought the bystander would take his friend’s threat seriously and report it to an adult, a smaller number
chose the do-nothing response, and still others offered different responses. Although they were less frequently voiced, they included assisting the friend in his effort to “get respect,” alerting friends that something might happen at school so they could protect themselves, and bragging to friends that he had handled a gun. A few students said they would attempt to persuade the friend not to bring the gun to school. Even fewer suggested attempting to thwart the student’s plan by warning the intended victims.

**Cross-Cutting Issues and Themes**

When asked to describe the ways student bystanders typically react to school violence, the responses were strikingly similar across student and school staff groups. In terms of impending violence, doing nothing was cited most often, followed by running to watch an unfolding conflict, instigating the discord, and cheering on a fight once it is in progress. There are also bystanders who support the aggressor and enthusiastically encourage his or her behavior by preventing others from intervening or serving as accomplices or co-perpetrators.

There was far less agreement between student and school staff groups on the topic of how student bystanders should respond to school violence. Teachers, guidance counselors, coaches, as well as other staff agreed that students should do what they can to prevent or stop violence from occurring or escalating, regardless of the bystander’s relationship to the victim or aggressor. They suggested several ways in which this intervention could be achieved, such as seeking adult assistance, most notably a teacher or a security guard. They also felt that if the student knew the aggressor, he or she might be able to convince the youth to stop. Said one teacher: “The peer group is the strongest influence . . . and if we focus on the ways that students communicate and students work together, it seems like that would be the greatest influence . . . They [students] keep each other in check in a lot of situations.” On the other hand, while there were some students who also stated that bystanders should intervene by employing the same methods mentioned by school staff, they were in the minority. Although students seemed to understand that asking what they thought student bystanders should do really meant “What is the right thing to do?” they frequently made it clear that what might be considered the right thing to do is not always the most prudent.

Students and staff identified situational and individual characteristics that influence bystander behavior. Chief among them is the bystander’s
relationship to the aggressor and victim. However, the type of intervention attempted is not always positive. While some students would intervene by attempting to stop the fight, others would do so by jumping into the fray.

Students were vocal when discussing the difficult position bystanders are in when they witness school violence. If a conflict is unfolding or a physical attack is taking place and other students are present, then the bystander who seeks assistance is known to all and is placed in a vulnerable position. Students expressed concerns about being stigmatized and known as the student who "tells on" other students. Being labeled a "rat," "squealer," "snitch," or "tattletale"; facing exclusion by friends and other students who consider reporting to adults an act of betrayal; and being targeted for revenge were all consistent and common themes.

Even when a student is privy to information about impending violence, both students and staff agreed that bystanders fail to report such knowledge because there are no protections in place and what they say is unlikely to be kept confidential. Although most students said there is at least one staff person they trust with information, their confidence in the person's ability to guard their identity was not always strong. Protecting the bystander's identity as well as supporting the bystander's actions were identified as essential if violence prevention efforts are to be successful.

Along these same lines, both students and school staff admitted that young people receive mixed messages from adults about appropriate bystander behavior. According to students, although school administrators and teachers encourage students to divulge what they know to the school, parents may instruct their children not only to avoid direct involvement in aggressive or potentially violent situations, but also to refrain from reporting incidents. Almost without exception, students explained that parents are merely trying to protect them, with several adding that students who report incidents sometimes end up being accused of being involved. There were also student comments made about parents' displeasure with being called into the principal's office, along with their child, when incidents are investigated. Many students also stated that school staff tends to discourage students from informing on their peers.

Students acknowledged that parents are more likely to instruct them to report potential violence to school personnel if it seems likely that the outcome could be serious. However, they also noted that parents' fears of retribution against their child are also strong and how the school can be informed without exposing a student to repercussions is not always
clear. However, parents direct them to protect a sibling or a relative who is being victimized, even if that means getting involved in a fight.

Adult and adolescent focus group participants also reported a host of additional normative and structural barriers that inhibit bystanders from acting effectively. For example, there is a lack of parent-child communication in many homes, making it unlikely that students will confide in parents when they have knowledge of impending violence. Having regular and open communication with parents and a trusting relationship with school staff increases the likelihood that student bystanders will report violence and potential violence to adults.

Also, because rough play, especially among males, is often normative, students frequently have difficulty discerning when a situation has moved up the continuum from “fooling around” to something more serious. Our findings also suggest that student bystanders are more likely to take action to deter violence if the potential outcome of a conflict is perceived to be severe rather than minor. This becomes evident when comparing student focus group responses to bullying behavior with those that involved a handgun. Still, in the latter case, both students and school staff overwhelmingly agreed that the bystander presented with an offer to handle a friend’s gun would likely do so, although he should not. In general, student responses seemed to suggest that only when fights become serious (e.g., bleeding or weapon involvement) should bystanders seek adult assistance.

**DISCUSSION**

Our findings are consistent with previous research suggesting that bystanders typically influence violence by either passively accepting it or actively promoting it. Passive bystanders, while they do nothing to actively instigate or encourage aggressive behavior, do nothing to prevent aggression from escalating into violence (Tremlow, Sacco, & Williams, 1996). Such bystanders increase the likelihood of violence in verbal disputes when they choose to stand around and watch, as peers feel greater pressure to demonstrate their toughness, prove their superiority, or defend their honor around others (Sampson & Lauritsen, 1994; Fagan & Wilkinson, 1998; Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996). They also sanction future violence by sending the message to others that aggressive behavior is acceptable (Tremlow, Sacco, & Williams, 1996; O’Connell, Pepler, & Craig, 1999).
Clearly, the focus groups conducted for this study were not intended to capture a nationally representative sample of middle school students and staff, but instead were groups that reflected their school communities. The interaction that took place between participants illuminated their views of the world, including their values and beliefs about violence, its prevention, and the role of bystanders. Information elicited from these groups enabled us not only to understand what issues are salient, but also why they are considered so. Although such focus group research has many advantages, there are also limitations. Problems can arise when attempting to identify the individual view from the group view; those who are introverted or not articulate may find it difficult to express themselves; and because focus groups are neither fully confidential nor anonymous, some participants may be hesitant to speak candidly (Gibbs, 1997). Finally, it is much more difficult to summarize data from focus groups than from quantitative research (Morgan, 1997). However, no other research method would enable us to draw out participants’ attitudes, beliefs, experiences, and reactions, or to explore the degree of consensus on the topic of school violence and the role of the bystander. Almost without exception, all discussants in both the student and school staff focus groups participated enthusiastically and appeared to talk freely. There was no evidence of hesitancy or concern regarding confidentiality.

**Implications for Prevention**

Despite the high prevalence of aggressive and threatening behavior at the middle school level and the presence of bystanders at these events or potential events, there is little information to guide the development of interventions to safely and effectively involve students in preventing or halting violence among their peers. Our work shows that while there are a variety of contextual factors that influence bystander responses, many of these factors, such as relationship to the victim or aggressor and severity of event, are not necessarily amenable to intervention. Thus, addressing individual and situational factors alone will not be sufficient to produce positive changes in bystander behavior and school violence, nor will a focus solely on the student bystander. Interventions must consider how the larger school environment supports both adolescent and adult bystander action and whether members of the school community—parents, students, teachers, and other school staff, and community residents—are in agreement regarding appropriate bystander behavior and support their norms. Understanding and documenting by-
stander responses to aggressive and threatening behavior and increasing school community awareness about bystander involvement and building community consensus around appropriate bystander behavior are all necessary steps in the development of bystander strategies to reduce violence. With such information, school communities may be better able to determine: (1) what role bystanders should play in preventing minor and severe acts of school violence; (2) whether prescriptions for bystander behavior should vary depending on the characteristics of the violent act, situation, or perpetrator; and (3) how the school community—teachers and other school staff, students, parents, and the community at large—might change the normative environment that shapes bystander responses, and in turn, reduce violence.

An expanding body of research has examined the impact of perceived collective efficacy on group functioning (Bandura, 2000; Mullen & Cooper, 1994; Sampson & Earls, 1997). Findings suggest that the higher the perceived collective efficacy, the greater the group accomplishments. These findings, in combination with our focus group research, lead us to conclude that collective expectations for positive bystander intervention are a crucial component of effective prevention efforts. In order to reduce school violence, members of the school community must have as a collective goal to operate schools that are safe, violence-free places where student learning is possible. However, building community consensus around bystander behavior, while is essential, is not sufficient. A strong sense of collective efficacy must also be achieved. In addition, researchers must find ways to effectively measure collective efficacy and interventionists must find ways to promote it.

In recent years, several strategies have been proposed, and some implemented, that have as their goal the prevention of school violence through bystander intervention. They include 24-hour telephone hotlines for use by students and parents to report potential school violence; a protocol for responding to reports of potential violence that are clear, consistently enforced, and protect the student reporter; and bullying prevention programs that address the role of the bystander (Wolfgang, 2002; Small, Jones, Barrios, Crossett et al., 2001). These are all positive steps that should be supported. However, much more is needed.

As a next step in our work, we have used our focus group findings to develop a video-based bystander intervention, Voices against Violence: Helping Students, Parents, and School Staff Speak Up (2004). Consisting of short, dramatic vignettes that present different violent or poten-
tially violent situations from the student bystander’s perspective, the video can be used in a range of settings such as classrooms, parent-teacher association meetings, and in-service training sessions. Its aim is to raise awareness on the part of school communities about the role student and adult bystanders can play in preventing school violence as well as the range of barriers that must be addressed if bystanders are to act.

The most ambitious aim of the video is that of fostering collective efficacy on the part of communities to support positive bystander actions. Although the belief that people are in large part a product of their environment still holds sway, the hypothesis that, via collective action, communities can transform their environmental circumstances is also gaining acceptance (Bandura, 2000). If a school community believes that, by the collective actions of its members, it is possible to reduce violence by effecting a change in bystander actions, then there is incentive to act. However, additional research is needed to more fully understand not only the social norms that shape the role the bystander plays in school violence but also the ways in which perceived collective efficacy can impact on group functioning. If, as research suggests, the higher the perceived collective efficacy, the greater the group accomplishments, then a focus on collective efficacy in efforts to develop and evaluate school violence prevention interventions seems an appropriate course of research to pursue.

REFERENCES


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