

Chapter 6

School Violence among Children and Adolescents in Rural Communities

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ABSTRACT

School violence gained increased attention after highly publicized school shootings occurred in a variety of different school districts across the United States. Some of these school shootings occurred in non-urban communities, suggesting that such violence can occur in all areas, even those originally thought to be immune to such violence. As a result of these incidences, more research was conducted on school violence in nonurban communities and it quickly became clear that children and adolescents from rural school districts were often exposed to school violence at similar levels as those children and adolescents from urban areas. The aim of this chapter was to review research concerning school violence among children and adolescents in rural school districts, and to make recommendations for policy and school violence reduction programs as well as future research.

INTRODUCTION

About 20% of the people in the United States live in rural areas (United States Census, 2010). Research also indicates that joblessness, lower employment wages, poverty, and school violence is growing faster in rural communities than in urban areas (Atav & Spencer, 2002; Bachman, 1992; Bachus, 1994; Donnermeyer, 1994; Hodgkinson, 1994; Monsey, Owen, Zierman, Lambert, & Hyman, 1995; Prothrow-Stith & Quaday, 1996; Slovak & Singer, 2001). These communities also lag behind in terms of opportunities for higher education and well-paying occupations as well as having less opportunities for job and income growth (Bachman, 1992; Hobbs, 1994; Osgood & Chambers, 2003; Sherman, 1992; Stein, Jaycox, Kataoka, Rhodes, & Vestal, 2003; Weist, Myers, Danforth, McNeil, Ollendick, & Hawkins, 2000). In addition, the available jobs in rural communities require few skills and pay poorly. Consequently, highly educated youth from rural areas are leaving these communities for better educational and employment

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opportunities (Hobbs, 1994). Therefore, considerable attention has been given to the role of rural public schools in educating the next generation for college and university enrollment as well as preparing children from rural communities for future, gainful employment.

Roughly 57% of regular school districts operate in rural areas, especially in the North Central, Southern, and Western parts of the United States, with many of these schools having smaller budgets and fewer resources (McLean & Ross, 1994; U.S. Department of Education, 2013). Despite having less funding, operational costs are sometimes slightly higher than state averages, most likely as a result of the misguided belief that these schools do not have as many problems as urban schools, which has a variety of implications for children's and adolescents' academic achievement, educational attainment, and their behaviors (Schroth & Fishbaugh, 2000). Rural schools are typically hypothesized to protect children and adolescents from school violence, racism, and general decay present in metropolitan areas (Friday, 1996; Schroth & Fishbaugh, 2000). However, research has begun to challenge this assumption, with findings indicating that rural children and adolescents are frequently exposed to high levels of school violence and that these schools no longer have the influence that they once had (Hobbs, 1994; Osgood & Chambers, 2003; Petersen, Beekley, Speaker, & Pietrzak, 1998; Slovak & Singer, 2001; Slovak & Singer, 2002). In particular, adolescents from rural schools in New York were significantly more likely than adolescents from urban schools to engage in school bullying, to carry a weapon to school, and to use drugs, tobacco, and alcohol (Atav & Spencer, 2002). Although student achievement is slightly higher than achievement from disadvantaged urban schools, achievement is lower than in more advantaged urban areas (U.S. Department of Education, 1994). Furthermore, school administrators from rural school districts report that parental involvement and supervision have diminished over the last few years, leading to poorer academic achievement and increases in school violence (Petersen et al., 1998; Stephens, 1994). Also contributing to the increase in school violence are family violence and unstable family structures (Petersen et al., 1998). Research findings also suggest that rural school districts that are close to large cities have more incidences of school violence than the national average (Kingery, Mirzaee, Pruitt, & Hurley, 1990). Despite such findings, published research on school violence in rural school districts has been slow to develop, leading to the mistaken attitude that such schools are safe, which prevents policy-making and intervention efforts. Therefore, a synthesis of the literature on school violence in rural school districts is needed in order to describe the importance and timeliness of investigating this topic as well as providing information concerning the gaps in the literature and proposing considerations for policy and future research.

The purpose of this chapter is to review literature on school violence among children and adolescents in rural school districts, including elementary, middle, and high schools. This chapter has six main purposes, including:

1. Explaining the nature of school violence;
2. Describing the prevalence and consequences of school violence in rural school districts;
3. Exploring the role of the social context in school violence – providing comparisons of school violence among children and adolescents from urban, suburban, and rural communities;
4. Explaining solutions and recommendations;
5. Proposing future research directions - describing future research on school violence among children and adolescents in rural school districts;
6. Conclusions – final remarks regarding the literature on school violence among children and adolescents in rural communities.

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