# Issue BRIEF

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# New Approaches to Youth Violence Prevention in Schools

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Considerable public resources have gone to understanding and preventing violence among children, youth, and young adults. As public attention has grown, many forms of physical violence in schools have declined, although rates of other forms of violence have persisted (Exhibit 1). Of course, regardless of prevalence, the negative consequences to young people of exposure to violence remain a serious concern. Youth exposed to violence, including those who are victims, perpetrators, or witnesses, may experience problematic outcomes in the short- and long-term. Exposure to violence has been associated with mental and behavioral health problems (e.g., depression, anxiety, aggression, substance use, suicide attempts), physical health problems (e.g., heart disease, stroke, injury, death), and impaired learning and functioning at school (e.g., lower grades, truancy, reduced likelihood of graduating).[1,2]

Violence receives a great deal of attention. Articles about violence are published in the popular press every day. Despite the fact that most members of the public would be able to give examples of violent acts, we need a common definition of violence. There are two types of violence: interpersonal and structural.

> The purpose of this Issue Brief is to describe improvements in approaches to violence prevention in schools, and to offer critical considerations for state and local education agencies aiming to start or refine violence prevention initiatives.

**19.2%**
**of students in grades 9-12 report being bullied at school**

**Interpersonal violence**, also referred to as "behavioral violence" is the type of violence most often represented in popular culture. It is the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against another person, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, and/or psychological harm.[3] Interpersonal violence has two types:

- **Physical violence**, violence that results in physical injury, and
- **Relational violence**, violence that results in psychological injury. Youth can experience episodic one-time interpersonal violence (e.g., school shootings, sexual or physical assault), or chronic ongoing interpersonal violence (e.g., domestic violence, bullying, dating violence).

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**Exhibit 1. Prevalence of Violence in Schools**

**Prevalence of Physical Violence**
Below are prevalence rates of various categories of physical violence among school-aged young people:
- **Homicide** is the second leading cause of death among young people ages 5-18. However, only 2% of homicides occur on school campus or on the way to/from school. Incidents of homicide of youth ages 5-18 at school have declined by half since 1992.[4]
- 1.2% of students ages 12-18 report experiencing **criminal victimization on school campus** (i.e., rape, sexual assault, robbery, aggravated or simple assault), down from 3% in 1995.[5]
- 8% of students report having been in a **physical fight on school property** in the past 12 months. This represents a significant decline in prevalence since 1993 (16.2%).[6]
- Among the 73.9% of students nationwide who dated or went out with someone, 10.3% had experienced **physical dating violence** and 10.4% had experienced **sexual dating violence**.[7]

**Prevalence of Relational Violence**
While prevalence of physical violence has declined, rates of relational violence, including bullying, have remained steady over time.[6]
- 19.2% of students in grades 9-12 report being bullied on school property and 15% report experiencing cyberbullying in the past 12 months.[7]

**Structural violence** refers to systematic ways in which social structures harm or otherwise disadvantage individuals.[8] Although it is less often discussed in popular culture, structural violence contributes to the dynamics of interpersonal violence in schools and communities.

- Structural violence disproportionately affects some neighborhoods through the forces of persistent economic and social stress (e.g., poverty, incarceration, unemployment).
- Rates of community violence (e.g., gun violence, gang activity) tend to be higher in neighborhoods affected by structural violence.
- Schools in neighborhoods affected by structural violence tend to serve higher proportions   of young people experiencing the social, emotional, and behavioral effects conferred by exposure to violence.

## Addressing Violence in Schools: Historical Approaches, New Directions

Schools are deeply intertwined with the communities they serve and are vital platforms for violence prevention and intervention efforts. Unfortunately, historical efforts to maintain civil, orderly, and safe schools have led many state and local education agencies to adopt practices based on the belief that individual young people who commit acts of interpersonal violence on school campus must be punished using punitive and exclusionary discipline practices. One such discipline approach, referred to as "zero tolerance," has since been revealed to (a) be ineffective for reducing violent and disruptive behavior, (b) contribute to structural violence in schools, and (c) further disadvantage students most in need of school supports.

These types of policies have resulted in children and youth with disabilities, students who are learning English, and black, Hispanic, and American Indian youth being disproportionately suspended from school for minor infractions.[9]

As a result of these insights, school violence prevention efforts in the United States have come to a fork in the road:

> Educators increasingly acknowledge the fact that violence is a complex social challenge for which reactive, exclusionary discipline policies do not work, and they've begun to seek innovative, research-informed strategies to replace them.

**An Ecological Systems Framework** helps educators and their youth-serving partners plan and implement innovative school violence prevention efforts that promote equity and healing. The ecological systems framework proposed here accounts for the fact that violence is the result of conditions existing at multiple levels: within the individual, across immediate relationships, within the local community, and within society at-large.

An Ecological Systems Framework provokes educators and other youth-serving personnel to:

- Consider the complex causes of interpersonal and structural violence that exist across the many environments with which young people interact.
- Acknowledge the enormous changes in the world in which young people grow.
- Develop and implement research-informed strategies (Exhibit 4) that address the impact of interpersonal and structural violence on young people.

### Exhibit 2. Embracing the Complex Dynamics of Violence

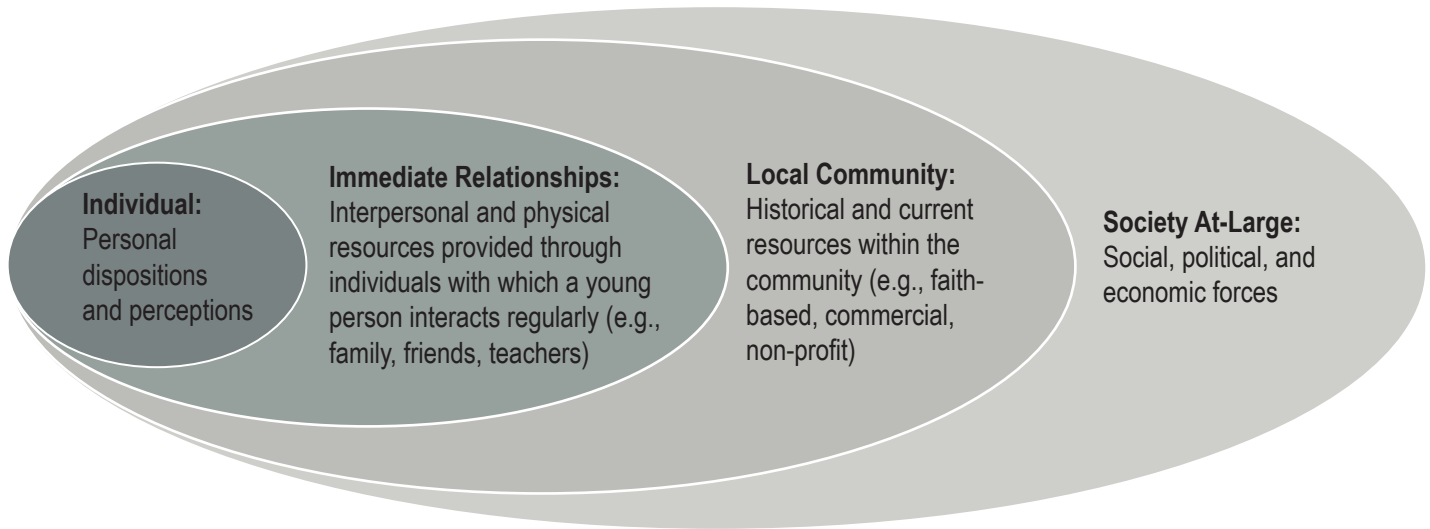| Young people may not distinguish the difference between real versus perceived violence. | Violent acts are not independent from one another. | Family caregiving supports may be negatively affected by exposure to violence, producing a cascade of impacts on school-aged youth. | Educator effectiveness may be impaired by exposure to violence. |
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| A true act of violence and a threat of violence can produce the same effects in school-aged youth. New approaches to violence prevention treat perceived violence as equally important to prevent and address as verified acts of violence. | Types of violence were previously conceptualized as disconnected and isolated issues (e.g., sexual assault, child abuse, homicide). Current research shows that different forms of violence tend to be interrelated, sharing the same risk factors and contributing to the same short- and long-term outcomes. Prolonged exposure to violence can lead to chronic and toxic stress for young people, families, and school adults. Those that are victims of or witness to violence also have a higher likelihood of perpetrating violence themselves. | The health of parents and other caregivers may be negatively impacted by experiences of violence in the community and in the home, which can negatively impact their ability to support their children and attend to school-related needs. | Teachers and staff who are victims or witnesses of violence, or who suffer secondary trauma from hearing about their students' firsthand experiences with violence, may suffer from behavioral and physical health outcomes. This may impact their ability to build relationships with and provide high quality instruction to young people. Exposure to violence can inhibit maintenance and recruitment of high quality staff and teachers. |

**Exhibit 3. Ecological Systems Framework**

**Individual:** Personal dispositions and perceptions

**Immediate Relationships:** Interpersonal and physical resources provided through individuals with which a young person interacts regularly (e.g., family, friends, teachers)

**Local Community:** Historical and current resources within the community (e.g., faith-based, commercial, non-profit)

**Society At-Large:** Social, political, and economic forces

## Pathways Toward Incorporating an Ecological Systems Approach to Violence Prevention in Schools

By approaching violence prevention with an understanding of the ecological systems in which it occurs, state and local education agencies can get closer to achieving violence-free schools. The following are key pathways toward reforming violence prevention efforts in schools:

1. **Rethink the concept of "safety."** School safety has historically been conceived of as a disruption-free environment. The logic was that if fights and drugs are eliminated from campus, then the campus is safe. This narrow conceptualization has contributed to the rise of zero tolerance policies and the increased presence of law enforcement on school campuses. A trauma- informed conceptualization of safety considers both physical and psychological safety of all individuals who interact with the school—students, staff, caregivers, and members of the community at-large.

> **Exhibit 4. Features of Ecological Systems-Informed Violence Prevention Approaches**
>
> - Take into consideration the root cause(s) of violence, which may be structural in nature and may therefore require changes in social and education policy
> - Involve a wide array of community partners
> - Coordinate services and supports across youth-serving partners
> - Consider the type of violence being addressed and the environment in which it is occurring
> - Make sure strategies are developmentally, culturally, and linguistically-appropriate for the target audience(s)
> - Incorporate the science of positive youth development, trauma, and resilience
> - Incorporate family supports, including supports to address family dynamics that may relate to violence
> - Address related physical, mental, and behavioral health needs

- Rethinking what safety means on school campus is a critical step in building more effective school violence prevention initiatives.

- Schools must consider whether stakeholders feel a sense of safety and belonging, and must work to improve the sense of safety and belonging by incorporating SAMHSA's principles of a trauma-informed approach (Exhibit 5).

2. **Redefine the boundaries of school responsibility.** Educators must begin to think about the plural ways that exposure to violence impacts students at school. Young people do not perceive a separation between violence in schools and violence in communities. In order to make a meaningful impact, schools must abandon the idea that the only violence for which they are responsible is violence that occurs on school campus during school hours.[10]

   - A school's role in preventing violence extends beyond the school property, following the student into his or her community context.

   - Teachers and school leaders must be trained in (a) effective strategies for preventing interpersonal and structural violence and (b) strategies for intervening effectively when they suspect a young person is suffering the effects of exposure to violence.

   - Schools need to establish productive relationships with community partners who have expertise in violence prevention and intervention. These partnerships are essential for building effective networks that span beyond the limits of the school campus.

3. **Engage in critical self-examination.** Schools can be the source of youths' experience with violence. Although we tend to think about school violence as violent incidents that occur on campus or in the passage to and from school, schools can also be a source of structural violence as well. Students may

feel marginalized or discriminated against when they are excluded from being real stakeholders in their schooling experience, or when they feel school staff are hostile or biased.[11]

- Schools must examine the policies, practices, and dispositions–including individual and collective biases–that may be contributing to students' experiences of interpersonal and/or structural violence.

4. **Focus on educator mental health and wellbeing.** When youth-serving adults are not provided the supports and opportunities to promote their own wellbeing, there is a risk that they may not have the emotional bandwidth and clarity to accurately interpret students' violence exposure-related behaviors. This misinterpretation can lead to the use of punitive, exclusionary practices and contribute to systemic violence that marginalizes young people most in need of support.

## Where to Start?

A systems-level approach that reframes and reforms school violence prevention efforts may seem daunting. Exhibit 6 provides detailed ideas for using the Ecological Systems Framework to guide your school's violence prevention and intervention decision-making.

The most logical and straightforward place to start is by conducting a thorough system assessment. This begins with an examination of stakeholder perceptions of the type, frequency, and intensity of both interpersonal and structural violence on campus, and an accounting of the school's current violence prevention and intervention efforts. When working with stakeholders, inquire about their experiences and ideas related to violence across all levels of the ecological system. Below are several ways of collecting and interpreting information gathered from stakeholders:

- Conduct stakeholder focus groups to understand student and staff needs and experiences. Focus groups provide rich data that can be used to guide violence prevention efforts. The variety of experiences of violence across students, staff, and families can be unearthed and analyzed.

- Select school climate measures that include specific items that explore structural and interpersonal violence perceptions and experiences. Conduct these enhanced school climate measures with students, staff, and families at least once per year.

- Locate an existing stakeholder leadership team (e.g., a PBIS team) to examine focus group and school climate data, to lead internal reflection around sources of violence in the local community and school, and to create a shared vision for the school's refined violence prevention approach.

## AWARE Highlight: Tool From The Field

The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction's Student Services/Prevention and Wellness created a Violence Prevention Program Assessment Tool for elementary, middle, and high schools to make informed decisions when selecting violence prevention programs. The tool models the ecological systems framework by assessing the following components: School Environment, Curriculum and Instruction, Student Programs, Pupil Services, Adult Programs, and Family and Community.
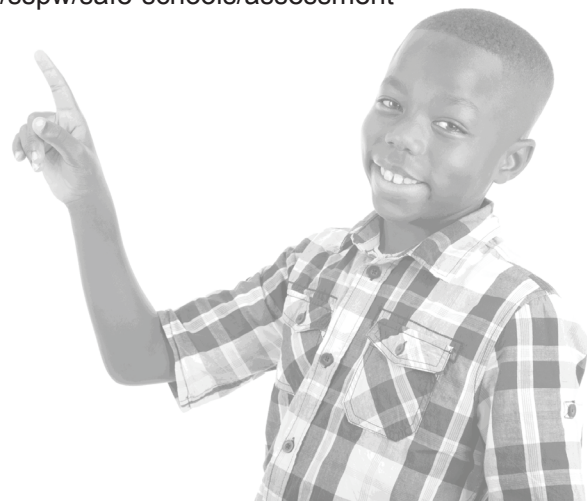
Download the tool at:
http://dpi.wi.gov/sspw/safe-schools/assessment

# Exhibit 6. Improving Violence Prevention in Schools Through an Ecological Systems Approach

| | | Guiding Considerations | Opportunities for Action by Schools | Exemplar Strategies, Programs, and Initiatives | Related Resources |
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| **Society** | | • What existing societal policies and cultural norms encourage or inhibit violence, and how do these impact young people at school?<br><br>• What discordant messages about the causes and consequences of violence exist between students' social worlds at-large and the school?<br><br>• How can topics related to the social contributors to violence be woven into the school's existing academic curriculum? | Explicitly discuss racism, classism, homophobia and other forms of structural violence that affect young people.<br><br>Provide opportunities throughout the school day to improve equity and social justice through instruction and school-wide programming and policies.  This not only includes what students experience, but also the training and professional development of teachers and school site staff, including cafeteria staff, maintenance staff, and bus drivers. | Facing History and Ourselves https://www.facinghistory.org/<br><br>Crossroads Antiracism Organizing & Training http://crossroadsantiracism.org/<br><br>Welcoming Schools http://www.welcomingschools.org/<br><br>Center for Nonviolent Solutions http://www.nonviolentsolutions.org/youth<br><br>Youth for Human Rights http://www.youthforhumanrights.org/<br><br>Mentors In Violence Prevention-Gender Violence Prevention & Education http://www.jacksonkatz.com/mvp.html | Urban Networks to Increase Thriving Youth Through Prevention (UNITY) http://www.preventioninstitute.org/unity.html<br><br>Rethinking Schools http://www.rethinkingschools.org/index.shtml<br><br>Training for Change https://www.trainingforchange.org/<br><br>Teaching for Change https://www.teachingforchange.org/<br><br>Teaching Tolerance http://www.tolerance.org/<br><br>Resources on Race Relations: Resources for Schools to address issues of race/ethnic relations (Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence) http://crede.berkeley.edu/research/pdd/intro2_4.html |
| **Local Community** | | • What risk factors for violence currently exist in the local community (e.g., gang violence, substance and alcohol abuse, economic factors)?<br><br>• What assets exist in the local community (e.g., availability of youth organizations and community advocacy groups)?<br><br>• What local norms encourage and/or prohibit violence?<br><br>• When issues and incidents occur in the local community, what are the school and school system's practices and policies for alerting school leadership?<br><br>• For individuals just recently moving to the local community, what prior experiences of violence might they have had that influence their current experience? | Establish supports that are both *ongoing* (i.e., regularly scheduled supports that address chronic violence) and *episodic* (i.e., targeted prevention and intervention responses in response to specific violent occurrences).<br><br>Partner with other youth-serving agencies to create collaborative approaches to reducing violence and supporting community members—including students, school staff, and families—exposed to violence.<br><br>Connect with local faith-based organizations to help affect local norms around violence and to improve school-community relationships.<br><br>Engage with law enforcement to ensure that School Resource Officers and other members of law enforcement are trained in principles of youth development.<br><br>Create school-based practices and policies that allow students to discuss incidents of community violence in safe settings.<br><br>Assume that the impact of community violence (structural and interpersonal) is universal; avoid targeting certain student populations based on assumption of need. | Institute for Nonviolence in Los Angeles http://invla.org/<br><br>Ana Grace Project http://anagraceproject.org/ana-grace/<br><br>Kids Off the Block (Chicago, IL) http://www.kidsofftheblock.us/<br><br>Teens on Target (Oakland, CA) http://www.youthalive.org/<br><br>Interior Alaska Center for Nonviolent Living http://www.iacnvl.org/<br><br>Teen Refugee Story Circle http://3chairs.org/refugeestorycircle/<br><br>Operation Ceasefire https://www.hks.harvard.edu/programs/criminaljustice/research-publications/gangs-guns-urban-violence/operation-ceasefire-boston-gun-project | Striving to Reduce Youth Violence Everywhere (STRYVE) http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/stryve/<br><br>National Forum on Youth Violence Prevention http://youth.gov/collaboration-profiles/national-forum-youth-violence-prevention<br><br>Resource Center on Nonviolence Youth Empowerment Programs http://rcnv.org/programs/youth/<br><br>Paving the Way for Project Safe Neighborhoods: SACSI In 10 U.S. Cities https://www.ncjrs.gov/app/publications/abstract.aspx?ID=237909<br><br>The Listening Project: Rural Southern Voice for Peace http://www.listeningproject.info/<br><br>Engaging and training migrant men and women farmworkers to promote family violence prevention in migrant farmworker communities (New Tactics in Human Rights) https://www.newtactics.org/tactic/engaging-and-training-migrant-men-and-women-farmworkers-promote-family-violence-prevention<br><br>Adverse Community Experiences and Resilience: A Framework for Addressing and Preventing Community Trauma (The Prevention Institute) http://www.preventioninstitute.org/component/jlibrary/article/id-372/127.html |

| | Guiding Considerations | Opportunities for Action by Schools | Exemplar Strategies, Programs, and Initiatives | Related Resources |
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| **Immediate Relationships** | • What might be the sources of strength in a young person's personal relationships that may protect him/her from violence and victimization at school?<br><br>• What might be the sources of risk in a young person's personal relationships that may make him/her more vulnerable to violence and victimization at school?<br><br>• What might be the factors that encourage or discourage students and staff to stand up against bias, bullying or other forms of violence? | Focus on improving the skills and competencies of school adults who work with young people every day. Provide training on effective communication and conflict management approaches and on the principles of positive youth development.<br><br>Encourage school adults to be allies to young people, reducing bias and discrimination by providing leadership to student action groups.<br><br>Provide direct mentoring to young people to help reduce conflict and foster healthy interactions.<br><br>Adopt pro-social conflict resolution and restorative policies that are culturally relevant and developmentally appropriate.<br><br>Encourage and provide opportunities and resources for youth engagement, empowerment, and peer leadership.<br><br>Fund a designated staff person who is a specialist in violence prevention and wellness promotion to serve as the internal resource and advocate to both coach staff and support students and their families. Budgets can be limiting as well as time; strategically partner with community-based organizations that explicitly work towards violence prevention. | Guiding Responsibility and Expectations in Adolescents Today and Tomorrow (GREAT) https://www.crimesolutions.gov/ProgramDetails.aspx?ID=409<br><br>Peace Over Violence http://www.peaceoverviolence.org/<br><br>REACH Beyond Domestic Violence http://reachma.org<br><br>Teens on Target, Youth Alive!'s peer education program, is training teens to be community leaders and educators and is successfully helping young people find positive alternatives to violence. http://www.youthalive.org/<br><br>RYSE Youth Center in Richmond, California partners with local schools to support teachers' professional development, assist schools in responding to student homicide, and run young men's groups on school campus that promote restorative healing. http://www.rysecenter.org/<br><br>Youth Guidance in Chicago, Illinois, provides social, emotional, and life skills support to young men and women coping with community violence. The Becoming a Man and Working on Womanhood programs are supported by high-quality evidence from program evaluation studies. https://www.youth-guidance.org/ | Futures Without Violence https://www.futureswithoutviolence.org/<br><br>Men Can Stop Rape Mencanstoprape.org<br><br>Family Violence Prevention Services http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/fysb/programs/family-violence-prevention-services<br><br>Institute on Domestic Violence in the African American Community www.idvaac.org<br><br>Mending the Sacred Hoop (violence prevention for Native women & children) http://mshoop.org/<br><br>National Latino Alliance for the Elimination of Domestic Violence http://www.dvalianza.org/ |
| **Individual** | • What biological, social, and/or cultural factors influence the potential of an individual student becoming a victim or a perpetrator of violence (e.g., history of child abuse, mental illness, bullying, substance abuse, aggressive behavior)?<br><br>• How might school adults' previous and present experiences of violence impact their capacity to support students?<br><br>• How might students' resilience (i.e., overcoming incidents of violence of victimization) be promoted and celebrated? | Provide direct instruction to students on the social and emotional skills involved in preventing and managing conflict.<br><br>Concentrate on school adults' fluency with the concepts of structural and interpersonal violence and their relationships with childhood trauma, Adverse Childhood Experiences, and resilience.<br><br>Regularly and visibly celebrate students' diverse identities. | See examples of the Los Angeles Unified School District's school violence threat assessments here: http://achieve.lausd.net/Page/2203<br><br>Elsie Allen High School campus in Santa Rosa, CA's ACEs screening practice http://www.acesconnection.com/blog/customizing-aces-screening-for-high-school-students<br><br>OUT for Safe Schools™ http://blog.ed.gov/2016/04/coming-out-for-safe-schools/?utm_content=&utm_medium=email&utm_name=&utm_source=govdelivery&utm_term=<br><br>Educator Action Group of Educators for Fair Consideration, a collective of educators who work to increase support for undocumented students in school. http://www.e4fc.org/ourteam/educatoractiongroup.html | Measuring Violence Related Attitudes, Beliefs, and Behaviors Among Youths: A Compendium of Assessment Tools: Second Edition http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pub/measuring_violence.html<br><br>For information on Adverse Childhood Experiences http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/acestudy/<br><br>The Virginia Student Threat Assessment http://curry.virginia.edu/research/projects/threat-assessment |

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