

The History of School and Youth Violence

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By Billy Hallowell

Violence in schools is an issue that has existed in American High Schools for many years. Over these years the problem has worsened as do all issues in society that are not or have not been dealt with properly. Since 1999, when two students named Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris entered Columbine High School with explosives and guns and massacred the school, school violence has been a more important issue in society. Around the nation organizations and companies have begun to recognize the problem and work on solutions. Many of these solutions have been extremely effective, while others have not. Almost any psychologist or educator would agree that there is not one set cure to end violence among youths and in schools. However there are ways to improve the problem and help teenagers. These methods go beyond prevention merely by watching for the danger signs of a student who may exhibit violence in the school setting. These warning signs, according to Dr. Scott Poland, are, history of bullying and aggression, fascination with guns weapons or violence, inferiority complex, cruelty to animals, chronic bedwetting, fire setting, and lack of remorse and empathy for others. These characteristics could not be discovered without close analysis of past events, and a valid idea of the root of school violence. The characteristics of school violence offenders can clearly fit into almost any time period throughout the history of the United States.

The issue of school and youth violence is not new. In fact the violent incidences brought on by teens have appeared throughout the history of the United States of America. Although this is so it was not until recently that these events reached the unhealthy level that they remain at today. The last forty years have provided a more concentrated series of youth violence events. These events have resulted in the deaths and injuries of youths and adults around the nation. In many instances one event would spark "copy-cat" attacks on schools. These attacks often have occurred only a few days after a major gun violence incident. Copy-cat attacks are common in school violence incidents, because some youths feel that they can relate to a perpetrator in some ways.

Around the United States violence in schools has become a huge issue. Violence is so prevalent in our society that although we may not experience it personally, we cannot escape it in our entertainment and in our daily news. The issue has reached the attention of lawmakers and leaders. In 1999, after the Columbine shooting, President Bill Clinton visited schools in the nation to speak about violence. He pointed fingers at the glorification of violence in popular culture and its desensitizing effect on your minds, the easy access to guns, and the lax parental supervision that exists in many families as the causes of school violence ("Profiling School Shootings"). An overwhelming amount of research shows that

students feel increasingly unsafe during school or traveling to and from school due to the violence events that have occurred to date.

During the late 1980's and early 1990's teen gun violence in schools had dramatically increased in the United States. This increase led to a sharp increase in gun deaths and gun injuries (School Violence Prevention). This poses a major problem, because it threatens the welfare of students in schools across the country in rural, suburban, and urban schools. According to a recent study, "Firearm injuries rank as the fifth leading cause of death for five to nine year old children and the second leading cause of death for children aged ten to fourteen and fifteen to nineteen" (School Violence Prevention). Another surprising fact that many people do not recognize because of the incorrect mind set of what violence in schools is after Columbine, is the fact that youth violence can be a variety of activities including bullying, threatening remarks, physical fights, assaults with or without a weapon, gang violence, and suicide (School Violence Prevention). Many of these activities are present in school environments everyday. The United States Education Department's Bill Modzeleski stated, "The trauma of school shootings is clear, but you can't ignore the other things that go on in schools- fighting, harassment, bullying...", which shows that these issues can not be left alone. These activities are present in high schools and educational facilities around the United States daily.

Although seemingly new these issues have been in the lives of youths since the beginning of time. Students in many cities and towns go to school in fear due to these factors. Some believe that this worrying is not in vein because the average child who spends thirteen years in school has a one in one hundred and seven thousand chance of "...encountering a violent death on the way to school, on school grounds, or at a school function" (Why Files Staff). Alarming results were found in 1996 and 1997 and in the end it was determined that four thousand incidents of rape and/or sexual battery were reported, eleven thousand incidents of physical attacks with weapons were reported, seven thousand incidents of robberies were uncovered, one hundred and ninety thousand incidents of fighting were discovered, and one hundred and fifteen thousand incidents of vandalism were reported.

Furthermore school violence in its many forms is visible in most if not all of America's high schools. Although not as severe as school shootings, fighting within schools is an important section and issue with violence that must be resolved. The bullying and fighting among youths that we see today can be traced back to the beginning of time. Minor incidents, and in some case major incidents or violence have occurred in America's schools since the first school house was opened. An amazing fact that has been discovered is that suburban schools usually do not have the frequency of fights that occur in urban or city schools. Although this is usually the case, almost every major school shooting that has occurred has been in a suburban school or in a school that does not have a long history of violence problems. Even though school shootings are not an every day occurrence, they still represent violence in its most terrifying form.

The school shooters and murderers make a diverse class portrait, because they are White, Black, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American. Few of these youths have mental disorders; however many of them are very depressed (Dedman, "Bullying"). Two of these school shootings can be examined and explained to see what violence in our schools has come to. On May 21st 1998 Kip Kinkel used three guns in his school to kill two students and to injure twenty-two. Back at home the youth had shot dead his parents (Why Files Staff). The most memorable school massacre in American history is undoubtedly the Columbine shooting. Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris went into their high school on April 20, 1999 and killed twelve students and one teacher. At the end of the massacre they committed suicide in the school's library where they had slain ten students. The two students used bombs and numerous guns to carry out their mission of death and destruction and changed the lives of one thousand nine hundred and forty one students forever (Hallowell, "Anti-violence Information"). These results and incidents show a lack of respect for human life. Another instance in which Tyrell Jones and Luther Wright beat fellow student Mathew Gremo shows this. The two beat the student brutally in enjoyment outside of their school cafeteria, leaving him with brain damage (Soteropoulos). This is yet another example of the lack of respect that many of today's youth hold for human life. With each of these events it is extremely important to examine and determine the root, cause, and motivation for violence.

The phenomenon of school and youth violence is fairly new to Americans. The roots and beginnings of the violence that the United States, as well as the world has seen in public and private schools date back to the 1920's. Although the perpetrator was not a youth, a violent event took place in an American school. An adult male entered an elementary school in Bath, Michigan, and murdered forty-five persons, wounding fifty-eight with bombs and a gun ("Charting"). Many of those murdered were young children. The superintendent of the school was shot dead by the same man who set off the dynamite. This is the first major school violence incident in the United States. While not brought on by a youth, it symbolizes the beginning of the violent trend that has continued into the twenty-first century.

The next root of youth violence was set in the 1960's. The 1960's were a time of racial unrest, containing one of the first instances in which youth chose to use violence as a means of expressing their needs and wants. The events being referred to are the riots of the 1960's in Rochester, New York City, and many other cities around the United States. These riots involved and were conducted by alienated youths in part. Although a famous Supreme Court decision in 1954 helped open new jobs, colleges, legal services, etc. for minorities, the same time period created factors that incited riots of destruction. During this period in history it seemed that more and more of America's alienated youth were participating in demonstrations and marches to enforce their beliefs. The discrimination prevalent in the south, and in many cases the north, helped to spark the youths' involvement in these instances. Although there is no evidence that teens actually planned any riots, they looted, burned, and fought the police during them. Some of the youths that were found to be involved in these offenses members of gangs. The race riot period is

one of the first times in history in which America's youth involved themselves in peaceful, as well as violent protest (Bernstein). Some viewed nonviolent youth involvement in these events as beneficial, while others claimed that undisciplined youths who became involved in protest were quicker to strike out physically, and were more hostile to the police.

The idea that some undisciplined youths may, or could have clouded the actual intentions of these peace rallies did prove valid in various circumstances. It is stated that, "In Cleveland, at a demonstration which resulted in a tragic death, there was later rioting by undisciplined youth" (Bernstein, 51). This event provides validation on the fact that youths were, in many instances, taking adult examples of protest and using them in their own light. In some instances the actions of these youths permitted destruction and violence. The event that occurred in Cleveland also validated that idea that undisciplined youths may lead demonstrations that promote violence due to their inexperience and lack of a regiment life. The riots are an essential examining point, because for the first time youths who felt oppressed were taking a stand through violence.

Following the 1960's, many violent events brought on by youths occurred. In 1966, "There [was] another American school that was attacked with gunfire in which more people were killed and more people were wounded than those from Columbine" ("Charting"). The event was brought on by an adult male. He killed 18 people, and wounded 31. Although not widely known of (due to fact that it occurred well before the string of shootings that we can see today), it is one of the worst school shootings in history. The next decade proved that the slow growing trend of school and youth violence would do anything but decrease. In 1979 a 16 year old girl shot six students in an Illinois elementary school. She killed a second grader, a man in a nearby home and herself during her rampage. This is just one example of the violent events that occurred in the 1970's (Hallowell). As the 1980's approached the issue of school violence slowly intensified. There were about three occurrences of major violence in schools in 1970 and 1978, and the number of occurrences dropped to two by 1986. Although this is so, by 1989 the number of occurrences was six ("Charting"). An astounding fact that many sources state is that the number of school violence occurrences for 2002 is approaching 40. Studies show that the month of May has had the most violent events occur within it than any other month. Also, Fridays are the most common day of the week that perpetrators have chosen to carry out their violent plans on and within schools ("Charting"). Unfortunately, the history of violent incidences has not come to a close, and it seems that every time a new event occurs the fatalities are higher and more gruesome. Tragically, the worst school violence event in world history occurred in 2001. Two students started an arson fire in a secondary school in Kenya. The fire killed 67 students and the perpetrators were charged with murder for their horrendous actions ("School violence around"). This event is yet another tragedy to be added to the seemingly unstoppable timeline of violent events.

Since the Columbine massacre studies have found that the violence events to date have primarily been caused by males. An interesting fact is that eighty three percent of school

victims and ninety six percent of offenders in youth violence incidences are male (Why Files Staff). According to the [Why Files Staff], "The mental world of these young killers is 'all about me'...They're frustrated, angry, in some pain...They feel like victims. They have no concern for others--they don't think about others." This statement while disturbing, shows that the mind set of these students and students resembling them must be changed in some way.

These violent events show that every part of the nation is affected by this epidemic known as school violence. It is a known and publicized fact that urban schools have a much higher rate of violence occurring in them as well as on their grounds. In fact urban schools, "...have a nine times higher homicide rate than rural ones" (Why Files Staff). New York State's own Governor George Pataki once stated, "Recent news events across the country clearly highlight the dangers that violence in our schools pose for our children," in the late nineties showing that violence in schools is a dangerous and infectious issue.

The Columbine tragedy on April 20, 1999 was not only a catalyst for the anti-violence movement, but it also served as another violent event that the United States would have to add to its history books. Since this date organizations and companies have developed many different programs to help cut back on the amount of violence present in schools nationwide. Columbine was a wake up call for many institutions across the country. The issue of school violence in some senses has been glossed over in the past because many people did not know how to deal with or handle the issue. Even today schools across the country gloss over the issue and this negligence can be seen in the statistics of cities across the United States. Nationally, the internet has played a large role in promoting peace and non-violence among youths. Web sites such as Teen Web Online and SHiNE (Seeking Harmony in Neighborhoods Everyday) have been developed by persons and organizations hoping to help stop the problem of youth violence. SHiNE offers message boards for teenagers to vent, columns on violence prevention, action guides which help teenagers learn where they can take action and much more. Teen Web Online is a similar web site that deals with the issues of violence and discrimination. These are just two of the many web sites and online organizations on the World Wide Web. Other web sites offer services such as free phone lines for teenagers to call for advice and to vent their anger, newsletters and free pamphlets (Hallowell). In the 1960's and 1970's services such as these were not created, or even thought up. The most astounding effort nation wide was the creation of the MTV Action Guide. MTV, the leading television station for fashion and entertainment, developed a year long program in response to the Columbine shooting. The program was called Fight For Your Rights and held the slogan, "Take a stand against violence." The guide was free and it was advertised through commercials on MTV. Teenagers could call into a 1-800 number and order the booklet which contained useful information on violence, ways to vent anger in a non-destructive way, and celebrity quotes and guidance on violence. Also, the booklet came with a free CD containing music and audio quotes from celebrities. As if that was not amazing enough, MTV developed television shows that centered around violence in schools and ending the problem in society, making the endeavor an important part of the network's history. The American

Psychological Association and MTV Networks joined forces to launch these campaigns (Why Files Staff). This was the first time that a major network geared towards youths launched a proactive program to help stop violence.

Around the nation speakers have been looked upon to enter schools and other educational institutions to speak to youths on violence. Ministries such as GoTell have speakers who were previously involved with drugs, alcohol, and violence. The idea is that these speakers have experience with the issue, have reformed and can show youths that violence is not the path to take. Billy Schneider is a speaker for GoTell and a former violence offender. He speaks to youths around the country and is available upon request to help change and educate young minds on the dangers of violence (GoTell Web site). As with all national issues, many politicians have taken the opportunity to speak on the issue of violence, and because of Columbine the issue is a current one in lawmaking bodies around the nation. These are many of the activities going on around the nation to help cut down on youth violence, and violence in schools.

The New York State government has also taken action to combat youth violence. Considering that the nation had never been faced with concentrated events like Columbine, many states had to make legislation for school districts around the nation. Governor Pataki signed into law the Safe Schools Against Violence in Education Act, or Project SAVE, on July 24, 2000. According to the New York State United Teachers, "This legislation culminates NYSUT's efforts over the past five years to improve school safety in response to the rise of violence in our schools." The project was created to make New York State schools a safer place for both faculty members and students. The law gives teachers the authority to remove unruly students from classes. Each district within the state is also required to develop safety plans for crisis response and management and a code of conduct for all persons within school buildings. Also, project SAVE states, "The State Education Department must develop interpersonal violence prevention education and training packages for grades kindergarten through twelve" (New York State United Teachers). This act made it essential that The State Department and the Department of Criminal Justice Services develop a uniform violent incident reporting system. Incidents are kept in records for each year and then reported to the proper authorities. Project SAVE gives advice to local officials and teachers in each district on how to handle children during school hours and serves as a guide for each school on violent events (New York State United Teachers). Plans such as SAVE have taken the historical initiative to help stop youth violence. Another program that the state has created is scholarship awards for students to help cut down on violence. Governor Pataki announced awards totaling \$600,000 to school based health centers across New York State for programs that target violence and other leading adolescent health risks (Office of the Governor). This will help increase awareness of the dangers that violence poses to youths. These are two examples of what the state government is doing to cut down on violence among youths.

For almost a decade now news of incidences brought on by youths has taken over a portion of America's broadcasting. The news is often filled with violence that youths have

created. Events like Columbine have caused Americans to question what could be causing children and adults to enter educational facilities and harm the inhabitants. Sadly, society has not learned from its history. Students who need help emotionally are often times left in the dust. Many officials and researchers downplay the seriousness of violence in schools and back up their ideas by explaining that it is a rare occurrence. History shows that this assumption is not the case. It is essential to reach back into the 1920's and examine what has made people commit violent acts over time. Examining events brought on by youth shows that in many circumstances the students committing the crimes are severely depressed. The fact that the number of occurrences has increased substantially over the last four decades shows people all over the world that it is the individual responsibility of every citizen to work toward a better world.

The history of school violence, while relatively new, has proven that society is in need of some sort of cure, and that cure is present in every individual on the earth. Unfortunately, the history of youth and school violence is unlike the history of World War I, or any other past event or historical figure. School violence is an epidemic that has slowly seeped into American society. Incidences of school violence have been horrendous in the past, but as they continue in the future they will build momentum and effect more people than they ever have before. The only way to prevent this from happening is to study the history of past events, look out for warning signs, and to promote anti-violent resolutions. Only time will tell what path the youth of tomorrow will take.