

Dangerous Adolescents

Extreme tragic events involving adolescents' brutal actions shatter our sense of basic civility and call for immediate responses. Such was the response to recent incidents involving the killing of several students by classmates in apparently safe schools and sheltered neighborhoods (Jenson & Howard, 1999). Although these extremes represent the popular types of interpersonal dangers that may lurk in or around schools, the violence actually reflects only a fraction of adolescent aggression and violence and the environments that sustain offending and victimization. In fact, only 1–3% of extreme forms of violence among school-aged adolescents actually occurs on school grounds or in related school-sponsored activities (Anderson, 1998). *Serious* violent events pervasively occur in adolescents' neighborhoods or in their homes—only about 7% of serious assaults take place at school (Snyder & Sickmund, 1995). Regardless of the actual reality of adolescents' offending, extreme violence grips and creates social consciousness regarding the realities of adolescents' offending against others and of disorder in schools. As a result, juvenile offenses in schools and the failure of schools to respond to offenses committed outside of schools rank among the most important social issues facing adolescents, schooling, and society.

Although the offenses receiving attention may be extreme, such episodes actually reveal much about school violence and environments in which adolescents find themselves. It is difficult to dispute the precariousness of adolescents' environments. Adolescents do live in and contribute to serious violence; e.g., within any given year, from 12–20% of males aged 13–16 report committing serious acts of violence (including aggravated assault, robbery, rape, or gang fights) (Kelley, Huizinga,

Thornberry, & Loeber, 1997). These serious offenses reveal only the tip of offenses and victimization. Environments conducive to serious violence strongly associate with risk for injury, exposure to intimidation and threats, and perceptions of fear and vulnerability (Brenner, Simon, Krug, & Lowry, 1999). These dangerous environments also breed school official reactions that themselves contribute to other forms of victimizations that induce severe physical, psychological, and sociological consequences (Hyman & Snook, 1999). Likewise, the extreme environments foster changes in adolescents' rights, as made most obvious in the dismantling of the juvenile court by transferring violent minors to adult court (Levesque, 1996a) and the removal of aggressive and violent adolescents from their community schools (Levesque, 1998c). Perhaps more importantly for policy reform, focus on extremely serious violence hampers the development of alternative approaches to other forms of problem behavior that may better alleviate adolescents' rates of more serious violence and that would otherwise reduce schools' iatrogenic effects on delinquency. Thus, even though adolescents' deadly violence and many less severe forms of violence now exhibit downward trends (Brenner, Simon, Krug, & Lowry, 1999), the dangers found in schools and communities remain significant social concerns and create potent images of the place of schools in adolescents' offenses.

The dangers (and perceptions of dangers) associated with adolescents and their schooling leave an important legacy for policies dealing with adolescents' rights and education. This chapter evaluates the legacy to lay a foundation for Chapter 6's delineation of reform alternatives consistent with the evolving understanding of adolescents, their offenses against others, and schooling's place in society. To do so, this chapter first details the nature of adolescents' offending, which for the purpose of this review ranges from severe violent criminal behavior, delinquency, to less recognized forms of abuse. The analysis then highlights the place of schooling in the creation and responses to adolescents' offenses. Having understood the important role schools play in addressing the needs of adolescent offenders and their victims, the discussion charts current legal responses to adolescents' offenses and delineates these responses' limitations.

ADOLESCENT OFFENDERS AND THEIR OFFENSES

A necessary starting point for discussion involves the manner researchers, policy makers, and society actually define certain offenses as problems and define schools' roles in addressing those problems.

Defining the contours of offenses worthy of intervention and the nature of schooling determines policies, the allocation of resources, and the extent to which schools may measure their success in responses to adolescents' offenses. As expected, delimiting the policy relevant contours of adolescents' offending and envisioning schools' roles remain contentious matters. Vastly different views of schools' roles in the reduction and production of problem behavior exist and complicate responses to the extent that each may marshal important empirical evidence to support their claims. Since none of the perspectives can negate fully the validity of others, attempts to establish policies that move toward any one perspective and approach to schools' roles in offenses necessarily must address issues raised by other views. That is a critical point. Although research supports many positions, some positions might gain more support and suggest the need to move toward certain poles of a polarizing continuum. Thus, delineating possible directions for addressing schools' failures in addressing adolescents' offending first requires a review of guiding themes emerging from empirical assessments of adolescents' offenses.

NATURE OF OFFENSES DEEMED WORTH ADDRESSING

Research that responds to adolescents' offending typically must begin by addressing two related issues. The first issue involves defining the problem. Research on adolescent offending usually focuses on some forms of violence but generally continues to have difficulty determining what precisely constitutes violence or even problem behavior. As a result, analyses often conflate aggressive behavior, violence against property or individuals, delinquency, crime, misconduct, and vague concepts such as disruptive behavior or school disorder (cf., Loeber & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1998; Welsh, Greene, & Jenkins, 1999). The second issue involves the need to address policy focal concerns. Thus, once problems have been defined more clearly, research must pinpoint the types of problem behavior deserving attention in light of competing resources, goals, and existing knowledge about what to do about the offenses. These directly intertwined issues affect both negative and positive outcomes. Lack of differentiation helps call attention to actions and allows for more inclusive research into the nature of adolescent offending. On the other hand, failure to distinguish between types of problem behavior leads to expected problems: it obscures the nature of violence, hampers comparisons between research findings, and potentially renders intervention ineffective when efforts are not tailored to specific problems. These issues generally continue to be addressed in a haphazard fashion; and no commentator has yet to propose a definitive resolution.

Despite continued failures to focus concerns, a close look at existing commentaries and research reveals two dominant positions regarding the types of offenses needing urgent attention and careful response. By far the most popular school responses to adolescents' offending involves the need to prohibit or suppress any form of overt, physical violence or actions indicative of possible violence. This approach is exemplified well by several "zero tolerance" policies that have emerged to deal with criminal activity in schools (Bogos, 1997) and the general community (Tonry, 1999). These efforts seek to remove offending adolescents from schools and tend to take a very narrow view of violence as constituting, for example, assault, intimidation, use of weaponry and conduct that seriously disrupts the education process (Johnston, 1999). Another group of commentators urges the need to address low-level aggression, such as cursing, disruptiveness, bullying, and horseplay (Goldstein, Palumbo, Striepling, & Voutsinas, 1995; Wilson & Petersilia, 1995). In addition to these two dominant positions, several now highlight the need to reconsider the nature of violence so as to include more covert violence, such as harassing behaviors that go ignored (Stein, 1999; Rigby, 2000) or the manner school staff, in the name of discipline, physically and psychologically assault students and impose violence (Hyman & Snook, 1999).

Notwithstanding controversies regarding the forms of violence that should receive priority, no one suggests that schools should ignore overt physical violence and that school environments should not be free of guns and weapons that place the school community at risk. Efforts to address school violence through suppressing gang activity reflect well the need for aggressive responses. For example, although several criticize policy makers' excessive focus on gangs, it is important to realize that some surveys reveal that up to 30% of urban inner-city adolescents join gangs at some point (Howell & Hawkins, 1998). Even if the percentage were smaller, the numbers gain significance by what we know about the extent to which gangs influence criminal activity. While in gangs, adolescents commit serious and violent offenses at rates several times higher than do non-gang members; and while in gangs, adolescents commit offenses at higher rates than before joining or after leaving (Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, & Chard-Wierschem, 1993). Their violence clearly impacts school life. A multi-state study of youth gangs reveals that 70% admit their gangs assault students and more than 80% bring weapons to school (Parks, 1995). Alleviating violence in several school districts, then, necessarily involves suppressing gang membership and the violence such membership produces.

Despite the significance of overt violence, research findings do support commentators' claims regarding the significance of addressing more

subtle forms of offending behavior. Commentators concerned with covert behavior receive support from three recent lines of research. First, episodes of subtle violence and the environments they create actually may be more harmful in terms of the number of students they impact, largely because less severe violence tends to be less addressed. For example, psychological maltreatment in the schools remains an area pervasively ignored by researchers and policy makers (cf., Hyman & Snook, 1999; Levesque, 1998b). Thus, addressing extreme forms of violence actually fails to respond to the major forms of aggression and violence adolescents receive and perpetrate in the form, for example, of bullying and harassment by peers (Pellegrini, Bartini, & Brooks, 1999). Second, addressing the more extreme forms of violence requires addressing the more subtle and ignored forms of violence (Goldstein & Conoley, 1997). Research convincingly reveals how subtle forms of violence contribute to adolescents' criminal activity. For example, low-level school disruption clearly increases the likelihood of serious school violence (Heaviside, Rowand, Williams, & Farris, 1998). Likewise, subtle violence relates to adolescents' needs to join gangs. Adolescents who are particularly drawn to gangs include those who are failing in school, not involved in school activities, have few perceived opportunities and come from socially depriving conditions (Spergel, 1995). Third, reductions in violent crime do not necessarily impact perceptions of the school's level of safety. For example, research clearly reveals decreases in adolescents' more violent crimes, especially fatal homicide and assaults at school (Brener, Simon, Krug, & Lowry, 1999). However, research also fails to document parallel decreases in the percentage of students who feel too unsafe to go to school, being threatened or injured with a weapon on school property, or having property stolen or deliberately damaged at school (Brener, Simon, Krug, & Lowry, 1999). One of every ten students fears being shot or hurt by other students; and more than 20% avoids going to unsupervised areas (such as restrooms) to dodge victimization (Elliott, Hamburg, & Williams, 1998). Although subject to different interpretations, the figures do highlight the extent to which fear does seem to infiltrate places which historically have been viewed as safe havens. Perceptions of school safety, the actual safety of adolescents in schools, and the contribution of low-level aggression to overt violent behavior suggest a need to respond to all forms of violence.

CHARACTERISTICS OF ADOLESCENT OFFENDERS

Perceptions of violence worth addressing color images of adolescent offenders. In general, those who take a narrow, more overt view of violence suggest that adolescent offending involves essential character flaws.

<http://www.springer.com/978-0-306-46767-7>

Dangerous Adolescents, Model Adolescents
Shaping the Role and Promise of Education

Levesque, R.J.R.

2002, XIII, 258 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-0-306-46767-7