Learning to fear, fearing to learn

Measuring the extent of school violence

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Violence in South African schools impacts on children, their families, and society more generally. Much of what occurs in schools is learnt through exposure to violence at home and outside the school, necessitating an integrated approach to addressing school violence that moves beyond a limited focus on the school itself. The Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention National Schools Violence Study provides an indication of how bad school violence is in South Africa, and through the wide range of data collected, provides a framework for interventions that cuts across sectors and conventional school-based stakeholders.

Over the past three years, schools as sites of violence have received much attention. Articles appear almost weekly in various national and regional newspapers, reporting on yet another incident of violence or drug use at secondary and primary schools. Those seeking to reduce violence and crime increasingly look to schools as a key site for interventions in a long-term strategy to halt unacceptably high levels of particularly violent crime in South Africa. Through the National Department of Education (DoE) and a number of provincial departments of Education, the government is exploring various programmes to address the most visible and immediate evidence of lawlessness and anti-social behaviour within the school environment.[1]

Schools exist primarily to ensure that effective learning takes place, so that children are socially and intellectually prepared to become responsible adults who actively participate in, and make a positive contribution to, society and the economy. Right now, a number of factors stand in the way

of effective and efficient learning at schools. Not least of these is school-based crime and violence, which is a barrier to education and threatens to deprive and even deny learners their Constitutional right to education. A range of other factors present at many schools in South Africa also impact negatively on education, including the isolation of schools from the surrounding community, unhealthy school environments (including the psychological environment), and the absence of adequate support for learners.

The National Schools Violence Study (NSVS) undertaken by the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention in 2007/2008 revealed, for the first time, the true extent of violence and crime in South African schools (both public and private).[2] The study contextualised the school within the community and family environments, and highlighted the problem of drugs and alcohol within schools. The study sample was drawn to be representative of the population of both schools

and learners down to a provincial level. In total, 12 794 learners at primary and secondary schools were interviewed, representing 260 schools. In addition, 260 principals and 521 educators were interviewed. The sample at each school was stratified by grades, ensuring a spread of respondents across all grades, and learners were randomly selected within each grade.

The study found that in total, 15,3 per cent of learners between the grades of three and 12 had experienced some form of violence at school (see Figure 1) (Burton 2008 a, b). The range of violence covered was broad. Actual acts of physical violence, acts such as robbery (experienced by 4,6 per cent of learners), assault (5,8 per cent of learners), or sexual assault and rape (2,3 per cent), have profound effects on the development of children and their ability to form trusting relationships with their peers and adults. In addition, such violence often results in serious physical injuries. However, the non-physical forms of violence are often as serious, and can have equally detrimental effects on young people, despite often being viewed as less important. Being threatened with violence at school, a situation reported by 12,8 per cent of learners, results in a lack of concentration in the classroom, the inability to focus on school work, and also undermines the formation of healthy positive relationships and bonding with teachers and peers. Furthermore, threats of violence contribute to increased truancy and dropout rates, both risk factors for later delinquency, as the threatened child is too afraid to attend school.

Figure 1: Experiences of violence at school
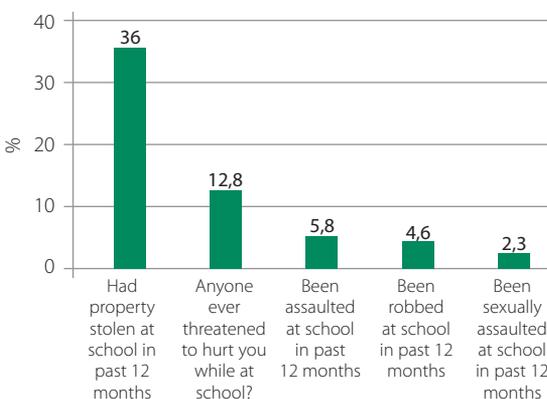
Source: National Schools Violence Study, CJCP 2007/8

Institutionalised forms of violence are also common. There is much debate in the public arena around the issue of corporal punishment. An act that essentially constitutes the crime of assault, it is still the option of punishment most commonly resorted to by educators, many of whom see no alternative, or have received little training on effective alternative ways of instilling discipline amongst their learners. The problem is exacerbated by large classes that are, at times, in excess of 50 learners (in some cases going to more than 100), and where many learners might be high or drunk. Yet the relationship between corporal punishment at school and other forms of violence is clearly reflected in the data emerging from the NSVS.

As the table below reflects, one in five (20,5 per cent) learners who had been physically punished (spanked or caned) at home also reported that they had experienced violence other than corporal punishment at home, and some form of violence at school (21,2 per cent). Of those who had experienced corporal punishment at school, 17,4 per cent had experienced some other form of violence at home, while more than one in five (22 per cent) had experienced some form of violence at school.

Table 1: Corporal punishment at home and school in relation to other experiences of violence*

		Experienced any other violence at home	Experienced any other violence at school
Corporal punishment at HOME	Yes	20,5%	21,2%
	No	13,0%	19,3%
Corporal punishment at SCHOOL	Yes	17,4%	22,0%
	No	14,2%	17,4%

*p<0.05

Source: National Schools Violence Study, CJCP 2007/8

Alcohol and drugs are not substances that are commonly associated with the school environment. Yet one in ten primary school learners, (i.e. children under the age of 14 years),

reported easy access to alcohol at school, with access increasing at secondary schools. The same percentage reported easy access to drugs at school. As unnatural as this association might be, and as dangerous the consequences, it is hardly surprising, given the access to both alcohol and drugs in communities surrounding schools. In total, South Africans spend more than R16 out of R100 on alcohol (Holtman 2008). In a recent qualitative study, communities surrounding schools were mapped, and it was not uncommon to find as many as four shebeens or taverns located in the immediate vicinity of both primary and secondary schools.[3] This lends substance to reports by learners in the NSVS of both children and educators going out in breaks or during classes to buy alcohol to bring back on to school property.

These incidents, and the generally unsafe nature of schools reflected above, undermine any sense of attachment that children might have had to school and learning. Yet this attachment has been shown to serve as an influential protective factor for young people, building resilience to anti-social and delinquent behaviour later in life. Empathy, self-esteem, self control, inter-personal skills, and morality and an appropriate sense of right and wrong have all been identified as key factors in building resilience to crime and violence through the teenage years and in later life, and all of these traits are moulded to a large degree in early childhood (Farrington & Welsh 2007 a, b). The school is the place where children spend up to two thirds of their waking hours, and as such is one of the two most influential environments on the development of these characteristics (United Nations 1990). In a society well known for its high levels of violence, violent school environments are particularly untenable.

DEALING WITH THE VIOLENCE

The most effective way to deal with the current situation is to initiate cross-cutting engagement between a range of stakeholders. The aim would be to deal concurrently with the school environment, violence in the community and in the home, and factors that facilitate violence such as access to alcohol, weapons and drugs. Interventions should seek to offer both short-term and medium term benefits, bearing in mind that long-term behavioural change is unlikely to be immediately evident.

Within schools

At a school level, situational prevention through environmental design is the most fundamental intervention. Secure fencing, monitored access and exits, adequate lighting, secure classrooms and well-maintained open spaces all contribute to a school environment that is easier to monitor for incidents of violence, and are likely to discourage acts of violence that often occur in particular unkempt locations. Within the classroom, educators need to take responsibility for being in the class at all times. The NSVS showed that the classroom is one of the most common sites for violence, and that teachers often spend as much of their time outside the classroom as they do inside, leaving learners unsupervised.

Similarly, open spaces such as playing fields should be monitored or supervised at all times. In this case the problem does not seem to be a shortage of teachers who can supervise (analysis of the learner:educator ratios drawn from the Department of Education EMIS system show that there are sufficient educators in all provinces to adequately monitor learners). Rather it would seem that educators need to be held accountable for what occurs in their classrooms through a performance management system, ensuring not only sound learning, but that they assume responsibility for supervising their classes and monitoring behaviour in the classroom.

In addition, educators should be trained on alternatives to corporal punishment. Such a process has already been embarked upon by the National Department through a partnership with Boys and Girls Town, a partnership that is also being rolled out nationally.

All of the above are simply a matter of effective classroom and school management. Effective management systems within schools will enable and enhance discipline and control, while facilitating a safer physical environment in which learners can spend their time. Minimum standards set by the National Department of Education need to be adhered to, and school principals and management teams must be held accountable for failure to comply with these minimum standards. As part of this, school authorities should be held accountable for dealing appropriately with unacceptable behaviour on the part of teachers, including the use of corporal punishment, arriving drunk or consuming alcohol during school hours, or encouraging learners to do the same.

Drawing on the data available in the NSVS, there is evidence that different provincial departments of Education vary substantially in their ability and commitment to effectively address school violence. It is also perhaps time to consider whether school safety is best located as part of the provincial departments' core competencies, or whether the cause might be better served under the single umbrella of the National Department.

Safety starts at home

In total, more than one in ten secondary school learners found it easy to get alcohol at school, while 11 per cent thought it was easy to get dagga. Three in ten secondary school learners, and more than one tenth (12,8 per cent) of primary school learners thought it was easy to get a knife at school. The alcohol, drugs and weapons that are so easily available to learners within the school environs, or immediately outside the school grounds, come from the homes and communities in which the learners spend the rest of their time. Similarly, the behaviour, attitudes and examples of parents, caregivers, and other adults in the home and community all have a profound impact on learners' academic development and performance, their social attitudes, behaviour, and responses within school.

The NSVS highlights the linkages between school experiences and learners' homes and

neighbourhood environments. Between ten per cent and 15 per cent of learners have family members who have used illegal drugs in the past year. Between ten and 13 per cent have caregivers who have been in jail, while almost one in five learners have siblings who have been, or currently are, in jail. Exposure to violence as well as personal experiences of violence are as common in the home and community as at school, with one tenth of primary school learners having been assaulted at home, and one in ten secondary school learners having been robbed at home.

The study shows that all of these factors are significant in predicting learners' experiences of violence at school. More than one third of those learners in both primary and secondary schools who have been exposed to violence at home have been victims of violence at school, as opposed to less than one fifth of learners who had not been exposed to violence in the home. Similarly, one in three (31 per cent) of learners who had been victims of violence within the home experienced violence at school, opposed to 14,2 per cent of learners who had not experienced direct violent victimisation at home. This relationship shows not only that young people are surrounded by violence in all their spheres of life, but also suggests a complex relationship between victimisation in different environments, with a vulnerability to victimisation common within a range of different environments.

These findings suggest the need for a range of urgent, targeted, well-planned and coordinated responses from the Department of Social Development (DSD), as well as a more limited role for the South African Police Service (SAPS). The role of DSD is critical in addressing violence in schools, and in the long term the failure of this department to involve itself will undermine any meaningful change, both within and outside schools. It is beyond the scope or mandate of the DoE to offer interventions within the home, or to address violence outside schools.

The levels of violence within the home also emphasise the importance of a social crime prevention approach. The SAPS argues that the

majority of violent crime (assault and sexual assault/rape) is committed within the home, beyond the reach of conventional policing. While the NSVS data do not provide detailed analysis of violence within the home, or how it relates to other crimes outside of the home, the data provide sufficient evidence of the relationship between school violence and exposure to and experience of violence within the home. These forms of violence can only be adequately addressed by directly targeting the social correlates of crime, for example (but not limited to) high levels of gender and economic inequality, poverty, unemployment, access to services such as housing, health and welfare, as well as environmental design.

Data from previous youth and child studies show that for many children violence has become normalised – it is a way of life, and the means through which any conflict is resolved (Leoschut & Burton 2006; Burton 2007). This has a multitude of implications for young people and is likely to impact negatively on their mental well-being, the development of healthy peer and authority relationships, and on their ability to resolve conflict in a positive manner. Most worryingly, such exposure to violence at a young age has also been shown to increase the likelihood of later criminal and violent behaviour (Farrington & Welsh 2007).

The SAPS and local government also have an essential role to play in limiting access to alcohol and drugs in and around the school environment. A number of school principals participating in the NSVS recounted failed attempts to engage with local police in dealing with drug dealers selling wares around the perimeter of the school premises. Those schools displaying the lowest problems of both drug and alcohol use at or related to school were significantly also those that reported the most positive relationships with local police officers. The development of an effective relationship where police work with particular schools is relatively cost- and resource-free, and can reap substantial benefits in making schools safer for learners. Local government, for its part, can drive the cleaning and maintenance of public spaces around the school, and can engage the

police in dealing with illegal alcohol and all drug outlets around the school.

THE SPACE TO SPEAK

The NSVS shows that, while information on how to protect oneself and where to report violence is generally available, the majority of learners who fall victim to violence still do not report it. This is not unique to young people – it is a common occurrence in South Africa that much crime goes unreported, for a range of reasons including lack of confidence in the police, a sense of relative unimportance of the act, apathy, or fear of retribution (when the offender is known). Whether the failure to report acts of violence in schools can be attributed to fear, a lack of trust in the authorities, or a lack of trust that anything can or will be done, it nonetheless undermines both the monitoring of incidents, as well as trends and measures to deal effectively with violence in schools. Young people need to be encouraged to establish forums within schools where they learn to give voice to, and take responsibility for, the issues that affect them. Mechanisms to encourage anonymous reporting and to ensure feedback to the learners can be established at school with no additional resources. Feedback on how complaints have been dealt with is as important as the reporting itself, as learners need to be made aware that actions are taken against those engaging in violence.

There is a strong correlation between inactivity and victimisation and the perpetration of violence. Planned, coordinated and, most importantly, consistent extra-mural activities are needed at all schools to involve learners in positive activities and reduce their exposure to gangs and violence or criminal opportunities. Such activities could focus on sport, or drama, or other cultural events and activities. It is important that learners are involved in designing appropriate activities if they are to participate in those activities. It is also essential that these activities are available throughout the school year, and over the course of a learners' schooling, rather than targeted at one set of school holidays or grades. Ideally, such activities can be run by the school

with the support of the department, but there are a number of examples available where partnerships with NGOs and other local organisations have led to ongoing activities for learners.

DIFFERENT SCHOOLS NEED DIFFERENT STRATEGIES

The basic infrastructure and resources available to schools differ substantively across South Africa. A lack of basic resources, like a functioning school governing body, trained teachers and support structures, for instance a school safety committee or a provincial Safer Schools programme, makes universal implementation of school safety programmes or interventions unlikely. This means that a national linear approach to wider implementation of school safety programmes is not likely to succeed. Rather, a staggered and incremental approach is required – an approach that acknowledges the necessity of a basic resource level and works to achieve that as the foundation of a safe school.

Given the differing resource levels of schools across and within the provinces, the implementation of school safety programmes should be based on a framework for incremental rollout that consists of:

- A detailed assessment of the basic resource requirements
- The categorisation of schools in each of the clusters according to their resource levels
- The identification of their capacity and entry for implementation of project interventions
- The engagement of appropriate support structures and potential partners such as the Safer Schools programme or Hlayiseka School Safety project to support implementation
- The formulation of district and school-specific safety plans, based on the individual needs, available resources, and priorities of each school
- Detailed monitoring of implementation so as to provide appropriate support to the schools as the required resources are built and more of the component is implemented

While unlikely to deal with the issue of school violence in its entirety, the above steps, which involve a range of government departments and stakeholders, will achieve substantial benefits in terms of making schools safer for learners. They will also contribute to making communities as a whole safer as learners are able to concentrate on their studies and develop healthy, positive networks and relationships with their peers and adults, learning pro-social behaviours that will inform later development and interaction with others as they reach adulthood.

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ENDNOTES

1 The best example of this is the CJCP Hlayiseka School Safety Toolkit, a programme that has been rolled out in all nine provinces by the National Department of Education, as well as expanded in some provinces through the provincial departments in partnership with provincial departments of Community Safety.
2 The primary school component of the study was undertaken in partnership with the Soul City Institute for Health and Development Communication.
3 Mapping exercise undertaken as part of the CJCP Youth Resiliency Study, publication forthcoming.