

FRONT LINERS

The Role of School Nurses in Preventing School Violence



The Columbine High School shootings in 1999 jolted the nation into the realization that a new, horrifying, and potentially deadly threat existed in our schools. Today, as incidents of youth violence continue to make headlines around the country and high-profile school shootings provoke legitimate fears and concerns, schools are implementing new strategies to enhance safety while addressing school violence.

By definition, school violence is any violence that takes place in a school setting, whether on school property, on the way to or from school, and at school trips and events. Despite CDC reports that youth violence has actually decreased over the past 10 years, the combination of the COVID pandemic's effects on mental health, institutional distrust, and the contentious climate of society, violence happening in the broader community is, unfortunately, permeating into schools. With an estimated 246 million children experiencing school violence each year, and with every incident causing trauma, psychological effects, even physical injury, disability, or death, the need for schools to ensure a safe and healthy learning environment is a top priority.

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Regarding school safety programs and risk reduction measures impacting school violence, the evidence for what works is considerably limited. Schools can install a variety of physical safeguards against direct threats (ie, metal detectors, limited access points, ID systems, and school resource officers). For many schools however, resources for equipment or personnel may be limited, so a focus on preventative safeguards such as establishing positive school climates, targeting bullying behavior, and implementing an emergency preparedness plan are steps schools can take to provide students a safe place to learn, grow, and thrive.

Research continues to suggest preventative approaches in schools including: social-emotional learning programs

or curricula about violence, examining and shifting perspectives/feelings about violence, can reduce aggressive behavior and other actions associated with youth violence. Additionally, fostering supportive relationships with school professionals who are trained and prepared to facilitate conversations and recognize potential threats, dramatically reduces a student's risk for engaging in violent behaviors.

School nurses play an integral role in the development, utilization, and preservation of school safety programs addressing school violence. The National Association of School Nurses states, *“School nurses serve on the front line and are readily able to identify potential violence and intervene to diminish the effects of violence on both school children as individuals and populations in schools and the community.”* School nurses are also prepared to respond to emergencies involving violence and ensure emergency plans are in place with appropriate supplies at the ready. While rates of school violence are decreasing and school shootings remain rare, the impact any violent occurrence makes on students, families, school staff, and the entire community demands that schools implement prevention strategies and emergency response protocols that protect and maintain safe and healthy school environments.



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