

**SCHOOL VIOLENCE: THE BI-DIRECTIONAL
CONFLICT FLOW BETWEEN NEIGHBORHOOD AND
SCHOOL***

Pedro Mateu-Gelabert, Ph.D.
Vera Institute of Justice, Inc.

July 2000

This paper was written in part while the author was a post-doctoral fellow at the Behavioral Sciences Training in Drug Abuse Research Program, sponsored by the Medical and Health Research Association of New York City, Inc. (MHRA) and the National Development and Research Institutes, Inc. (NDRI) with funding from the National Institute of Drug Abuse (5T32 DA07233-09).

Please direct correspondence to Dr. Pedro Mateu-Gelabert, Vera Institute of Justice, 233 Broadway, 12th floor, New York, N.Y. 10279. The points of view and opinions in this paper do not necessarily represent the official positions of the United States Government, MHRA or NDRI.

ABSTRACT

School Violence: The Bi-Directional Conflict Flow between Neighborhood and School

In this paper the author explores the interrelationship between school and neighborhood violence through ethnographic data collected over two years in a New York City middle school. The author presents a bi-directional flow of adolescent conflict by analyzing incidents taking place outside the school that initially originated in the school setting and other incidents of conflict occurring in school that initiated in the surrounding neighborhood. The research shows the effect of school and neighborhood structures on adolescent violence, concluding that school violence is clearly contextual. Adolescents do not choose their peers in a vacuum, but instead in their selection of peers they mirror the organizational settings of both their school and neighborhood. This paper also presents some successful measures taken by the school staff to stop the conflict flow by halting street codes of behavior within the school setting and helping the students to peacefully solve their disputes.

INTRODUCTION

The issue of school violence has become a theme of great importance on the national agenda and in the eyes of many parents, worried for their children's safety. National surveys point to the severity of the problem of school violence nation-wide (Bastian and Taylor 1991; Gottfredson and Gottfredson 1985; Maguire and Pastore 1996; National Institute of Education 1978; Nolin, Davies, and Chandler 1995). Other studies indicate a increase in the severity of the incidents taking place on school grounds due to the use of guns to solve disputes (National School Boards Association 1993), and an larger number of students who carry guns for protection (Sheley, McGee, and Wright 1995).

The most recent national report, *Indicators of School Crime and Safety 1998*, published by the National Center for Education Statistics in conjunction with the Bureau of Justice Statistics concludes:

The amount of crime committed in the nation's schools continues to be a concern. However, students are exposed and vulnerable to crime away from as well as at school. In fact, life away from school may be more dangerous for some students than life at school (p. 2).

Between 1989 and 1995, there were increases in the percentages of students feeling unsafe while they were at school and while they were going to and from school. In 1989, 6 percent of students ages 12 through 19 sometimes or most of the time feared they were going to be attacked or harmed at school, while in 1995 this percentage rose to 9 percent. Between these years, the percentage of students fearing they would be attacked while traveling to and from school rose from 4 percent to 7 percent (p. 30).

Implicit in both of these statements is that there is a clear distinction between threats and incidents that occur in school and those that do not. This distinction, however, may be an artificial one. Through ethnographic data collected over two years in a New York inner city neighborhood, I will argue that many incidents taking place outside the school, in actuality, originated in school, while many incidents occurring in the school, in fact, originated in the neighborhood and are not school related.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Most researchers explain variability of school violence as a function of neighborhood and/or school characteristics. Social disorganization theory explains neighborhood violence as a byproduct of neighborhood instability caused by structural factors: low socio-economic status, ethnic heterogeneity and high residential mobility (Shaw and McKay 1942; Sampson and Lauritsen 1994). In an unstable neighborhood the community has weak social control over its members, which leads to a higher degree of violence. Factors associated with violence are poverty (Reiss and Roth 1993), family disruption, urbanization and anonymity (Sampson and

Groves 1989).

Although social disorganization theory is a structural explanation in nature, it points to the ecological segregation of those communities which give rise to different cultural organizations (Sampson 1997). Structurally disorganized communities engender the emergence of subcultures that have a higher tolerance for crime (Suttles 1968; Anderson 1990; Bourgois 1989). Social isolation in these communities reinforces the different values of the subcultures, and facilitates the transmission of their modes of behavior (Sampson and Wilson 1995).

School violence literature describes violence in schools as dependent on neighborhood characteristics as well as the school environment (Anderson 1998; Gottfredson and Gottfredson 1985; Hellman and Beaton 1986; Ringwalt et. al. 1992; Sheley et al. 1995). School structural characteristics predictive of disorder included size (large school), staffing (high student/teacher ratio), and resources (low operating budgets for learning materials) (Welsh, Greene, and Jenkins 1999 citing Duke 1989 and Gottfredson and Gottfredson 1985). Schools with the worst disciplinary problems were those with ambiguous rules or inconsistently enforced rules and inactive administration (Gottfredson 1989). Despite this consistency in the causes behind school violence, the emphasis diverges. On the one hand, some authors report that school violence is more correlated with neighborhood characteristics than with school characteristics. This conclusion would indicate that schools do not generate violence as much as they reflect locations where violence permeates. Conflict spawned outside the institution is enacted within its walls (Gottfredson and Gottfredson 1985; Pearson, and Toby 1991; Sheley et al. 1995). In contrast, Hellman and Beaton (1986) indicate that school characteristics are the overriding factor in predicting school violence especially for middle schools. Anderson (1998) indicates that proactive preventive measures taken by school staff can ameliorate students' victimization. Yet a third variation attributes individual characteristics as the primary cause of school violence (Welsh et al. 1999). They report that school and community have a relatively minor effect on explaining school disorder.

A possible way to reconcile the different theories of school violence is to explore the link between school and community and the processes through which this interrelationship takes place. As Welsh and colleagues (1999) indicate, the exact chain of causality between violence in schools and the surrounding community "is rarely articulated or explored." The literature hints at the existence of a bi-directional flow of violence between schools and neighborhoods but has not yet described the process by which this phenomenon takes place. This paper will explore some of the social processes that link school and community conflict and violence. It presents violence as a by-product of the bi-directional conflict flow between a school and its neighborhood. The concept of "conflict" will help to clarify the complex relationship between violence in schools and violence in neighborhoods.

Conflict involves a difference in goals and interests between two or more people. By using this definition, two aspects of conflict are emphasized: (1) it is a state of unresolved tension due to opposition; and (2) it is a malleable state that has not reached full-blown

(physical) violence. A corollary of this definition is that violence is not a necessary outcome of conflict. Peaceful resolution is, indeed, another possible outcome. More common is avoidance, evasion, or confrontation between parties. This definition allows us to understand how both neighborhood and school characteristics mediate between conflict and violence. School and neighborhood social context often defines what the goals and interests of the individuals are as well as the ways and means by which they resolve them. In other words, in those neighborhoods where conflict is often solved through physical confrontation, violence is a more probable outcome. In the same fashion, those schools where there is a weaker control over students' behavior, the violent outcome is more likely to be found. Schools with fewer violent incidents are those that are able to manage or induce students to resolve conflict through alternatives other than violence.

THE STUDY

The data presented in this paper were collected as part of a larger longitudinal and ethnographic study of adolescent violence sponsored by the Vera Institute of Justice under the direction of Dr. Mercer Sullivan. As part of this study, the author began participant observation in a junior high school in a predominantly immigrant neighborhood of New York City. For three years, I tracked and documented the social context of development of 25 students beginning 7th grade and ending with the completion of their first year of high school. In addition to participant observation of the focal teens interacting in their school and neighborhood, each of the students and their parents were interviewed a minimum of once annually for the duration of the study. In addition the author spent many hours observing the entire school and noted conflict situations and violent incidents in the rest of the student population, in the school and the neighborhood. The findings presented here rely mainly on the field observations and interviews done during the two first years of fieldwork while the student sample were enrolled in seventh and eighth grade.

The Use of Qualitative Methods

Qualitative methods allow the capture of both the social context and the social construction of meaning through the use of observation and in-depth interviews. The use of a qualitative approach provided a window into the students' rationale for engaging or not engaging in violent behavior. This methodology gives a voice to the subjects of investigation and provided a fuller understanding of how and where conflict originated and where it occurred.

All field notes and interviews were summarized and inputted into a computer program especially suited for the analysis of qualitative data. For this study a total of 2,730 summaries of wave 1 and 2 of interviews and 593 summaries of field notes were used. All this data was collected in two years from 1995 to 1997.

In order to determine the number of conflicts recorded during the two years of field observations the field note summaries that referred to a conflict were identified. As a result 195

summaries were coded as referring to a conflict. These resulting 195 conflicts were coded identifying where the conflict originated (either in school or in the neighborhood) and where it took place (either school or neighborhood). Four codes were used:

- a) School-Neighborhood. To indicate conflict originated in the school and occurred in the neighborhood. An example of this type of conflict extracted from the summaries is as follows: “Leidi said that all started in gym. Nancy, the student with whom she fought, took her friend’s book-bag and jacket. Leidi asked Nancy why she was taking her friend’s stuff. Nancy replied that it was none of Leidi’s business. Leidi wanted to fight Nancy. Nancy did not want to fight in the school. They decided to settle it at three o’clock.”
- b) Neighborhood-School. Conflict initiated in the neighborhood and took place in school. An example of a summary identified with this code is: “The school safety officers told me that a student had a fight. There were rumors that the Redwood boys were out to get him because he had fought with one of their own. As a preventive measure the guards sent this student home twenty minutes before dismissal.”
- c) School-school. Conflict that initiated and carried on in school. An example of this conflict type is: “Carlos has been transferred from academy to academy and keeps having problems. Today he was suspended because he pushed Willie.”
- d) Neighborhood-Neighborhood. Conflict that occurred and was initiated in the neighborhood. For example a summary coded with these label is: “Alberto tells me about a fight he had playing basketball in his block. A boy bit him in his face.”

In addition, all conflicts were labeled with one or more of the following codes in order to record the reason(s) behind the conflict.

Proto-gang: Conflict caused by block gangs, gangs, or temporary gangs or conflicts in which the students rely on proto-gangs or gangs as a means to resolve conflict.

Namecalling: Conflict in which students insult each other. Insults included tomboy, pato (gay), bitch, chicken, chicken-head, etc.

Playfight: Conflict in which at least one of students punched, pushed and/or kicked.

Stealing: Incident in which money or clothing was taken.

Weapon: Incident in which a box cutter, knife or gun were carried.

Jump: Conflict in which one student attacked or threatened to attack another with the help of three or more friends.

Floors/class: Conflict in which the students’ floor and/or class were referred to as the cause of conflict.

Adult: Conflict between a student and an adult. (e.g. student hit teacher or school safety officer)

Staged fight: Conflict that occurred among peers that gather for the purpose witnessing the fight. The conflict was triggered and/or organized by the mediation of a third party.

Bullying: Conflict in which one of the students is considered a bully.

Dislike: Conflict in which student expressed the dislike for the other.

Labeled as Hicks: Conflict in which one of the parties was labeled “hick.”

About boys/girls: Conflict about seeing or hearing rumors about the contender “stealing boyfriend/girlfriend” or saying “X goes out/kissed/likes Y.”

Threat: Conflict in which one contender threatened the other with physical violence

Sexual: Conflict sexual in nature

Clothing: Conflict in which style of dressing is mocked.

Defending friend(s): Conflict in which one contender is involved because he/she defends friends or relatives.

Sports: Conflict as a result of playing sports.

Drugs: Conflict in which drugs were involved

Analyzing the data according to different themes, resulted in a conceptual construct that helped understand the flow of conflict between school and neighborhood and the reasons behind this conflict.

Sample Selection

In 1995, I selected a sample of 25 seventh graders reflecting the make-up of the student body. The following attributes were considered:

- a) Gender: Similar number of boys and girls.
- b) Academic ability: The students selected in the sample represented a wide array of academic abilities. Some of them were at the top of their class while others had academic difficulties. School personnel considered the rest of the sample to be average.
- c) Language and Immigration: At least one third of the sample attended bilingual education classes (31% of the students in the school were in bilingual classes). Some of them were considered immigrants (less than three years in the United States).
- d) Troubled students: In order to ensure that there was a significant number of students considered “trouble makers,” I recruited some students assigned to special programs for those who were constantly in trouble academically and/or due to their behavior.

The students selected were given consent forms for themselves and for their parents. The consent form explained what was expected of the participants and that the author would be observing the students regularly in and around the school and speaking with their teachers.

Table I lists the some of the sample’s characteristics. There were 15 boys and 20 girls,

most of Dominican descent. All the students were either first or second generation immigrants. Fourteen students were first generation, born in the U.S. with immigrant parents, and 11 were born outside the U.S. in the Dominican Republic.

The Neighborhood: El Dorado

El Dorado, the code name for the neighborhood where the students live is located in an immigrant neighborhood in New York City. Historically this neighborhood has been the first stop in the U.S. for many immigrants. The net surplus of new immigrants, the majority of them from the Dominican Republic, has transformed the physiognomy of the neighborhood: A great number of Dominican restaurants dot the area, Spanish is the language spoken in all of the stores and Dominican music (Merengue and Bachata) can be heard from loud speakers outside of the many bodegas that supply the neighborhood.

Despite a renewed new business vitality brought by the influx of newcomers, the area has many social problems: Twenty-five percent of the residents live below the poverty line and the unemployment rate is 11 percent. In addition, 11 percent of the population has to rely on public assistance and 24 percent receive Medicaid. The location of the neighborhood next to main routes of communication has facilitated the nourishment of a major drug market that provides supplies of cocaine and heroin to drug sellers around the New York metropolitan area.

Drugs are a serious problem in the area. All of the students are aware that there are many drug sellers in their neighborhood. They often refer to drug dealers as “tigres” [tigers] who can always be found “on the corners” of El Dorado’s blocks. A common word of advice from parents to their children is to avoid the people on the corners and if they spot trouble to go the other way. Other residents, however, see drugs as something that only affects those involved in the buying and selling.

Mario, one long time neighborhood resident, gave his opinion about the neighborhood and the problems with drugs: “They don’t waste their time stealing. Here one can wear a gold chain and they don’t take it from you. They are paying attention to their business. Their business gives them more benefits. The shooting and [drug] wars go on between them.”

Somehow, ironically even, the statistics seem to confirm Mario’s intuition. While the neighborhood has the highest homicide rate in New York City, in all other crime categories, El Dorado falls below average (Garfield and Abramson 1994). Another consequence of the heavy drug trade is the social division of the neighborhood into blocks. The drug business generates division among blocks in which drug dealers define as their “turf” or sales area.

The school: La Escuelita

La Escuelita, code name for the junior high school where the sample attended the 7th and 8th grades, opened its doors in 1992 in a brand new building. The five-floor building is located next to a park. It is spacious and full of light. Upon entering the school, one has the impression of

walking into a very welcoming and warm place. La Escuelita, at the time of the study, had an enrollment of 1,450 students.

La Escuelita is run in partnership between a not-for-profit organization that we will call KAS and the NYC Board of Education. The philosophy behind this partnership is to build a community school where the students can receive both an education and any other services that they require. In a booklet published by KAS, they explain their concept of a community school:

The community school concept turns public schools into full-service community centers that are open all day, all week, year-round, with on-site health counseling, child care, extended-day programs, tutoring, adult education, parent workshops, cultural programs and summer camp.

As a result of this partnership both the principal and the on-site director of KAS run the school. The principal is responsible for managing the regular school day activities (e.g., teaching staff, classes, curriculum, etc.), where as the KAS Director runs the afterschool program and extracurricular activities (e.g., summer camp). There is a strong collaboration between both parties. The extra money that this partnership generates translates into many extra resources that would otherwise be unavailable: an in-house medical clinic, a dentist, an optometry clinic, a family room, an afterschool program and full time social workers. I have witnessed many times how this partnership allows for better service to the students.

The school is divided into five academies, each emphasizing a theme of study and located in different floors: expressive arts academy (2nd Floor), communications and technology academy (3rd Floor), ethics and law academy (3rd Floor), community service academy (4th Floor) and business studies academy (5th Floor). The academies are run like mini-schools within the school. Each one has its own director and a wide range of independence in educational programming.

The students are divided into grades within the academies and attend either the monolingual or bilingual program. The bilingual program has classes in Spanish as well as in English as a Second Language (ESL). There is no tracking in the school. At the time of the research forty-three students attended special education classes and one third (31%) of the students attended bilingual education classes. It is also important to note that among the student body there were at least 25% who were considered immigrants (less than three years in the United States). The majority of the students in the school are of Latino origin, reflecting the large influx of Dominican immigrants into the neighborhood in recent years.

The school and KAS maintain a very active and popular afterschool program that runs until six o'clock. This program includes physical education, computer, sports and academic classes given by some of the same teachers who teach in the morning. In the evening the building is used as a community center for educational and recreational activities for teenagers and adults.

La Escuelita has a very active parents association and those members most active can be seen in the school on a regular basis. Most members are women. The President of the parents

association ran for office in a school board election during the years of fieldwork. The parents work in the school as volunteers, organize events in the school, and are actively involved in many activities. KAS has a full-time employee in La Escuelita whose sole function is to develop parent involvement and activities for parents in the school.

CONFLICT FLOW

The results presented in table II indicate that 39 percent of the recorded incidents have a delayed outcome, that is the outcome of the conflict took place later in time and in a place other than where it originated: 18 percent of incidents were initiated in school and played out in the neighborhood and 21 percent of incidents played out in the school were initiated in the neighborhood. These numbers point to an interrelation between school and neighborhood violence. This interrelation is further supported by table III which presents the reasons behind the incidents. The most prevalent reason behind school conflict is proto-gangs (17 % of all coded incidents).

In order to further understand these results it is necessary to present how the adolescent violence is organized at the neighborhood level. The following section presents such organization and how it is understood by students. The quotes from this section have been extracted from wave one and wave two interview with the student sample while they were in 7th and 8th grade and from the field notes.

Social Organization of Adolescent Conflict in the Neighborhood

Our neighborhood is very related to why fights start. In our community you have to be alert of who is around you. [...] You have to fight for your respect; people would push you around to find out if you are a chicken.

Gladys –8th Grader-

In the neighborhood, groups of youth have “hang out areas” that tend to overlap with the turf-areas of the highly developed drug markets. These groupings may be considered as “proto-gangs” because they are not the named, ritualized kinds of groups generally thought of as gangs, yet often have gang-like behaviors. The proto-gangs are not directly employed by drug traffickers but rather serve as an overlapping source of potential violence in this area. These proto-gangs pose a significant risk factor for all of the residents in the area, especially the adolescents.

The neighborhood proto-gangs are typically based within street blocks. This division often forces the children to define their loyalties. Many students identify themselves as belonging to a block. They “represent” the block, usually where their house is located. Arelis described representing as an automatic obligation to residence. “If you live on a block you have to represent it. You go to your block and you say, like I got beef, and they come. That means

represent you.” Representing provides a strong sense of security that if a conflict occurs, students are confident they will have “back-up,” or people to “watch their backs” and who are referred to as “props.”

In the following excerpt, Saida describes conflict situation (“beef”) and remarks on her continual reliance on friends from her block for safety. In this excerpt, the perception of having “props” is a major factor for the adolescents as they manage their “beefs.”

SAIDA: Trouble. When you have a beef with another girl, or another boy, right. They gang your block up. Like where they live they go with back up, it's called back up.

Where you have back up and you letting them know you don't have back up, they jump you. And if you don't have any back up you can't do anything about it.

INT.: So, do you have back up?

SAIDA: Yes, I do on my block. [...] Because like if you really into the block and everybody like you and stuff, they don't like when people hit you. And a kid, that person, like I am not the type of girl that my block like that, like if that person gets their block, I don't get my block, because I am not getting jumped by their block. I have got to get my block, too. Something like that.

For Saida and many other sample members people from their block are considered a safety net and resource in a conflict/potentially violent situation. In the same interview she stated: “In order to stay safe you should be with people from your block. Don’t be alone on the street.” In the following excerpt, Teresa pointed to a further implication of the rigid social frontiers between blocks. People from other blocks become a safety threat, a potential source of trouble. Throughout this interview Teresa described her neighborhood as calm and peaceful. It was clear that Teresa referred to her block as her neighborhood.

INT.: Okay. When do you worry about your safety?

TERESA: When I am outside of my block.

INT.: Why?

TERESA: Because there are people that I don't know, and there is people that I know that don't like me. So, it's a problem.

These geographical and social perceptions of danger have real consequences for the mobility of the teen in her immediate surroundings. Teresa reinforces this idea further:

INT.: ... Are there any places that you go even though you know they are dangerous?

TERESA: Sometimes, but it has to be a really good reason. I don't come out of my block.

From the students’ perspective, “representing” carries the benefit of enabling them to navigate the streets safely since it serves as a deterrent to being picked on or victimized by others. Ivan refers convincingly to the deterrent aspect of props: “ They know not to mess with

me, because if they do.... my props..."

Despite the fact that the students perceive representing as a safety resource, the strong identification with one's block may often be a source of conflict. When two blocks "have beef," the teens residents who belong to each one of the "gang-blocks" automatically have "beef" with one another. Students will often avoid certain streets because their block has an on-going conflict with the "gang-block" of that particular street." On one occasion, after an interview, the student, Ali, and I left the school together. Ali didn't want to walk down Redwood St., a street next to the school, because "Redwood had beef with his block." Rico reported similar problems and his need to avoid the Graytown area [public housing] because there was an on going conflict between Graytown and Cost, Rico's block. After the many interviews, it became apparent that being aware of on-going block beefs is a good safety strategy since not knowing about "block-beefs" can increase the likelihood of becoming a target.

A conflict between blocks can often escalate into severe violence and people may resort to using weapons. During her first interview, Saida described the following block incident in which people from her block, including her brother, "got guns."

A guy name Gerard he started hitting one of our little kids on the block. He started hitting him and his brother, he took ... and they were going to hit him, but the other block pulled out a gun on him. So, we all ran. But then we met and then we, they all got guns. Our block and their block. So, they got together, but they didn't do it because this lady had already called the cops and the cops were there.

Conflicts between block groups can have long histories. Often the kids most aware of what is happening on the streets can narrate the tales leading up to the latest beef. In the following excerpt Sofia does so in a very colorful way:

SOFIA: Cost [Cost Street] has a lot of problems with Redwood [Redwood Street]. 'Cause Redwood likes to disrespect a lot. Redwood doesn't, they jump, alright, Cost, Redwood, Redwood jumped a guy from Cost. The guy told Cost. Cost got pissed. Now Cost said Redwood and I are enemies. Cost and Clermont [Clermont Street] I think they made up, they're friends now. They made a friendship.

INT.: And who decides this, I mean who -- ?

SOFIA: They do, the whole group.

INT.: The whole group.

SOFIA: The whole block. If one goes down it's all of them.

Many students define their friends and enemies as a function of the block they belong. Such strong identification with a block carries extreme loyalties. The block is often referred to as family because you can appeal to block members for help when in trouble. Block members are perceived as a resource for help and to maintain safety. In the interviews, numerous stories point to relationships between personal or individual conflict, the immediate connection to blocks, and

the progressive severity of hitting and retaliation.

The block groups are in conflict more often than not. The conflict between blocks is ever changing, not static. Often blocks establish alliances to fight more powerful blocks. Block groups fight for respect. Respect is the quintessential value in block interchange. Threats of and use of physical force is one of the currencies with which “respect” is achieved. Some students act in parallel way in their personal relationships, they fight to gain or keep respect.

The conflict between block groups creates the need for back up. If an adolescent from the block has trouble with a person from another block, and has a big group of friends (from the block group) willing to stand up for him/her, the opponent must also bring “his/her people” in order to keep the fight on equal term. This need for back up has become part of the students’ lives. When Saida was in the 7th grade, she was making arrangements to meet afterschool with a friend. She told me she always goes home with somebody else. Why, I asked, thinking that her answer would make reference to the pleasure of her friend’s company. “So you get backup”, Saida responded. “Just in case somebody jumps you, you have somebody to back you up.”

The ongoing rivalry in the neighborhood imbeds most students, especially in those more involved with “block life,” with a sense that no place is safe. One needs to be constantly on guard. One student who was deeply involved in block gangs explained that he walks against the wall so if a group of people want to jump him, “he would have his back covered.” This sense of being in constant danger is exacerbated by the street ethos. Carrying weapons constitutes the extreme of the street ethos. While carrying weapons gives teens a sense of security (or self-protection) against the threat from other blocks, showing weapons is perceived as an immediate way to get respect and prove that you are not afraid to stand up for or defend yourself.

The division of the neighborhood into block groups and the social rules that operate within the neighborhood and across blocks constantly influences the daily lives of all of students. I cannot imagine a better way to document the existence of unwritten rules than by presenting Ali’s conscious transgression and breaking of them as he talks about his good friend Ario.

ALI: Oh, we not suppose to be friends, me and Ario.

INT.: No? Why not?

ALI: Because we are from different blocks.

Conflict from Neighborhood to School

The social organization of El Dorado described in the previous section often influences the conflict that occurs in the school. Fifty one percent of incidents initiated in the neighborhood and carried on into the school were related to proto-gangs. While kids can avoid particular blocks in the neighborhood, they all attend the same school, sit in the same classrooms and eat in the same cafeteria. [The school organizational structure ignores block groupings.] Students continue to “represent” their block, but encounter students of an opposing block often while in school. If an encounter between opposing block members occurs while in the school, the individuals may decide to fight as a way to “get justice” for on-going grievances. One of the most dramatic

examples of this happened during the first year of field observations. Zorba, a student attending the after school teen program, was confronted by some of the Redwood boys on his way to the gym. One of the Redwood boys approached Zorba, saying, "I heard you have a beef with my block." Zorba tried to run but he was tripped by one of them. Once on the floor, five or six Redwood boys started hitting and kicking him. His face was badly hurt and he was sent to the emergency room.

Another student, Jerome, once found a bicycle frame on Redwood Street and took it. Some students from Redwood threatened Jerome demanded money as restitution for taking a frame found on their block. Jerome, worried about his safety, alerted a school safety officer (SSO). The SSO confronted one of Redwood Boys. He explained to the SSO that he was "just doing a favor for a kid on his block."

Belonging to a "block gang" is used by the students as a source of pride and, at times, as a threat to their fellow students. When students engage in a playfight the conflict turns sour, and parties threatens to bring "their people" from the block "to get" the other student.

While majority of the students manage to navigate this world of "block gangs," many had difficulty avoiding it. Jorge was unable to adapt and had many difficulties from the moment he began attending La Escuelita. Jorge's problems became exacerbated in 7th grade. Four students jumped him on the stairs. Jorge explained with disdain, that Jordi, one of his attackers, had asked him which block he came from before the assault so Jordi would know how many people Jorge could rely on. Jorge confessed his unawareness of block life, block gangs, and street ethos. "I only live on my block," he explained. Jorge was afraid that Jordi would pick a fight with him again. His concern and fear are reflected in Jorge's question to one of the SSOs: What if they have weapons?

One incident took place in front of the school and several members of the sample group witnessed it. What follows is a description of the event, taken from the field notes:

While talking to Hector, I found out about a fight that took place last Friday in the schoolyard around five o'clock, during the afterschool program. Two boys approached Loco, a boy from Redwood, from Cost. One of the boys from Cost pulled a gun and tried to shoot Loco. The gun jammed and did not shoot. They started fighting. Others from Redwood got involved in the fight and beat the kid from Cost very badly. Hector did not know the cause of the conflict. It seems that Loco bothered a cousin of the boy from Cost.

This example clearly illustrate how the ongoing beefs that originated outside of school premises (beefs between Redwood and Cost block gangs) can quickly explode into serious violence involving many youths, and played-out within the boundaries of the school premises.

The second most important reason coded for neighborhood to school incidents is "weapon." One reason behind this is the way weapon has been coded. In any incident in which

there was no clear reason for the conflict and a weapon was present I automatically coded neighborhood-school. Since the weapon is carried from the neighborhood into school. The reasons given by the students for carrying a weapon were “protection” or “showing off.” Proto-gangs (51%) and weapon (23%) accounted for 74 % of coded incidents for this category follow by threat (5%), sexual (5%), stealing (5%) and adult (5%).

Conflict Flow from School to Neighborhood

As presented in Table II eighteen percent of all recorded conflicts originated in the school and occurred in the neighborhood. The most prevalent codes for school to neighborhood conflict were proto-gang (16%), staged fight (12 %), floors/class (11%), namecalling (11%), dislike (11%), jump (7%), weapon (7%), bullying (5%) and defending friend (5%). The other categories (playfight, labeled hick, sports, stealing, about boys/girls and threat) carried the remaining 18 percent.

Often students from the same classroom but different blocks would have playfights. The playfight often transformed into a confrontation, with both students bringing their respective “back up” and block gang into the conflict. This was the case when Rafael, a student in a 7th grade bilingual class had a play fight with Darwin, a fellow classmate. Darwin threatened Rafael saying that he would bring his boys from the third floor, many residents of Redwood. “I’m from Redwood. – Darwin yelled outside his classroom- I’m going to get him. He doesn’t know I have my people. I’m going to get him. Watch. Watch.” I went inside the classroom to talk to Rafael. He seemed very concerned and told me: “He is saying he is going to bring people at three o’clock. But I got people too. I’m not going to fight alone.”

Staged fights present a conflict in which fellow classmates encourage some on-going animosity among students. A student (referred to as the messenger) aware of the conflict and wishing to witness the fight go back and forth among both contenders the audience (members of the same class or a click of friends) arranging time and place of the fight.

The following is an summary of an observed “staged fight”

At three o’clock a big group of students going towards the park. Up the hill on the road, at least 60 students were in a circle. I noticed that most of the known “troublemakers” were there: Wendy, Taffy, Ariel, George. At the bottom of the hill two female students started fighting. One of the students was hitting while the other was backing trying to keep up with the fight but at an obvious disadvantage. After the fight Taffy approached one fighter and took a big plastic ring off of her finger. “You don’t need it anymore. You won,” Taffy said.

The division of bilingual and monolingual classes at La Escuelita often leads to tension that can be a source of conflict between students. The monolingual students (who primarily speak Spanish), often recent arrivals from the Dominican Republic, are labeled pejoratively as “hicks.” Hicks refer to youths who are not well versed in the ways of the city (e.g. don’t speak English, or “don’t know how to dress.”) On one occasion this animadversion between bilingual

and monolingual classes led to a fight in the street between two students. Joanne, a student in the monolingual class, went to Maria's block to look for her. Once she found her she fought her, because she had "disrespected" her and her class in the school cafeteria. The school's structure of five academies, separated by floor, is another source of conflict and fights in La Escuelita. Students from one floor go to other floors looking for trouble. On one occasion, a student from the 4th floor looked the "wrong way" at a student from the fifth floor. Later 5th floor students surrounded and threatened the 4th floor student in the bathroom. The 4th floor student resorted to backup from his block. Some high school students from his block waited for the fifth floor students outside the school. One of the latter was severely beaten by a group of twenty youngsters. The desire to protect weaker members of one's class was also documented as a reason that conflict may spill over from school into the neighborhood. Veronique, a 7th grader in a monolingual class, followed another student outside the school because she had threatened Catherine, a fellow classmate. "She said that she was going to get people, so I got people..." Catherine explained justifying Veronique's involvement. Veronique was stopped and handcuffed by the police. She was carrying a knife.

MEASURES OF VIOLENCE PREVENTION: STOPPING THE FLOW

La Escuelita's and KAS staff use many resources in an effort to maintain a safe environment by curtailing the conflict flow between school and neighborhood. The school staff, when aware of conflict, intervene and guide the students towards non-violent resolutions. The preventive steps taken by the school are aimed at stopping both streams of conflict: from school to neighborhood and from neighborhood to school.

Preventing the neighborhood conflict from entering the school

School staff, aware that much conflict takes place in the neighborhood, patrol the perimeter as a measure of prevention. Everyday, at the beginning and end (dismissal) of the school day, three security guards and four KAS personnel patrol the perimeter of the school. *Perimeter* is defined as the immediate area surrounding a school building outside school property. Patrolling the perimeter during those times is very important because it is at those times, especially when the students leave school at the end of the day, when most student conflict generated either in the school or in the neighborhood, occurs.

As soon as a verbal argument or a fight breaks out the SSO and KAS staff respond immediately, separating the fighters, dispersing all those who gather to watch, and taking the contending students into the school. The students, once brought to the main office, are asked to write statements explaining the reason(s) behind the confrontation. Their parents are notified and are asked to come immediately to school the following day with their children. This "no fights" school policy is enforced both inside and outside of the building.

Patrolling the perimeter also keeps trouble that may come the neighborhood away from

the students while they are near the school. I have often witnessed school staff requesting teens from other schools to leave the area surrounding La Escuelita. Since school dismissal provides a perfect time and place to locate somebody with whom someone has a beef, (and before the parties return to the “safety” of their homeblock) outside persons come during dismissal to confront and “fight out” grievances that had been previously generated in the streets. As a preventive measure, “those looking for trouble” are asked to leave. In the words of the KAS head of security, “block gangs try to get near the school and we have to push them away.” On occasions, when the school staff is aware that a major confrontation of block gangs is about to happen, they request additional SSOs from the district.

In order to insure the safety of the school perimeter, the Principal and KAS staff maintain a very good working relationship with the police. When school staff face trouble that the security guards may be unable to handle on their own, the Principal requests police presence. The following log refers to some reflections about two successful school interventions that reduced the risk of violence. In one case (Coco’s arrest), the Principal in conjunction with the police helped identify and apprehend a group of neighborhood teens who were preying on La Escuelita’s students by snatching gold chains soon after dismissal. In the other case, a conflict that had the potential to end in severe injury was resolved peacefully after a decisive mediation by the principal.

Tuesday, January 21, 1997

Last Thursday I went to criminal court to witness Coco’s trial. [The trial was postponed.] Today at school dismissal, I did not see Coco. [O.C. Coco’s case made me think a great deal about the role of the institution, the school in this case, in providing safety for the students. It’s interesting to wonder why I am so aware of the whereabouts of Coco, a nineteen-year-old man. The main reason is the safety threat that Coco has posed for many of the students in La Escuelita. The school staff is fully aware of this threat and their involvement, especially the principal who contributed to Coco’s arrest. I remember a conversation that I had with the Principal about safety outside the school. Her answer was clear. The students’ safety outside the school was her concern because they could not provide a safe environment for the children if they ignore the school surroundings. This case has helped me to realize the great deal of intervention power the school has in order to increase the safety of the adolescents. Coco’s case is an obvious and important example. By collaborating with the police, an adult robber that was preying on school children is now scheduled for trial. There are many other examples in which staff intervention reduced the potential of a regretful development of events. Last week, Angel’s problem had the potential for a very dramatic development. Ana, a female student, said that Angel “had raped her.” Ana’s brother took it upon himself to restore the honor of the family and waited for Angel at dismissal. Angel was scared -”worried” - of what could happen. Angel asked a family friend to be defend him. Both, Ana’s brother and Angel’s backup met in front of school and agreed to fight in the park. The school

safety officers stopped the fight and took a knife that Ana's brother carried. The principal personally intervened [She had a meeting last Friday with the two families that lasted until 7:30 PM] and brought a pacific solution to the conflict.

In both cases referred to in the previous excerpt the conflict took place in the neighborhood yet clearly effected La Escuelita's student body. The school personnel awareness that what happens outside in the neighborhood matters because it affects the students' and their willingness to intervene clearly diminished the risk of further violence.

Preventing the school conflict from spilling into the neighborhood

The school has systematically implemented changes designed to diminish conflict and help control the students. When trouble arise with a specific student in an academy, he/she may be transferred to another academy. The director of an academy explained to me that students have a tendency to engage in more conflicts after lunch and behave better with their homeroom teacher. The director decided to put the students with their homeroom teachers after lunch. This simple measure in itself decreased significantly the number of incidents in the academy.

When the administration observed too many fights occurring immediately after school, it started to dismiss the academies at different times so the number of students outside the school at one time was reduced. In the case of an on-going conflict between two floors, the leaders of both conflicting groups were convened in the principal's office. The principal told the students that they could not be more fighting between those two floors otherwise all the gym classes would be suspended until the end of the academic year. These examples reflect the overall philosophy of the school: being proactive in the prevention of violence.

Preventing violence. Policy Implications

Throughout this paper numerous examples have been presented of the intertwining of school and neighborhood conflict and violence, and how conflict flows between both spaces. This flow of conflict effects the physical safety of the students. While the school developed many strategies to prevent violent outcomes, the school's success was limited. Many fights and some very violent events took place in the school and within its perimeter.

Despite the limitations, many of the school strategies were successful in bringing down the number of incidents between students and limiting their severity of injury. Many fights after school were aborted, and often conflict was dealt with before it escalated into a tragedy. As a result, La Escuelita can be proud of providing a safer environment that was more conducive to learning: something crucial and expected of every school, yet at the same time, so difficult to achieve and maintain in a neighborhood with as much conflict and violence as that in El Dorado.

CONCLUSION

Previous studies have stated the importance of neighborhood effects on school violence (Anderson 1998; Gottfredson and Gottfredson 1985; Hellman and Beaton 1986; Ringwalt et. al. 1992; Sheley et al. 1995) while others have pointed to the importance of school characteristics (Welsh, Greene, and Jenkins 1999, Duke 1989, Gottfredson 1989, Gottfredson and Gottfredson 1985). Understanding school violence as a consequence of the bi-directional conflict that flows between a school and its neighborhood allows us to illuminate the process by which neighborhood and school violence are interconnected. This paper illuminates this process by (a) documenting the existence of conflict that initiated in the neighborhood is carried on into the school and conflict, initiated in school premises and carried out in the neighborhood and (b) documenting how adolescent conflict often times mirrors the organizational structures of both school and neighborhood. The coexistence of these mirrored conflicts accounts for a great amount of adolescent conflict and for a majority of the most severe.

In this paper I described the conflict flow from neighborhood to school (21 % of all recorded incidents) and from school to neighborhood (18 % of incidents). This conflict flow indicates that, for adolescents, school and neighborhood violence are deeply interrelated. In order to understand the reasons behind this interrelation I proceeded to present the way in which a neighborhood and school are structured and how it affects the formation of peer groups among students. Adolescents from the same block tend to have their peer groups among other residents of the block. Block alliances and conflicts predispose the student to have a major number of conflict with the residents of those blocks. Students from the same floor and the same class tend to have their peers within their class and their floor. Different floors and within floors bilingual versus monolingual classes tend to have conflict. Often times students define their conflict within these organizational parameters. Conflict can happen anywhere but is mediated, and often exacerbated, by these social structures.

What this research has shown as the effect of school and neighborhood structures on conflict, leads to conclude that school violence is clearly contextual. Adolescents do not choose their peers in a vacuum, but instead in their selection of peers they mirror the organizational settings of both their school and neighborhood. Further study is needed to better understand the mediating effects of school and community organization as a source and setting of adolescent conflict and how they impact on conflict flow. Such studies that focus on the processes by which this interrelation takes place would help in the design of successful violence prevention programs. Indeed, based on these findings, those programs that solely focus on the school aspects related to violence prevention are doomed to fail.

Throughout this paper numerous examples have been presented of school developed strategies to prevent violent outcomes, the school's success was limited. Many fights and some very violent events took place in the school and within its perimeter. Despite the limitations, many of the school strategies, were successful in bringing down the number of incidents between students and limiting their severity of injury. Many fights after school were aborted, and often

conflict was dealt with before it escalated into a tragedy. A special attention should be given to the possibility of extend the supervision of students in the immediate area surrounding the school building at dismissal.

Limitations of the Study and Implications for Future Research

While this study has focused on one inner city middle school, it calls for further study of the interrelation between school and neighborhood in other urban settings and in suburban and rural areas. While this study has focused on one middle school, it calls for further study of this interrelation in other schools in New York and other cities . This will help determine whether the findings presented here are in fact common across inner city schools and not present in La Escuelita alone. In addition, the consequences that the conflict flow has on student safety and academic performance could be explored.

Further study is needed in determining how different community characteristics effect school environment and student performance. A better understanding of the interrelationship between community and school would make it easier to identify the needs of students as well as help school staff and other interested parties prevent the pernicious effects that some of these community characteristics have on the school environment. It would also help to develop programs to deal with and mitigate those effects.

REFERENCES

Anderson, D. 1998. *Curriculum, Culture and Community: The Challenge of School Violence*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Anderson, Elijah. 1990. *Street Wise: Race, Class, and Change in an Urban Community*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Bastian, Lisa D., and Bruce M. Taylor. 1991. *School Crime: A National Crime Victimization Survey Report*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Bourgois, Philippe. 1989. "Crack in Spanish Harlem. Culture and Economy in the Inner City." *Anthropology Today*, vol. 5, no. 4.

Garfield, Richard & Abramson, David. 1994 *El Dorado: The Health of a Community*. The Health of the Public Program. Columbia University

Gottfredson, G. D., & D. C. Gottfredson. 1985. *Victimization in Schools*. New York, NY: Plenum.

Gottfredson, D. C. 1989 "Developing Effective Organizations to Reduce School Disorder." In Oliver C. Moles (ed.) *Strategies to Reduce School Misbehavior*. Washington, DC: Office of Educational Research and Improvement.

Duke, Daniel L. 1989. "School Organization, Leadership, and Student Behavior." In Oliver C. Moles (ed.), *Strategies to Reduce Student Misbehavior*. Washington, DC: Office of Educational Research and Improvement.

Ely, M. with M. Anzul, T. Friedman, D. Garner, and A. McCormack. 1991. *Doing Qualitative Research: Circles Within Circles*. New York, NY: Falmer Press.

Hellman, Daryl A., and Susan Beaton. 1986. "The Pattern of Violence in Urban Public Schools: The Influence of School and Community." *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 23: 102-127.

Maguire, Kathleen, and Ann L. Pastore, eds. 1996. *Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics, 1995*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Mateu-Gelabert, Pedro. 1998. "Street Ethos: Surviving High School." Ph.D. dissertation,

Department of Administration, Leadership, and Technology, New York University, New York, NY.

National Center for Education Statistics & Bureau of Justice Statistics. 1998. *Indicators of School Crime and Safety, 1998*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

National Institute of Education, 1978. *Violent Schools –Safe Schools: The Safe School Study Report to the Congress*, vol. 1. Washington DC: U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare.

National School Boards Association. 1993. *Violence in the Schools: How America's School Boards Are Safeguarding Our Children*. Alexandria, VA: National School Boards Association.

Nolin, Mary Jo, Elizabeth Davies, and Kathryn Chandler. 1995. *Student Victimization at School*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

Pearson, Frank S. and Jackson Toby. 1991. "Fear of School-Related Predatory Crime." *Sociology and Social Research* 75:117-125.

Reiss, Albert J., Jr., and Jeffrey A. Roth (eds.) 1993. *Understanding and Preventing Violence*, vol. 1. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

Ringwalt, Chris, Pamela Messerschmidt, Laura Graham, and Jim Collins. 1992. *Youth's Victimization and Experiences, Fear of Attack or Harm, and School Avoidance Behaviors*. Final report to the National Institute of Justice. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice.

Sampson, R. J. 1997. "The Embeddedness of Child Adolescent Development: A Community Level Perspective on Child Development." In Joan McCord (ed.) *Violence and Childhood in the InnerCity*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Sampson, R. J., & Groves, W. B. 1989. "Community Structure and Crime: Testing Social-Disorganization Theory." *American Journal of Sociology* 94: 774-802.

Sampson, R. J., & Lauritsen, J. L. 1994. "Violent Victimization and Offending: Individual-, Situational-, and Community-Level Risk Factors." In eds., Albert J. Reiss, Jr. & Jeffrey Roth, *Understanding and Preventing Violence: Social Influences*, vol. 3. (National Research Council.) Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

Sampson, J. R., & Wilson, W. J. 1995. "Toward a Theory of Race, Crime, and Urban Inequality." In eds., John Hagan & Ruth Peterson, *Crime and Inequality*. Stanford, CT: Stanford University Press.

Shawn, C. R., & McKay, H. D. 1942. *Juvenile Delinquency and Urban Areas*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Sheley, Joseph F., Zina T. McGee, and James D. Wright. 1995. *Weapon-Related Victimization in Selected Inner-City High School Samples*. Final Summary Report to the National Institute of Justice. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice.

Suttles, G. 1968. *The Social Order of the Slum*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Tesch, R. 1990. *Qualitative Research: Analysis Types and Software Tools*. London: Falmer Press.

Welsh, W. N., Jack R. Greene and Patricia H. Jenkins. 1999. School Disorder: The Influence of Individual, Institutional, and Community Factors. *Criminology* 37:1 pp. 73-115.

Wolcott, Harry F. 1990. *Writing Up Qualitative Research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

TABLE 1
Sample Characteristics

Variable	#
Gender	
Boys	15
Girl	10
Ethnicity	
Dominican	21
Cuban	1
Puerto Rican	3
Average siblings at home	1.5
Average number of siblings	2.4
Average residential changes during time of research	1.1
Immigration	
First Generation	11
Second Generation	14
Employment	
Households with at least one family member with regular employment	17
Households without family members with regular employment	8
Benefits	
Households receiving public benefits	11
Household not receiving public benefits	14

Table II
Where Conflict Originates/Takes Place

Initiated/Took Place	# of incidents	% of total
School-Neighborhood	35	18%
Neighborhood-School	41	21%
School-School	94	48%
Neighborhood-Neighborhood	25	13%
Total	195	100%

Table III (*)
Reasons for Conflict

Reason for Incident	# Incidents	Column Percent
Proto-gang	45	17%
Namecalling	31	12%
Playfight	20	8%
Stealing	17	7%
Weapon	18	7%
Jump	16	6%
Floors/class	16	6%
Adult	16	6%
Staged fight	14	5%
Bullying	11	4%
About boys/girls	10	4%
Dislike	10	4%
Labelled Hick	9	3%
Threat	6	2%

Sexual	6	2%
Clothing	4	2%
Defending friend(s)	4	2%
Sports	4	2%
Drugs	3	1%
<hr/>		
Total	260	100%

(*) There a total of 195 incidents recorded. Some were coded with more than one category resulting in a total of 260 codes assigned.