Chapter 3

A History of Violence in the Schools

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VIOLENCE IN THE SCHOOLS: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

American children spend approximately 35 hours per week in school (Volokh & Snell, 1998). In recent decades, schools have been portrayed as unsafe, a theme reinforced in movies such as Blackboard Jungle and Lean on Me, and in the news media. Indeed, on a daily basis, we are confronted with stories in the news about children and adolescents who are victims of aggression or crime in school, or who are victimizers. School shootings have been reported in Pearl, Mississippi; West Paducah, Kentucky; Jonesboro, Arkansas; Jefferson County, Colorado, and many other places. To cite some specific examples:

- In February 1996, in Moses Lake, Washington, a junior high school honor student shot and killed his math teacher and two students with a high-powered rifle (Staff, 1996).
- In 1996 in Lynville, Tennessee, a teenager fired a rifle into a school hallway, killing a teacher and a student (Staff, 1996).
- In May 1998, in Springfield, Oregon, a student was expelled after bringing a .32 caliber handgun to school. On the following day, he killed his parents at home, and then fired at fellow students and staff, in the school cafeteria (National School Safety Center, 1999).
In addition to the violent deaths are the non-fatal but serious ways in which both students and teachers are victimized. Crimes at school include rape, sexual assault, robbery, and aggravated assault (Resnick et al., 1997).

The response to what has appeared to be an increase in the prevalence, and certainly the dangerousness, of school violence has been to characterize it as a major public health problem (National Institutes of Health, 1994). Polls of the American public have indicated that violence in the schools is among the greatest concerns in the nation (Rose & Gallup, 2000). Ridding schools of violence and drugs became an important goal during the 1990s, as reflected in the government statement: “By the year 2000, every school in America will be free of drugs and violence and the unauthorized presence of firearms and alcohol, and offer a disciplined environment conducive to learning” (U.S. Department of Education, 1993). Nevertheless, even in this new millennium, violence in the schools has continued to provoke attention and concern (Reddy et al., 2001).

It seems right to assume that school violence in particular—and youth violence in general—are areas of great concern, in need of concerted prevention and intervention efforts. But is it also right to assume that “[h]istorically, our schools have been relatively safe havens from violence…. [whereas] more recently there has been an epidemic of youth crime (Elliot, Hamburg, & Williams, 1998)”?

The use of the term “epidemic” may be appropriate, as it is used differently here than when referring to physical health. Practitioners in the field of public health ordinarily use “epidemic” to refer to a contagious mechanism that spreads a disease from person to person. When people in the public health field refer to an epidemic of school violence, what they mean is that school violence is evoking more trauma in society than it has in the past (Moore & Tonry, 1998). The use of the term “history,” though, is vague and could be misleading in this context.

While the existing data on school violence indicate that it did increase through much of the decade of the 1990s, virtually none of the recent work addresses the earlier history of this phenomenon. Additionally, even though nominally rigorous research methods have been used, methodological flaws abound in the way that the longitudinal data on school violence were collected (cf. Cornell & Loper, 1998; Kingery, Coggeshall, & Alford, 1998). Information about violence in the schools before the middle of the twentieth century is even less frequently based on systematic research efforts. The early history of school violence is known largely through archival records and anecdotes, gathered through means that rarely resemble modern research. Nevertheless, it can be useful to turn to archives and historical accounts in order to determine whether school violence is actually a new and unique phenomenon, either in prevalence or in dangerousness. If not