

HOW SAFE IS YOUR SCHOOL?

BY PATTI HERRING AND ELIZABETH HOLZHAUSER

“In an urban, working class city of 62,000, a young teenage boy carrying a knife entered one of 40 mostly unlocked and unmonitored entrances at a high school of over 2,000 kids. He was not a student at the school. He searched through the building for another boy with whom he had argued the previous weekend. He found him in a second floor hallway and stabbed him, injuring him severely. The victim’s best friend was stabbed to death as he tried to help his friend. The school had never before experienced this type of violence.”¹

The Problem in the United States

The Bureau of Justice Statistics in collaboration with the National Center for Education Statistics collects data from students, teachers, principals, and the public on school violence in the United States. They have found that the percentage of school violence increased from 71 percent in the 1999 to 2000 school year, and even higher, to 81 percent in the 2003-2004 school year. From July 1, 2004, through June 30, 2005, 21 children (5 to 18 years of age) were killed at U.S. schools.²

A case in point is the disturbing Amish school shooting in Nichol Mines, Pennsylvania, on October 2, 2006. A disturbed man from the outside community held 10 little girls (aged 7-13) hostage. There were 26 students in school the day he attacked, 15

boys and 11 girls. He shot all of the girls except the one who escaped, killing five, before taking his own life.³ This was only one of three deadly shootings that week (the other two occurred on September 27 and September 29, 2006).⁴

One year later, on October 16, 2007, America’s worst mass school shooting occurred: the Virginia Tech massacre (as it is now known). Seung-Hui Cho, a 23-year-old student, shot and killed 32 people and wounded 17 before killing himself.⁵ Many wondered what motivated the shooter, and what, if anything could have been done to prevent this tragedy and others.

The Problem Internationally

Studies, although limited, clearly show that violence is a major problem in other countries as well, and not only in the U.S., as some might believe. Wherever it occurs, it has a negative impact on teaching and learning.⁶

Researchers who studied school violence in 37 nations around the world reported problems that caused students and teachers to be fearful at school. In more than half of these countries, one in four students feared becoming a victim (i.e., being hurt or threatened) at school; they also feared that their peers would be the victims of violence. The teachers were also concerned about the threat of violence, seeing it as interfering with their teaching and as a major barrier to their students’ learning.⁷ This has caused a tightening of security at schools around the world.

The Problem in Adventist Schools

Who would have believed that schools in the 21st century would need metal detectors and other high-powered security devices to identify weapons and other paraphernalia used in vio-

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lent assaults? We are still adjusting to the high security measures at airports, courthouses, and other governmental facilities—and now many schools, too, must operate under high security. You might be thinking, Not in Adventist schools. We don't need expensive security devices, and our students do not have to endure the strip searches that are necessary at public schools; thank the Lord that Adventist schools do not have that problem. Furthermore, if we start securing our schools, the world might mistakenly assume that the measures are an admission that our schools are not safe.

Many people believe that school violence is perpetuated by children who dress in a certain way, or live in bad neighborhoods, or who attend inner-city public schools—and the highly publicized cases encourage these perceptions. We want to believe that our schools are special places, protected and exempt from the realities of violence. Unfortunately, it is time for a reality check. Because of sin, the world is out of balance, and violent people are everywhere; thus unbalanced behavior can and does find its way to Adventist school campuses. We must take action now to prevent this from happening. Preventing something before it happens makes a lot more sense than dealing with the consequences.

This brings us to the question of how vigilant Adventist schools should be in preventing violence of all kinds on our campuses. In this article, we will discuss what you can do to keep your school safe and thus protect your students and staff. We do not wish to unduly alarm you, but instead fast-forward you into thinking about what adjustments are necessary to ensure that your school **is safe, stays safe, and becomes safer**. In addition, we will bring you up to date on research about the complex issue of school violence, discredit some commonly held myths about the perpetrators of school violence, and present some practical recommendations and helpful resources to help you guard and protect your school environment.

What Is Violence?

What constitutes violence? The definition differs worldwide, depending on societal and cultural norms, but the World Health Organization (WHO) defines it as “the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened, or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, mal-development, or deprivation.”⁸

• “*Self-inflicted violence*” includes acts of violence intentionally inflicted upon oneself such as suicide, skin cutting (or

mutilation), and other self-destructive acts or behaviors.

• “*Interpersonal violence*” is defined by the WHO as a victim-offender relationship-type violence, whether occurring at school, in private, in public, in the family, or in the community. Interpersonal violence includes corporal punishment used at school, bullying, harassment, child abuse, domestic violence, and violence perpetrated against someone because of gender, race/ethnicity, religious affiliations, age, disability, or sexual identity. The WHO considers such behavior violence even if it is committed or condoned by the government or those in control of an institution.

• “*Organized violence*” is perpetrated by “social or political groups motivated by specific political, economic or social objec-

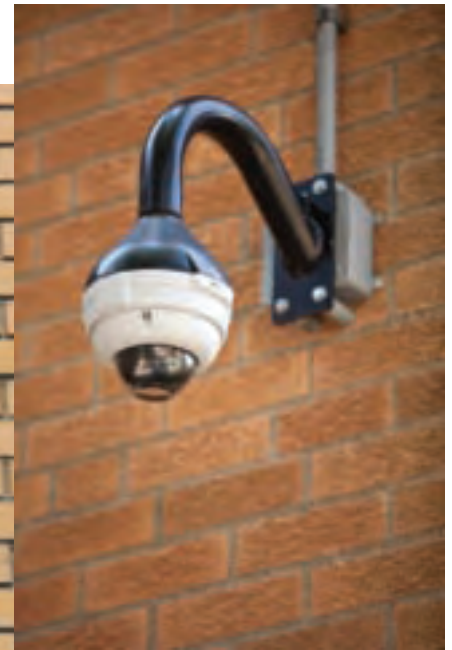
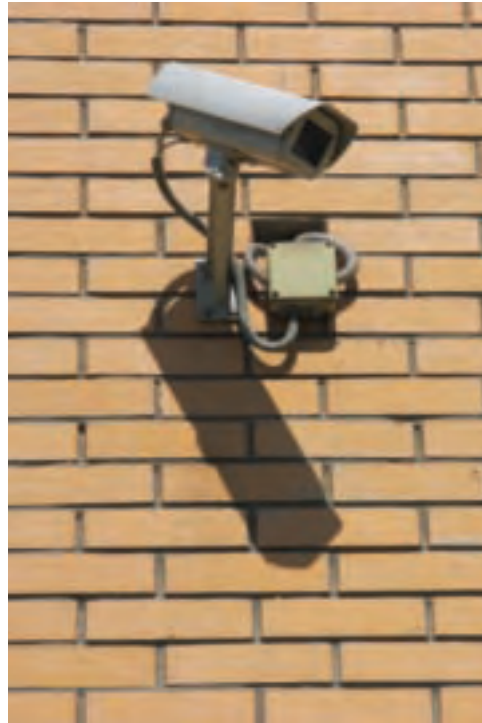


tives.” Examples include war, religious, racial, gang, mob, and other group conflicts.⁹

Contributing Factors

It is important to remember that young people are not normally prone to violence,¹⁰ and those who do commit violent acts learned those behaviors from life circumstances or other factors that put them at higher risk than others to become violent offenders. Some of these risk factors include the following:

- Poor interpersonal communication skills
- Substance abuse (illegal substances, alcohol, and prescription drugs)
- Observing violence or inappropriate interpersonal behavior in the home or in the community
- Being victimized (at home, at school, or in the community)
- Having access to firearms and ammunition, as well as other weapons
- Disparate or preferential treatment if a member of or affiliated with certain racial/ethnic groups, religious groups, genders, or school social groups
- Socio-economic disparities between racial/ethnic groups, genders, or school social groups
- Media influences
- Peer influences¹¹
- Gang affiliation
- Low school performance
- Inability of caregivers to maintain a stable family unit
- Cyber abuse¹²



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- Anger about perceived unfair treatment, unjust rules or policies
- Societal, cultural, or neighborhood norms that condone violent behavior¹³
- Lack of spirituality in the home, and thus in the youth's life.

Spirituality: The good news is that spirituality has a positive influence on children's attitudes and behaviors. It is impossible to shield children from all negative influences in life, no matter how hard parents and teachers might try. However, the fact that parents have had the foresight and the means to enroll their children in Adventist

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schools is an important preventive factor. Studies show that regular religious engagement can help compensate for exposure to acts of violence that children encounter in everyday life. Research also shows that children whose parents engage them in regular religious activities, and whose religious belief system and faith are exercised on a regular basis, are more likely to be able to handle accidental and occasional exposure to violence without harmful consequences (i.e., participating in delinquent behavior and choosing delinquent associations).¹⁴

Improving Interpersonal Relationships for Safer Schools

To investigate why some school environments have lower rates of violence than others, Court¹⁵ conducted ethnographic research at an Israeli religious middle school (grades 6 through 8), Abu Snam, to discover this institution's secrets for creating a non-violent school environment. The students came from a mixed population of Moslem, Druze, and Christian Israelis. She found that school's goal was to transmit values that encouraged students to choose non-vio-

lent behavior to resolve conflict and to get along with their peers, although the school was located in a violent community.

The vice principal, a Druze, said that the school housed "three religions but one value," which is "**respect for other people.**" Court reported: "I came away from this research feeling I had been privileged to see a remarkable school that is virtually free of violence, a considerable accomplishment in an area of the world fraught with violence and strife."¹⁶

How did they do it? Court found that **leadership** was the key to this school's success. Administrators focused on communication, and stressed teaching tolerance, respect, and non-violent behavior

Violence Prevention Resources

WHO Information Series on School Health. *Violence Prevention: An Important Element of a Health-Promoting School:* http://www.who.int/school_youth_health/media/en/93.pdf.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *Using Environmental Design to Prevent School Violence:* <http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/dvp/CPTED.htm>.

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Constitutional Rights Foundation, Service Learning Network, *The Challenge of School Violence.* *Talking Points: Causes of School Violence 13:1 (2007):* http://www.crf-usa.org/service-learning-network/13_1-challenge-of-school-violence-lead.html.

in response to school situations. Their anti-violence methods consisted of the following strategies:

- Implementing a Values Education Curriculum for all grade levels.
- Dealing with bullying, rudeness, or any other incidence of violence immediately when it occurred by talking, listening, engaging other students in resolving the issue or conflict—never ignor-

ing any acts.¹⁷

- Requiring that everyone (students, school personnel, including administration) refrain from gossiping or slanderous remarks, treat others with respect, and keep the doors of communication open.
- Speaking frankly with students about sensitive issues such as suicide bombings, and the consequences of such acts, and en-

Ten Myths About School Violence Perpetrators

The following myths were carefully developed by Dedman from detailed case files of the most notorious school shooters who ultimately committed suicide, from comprehensive interviews with those convicted of school-associated violence, as well as information from the United States Secret Service, and the United States Department of Education.¹⁸

1. *“He didn’t fit the profile.”* There is no functional profile or checklist that will accurately predict whether someone is contemplating a violent act at the school site. Demographics, socioeconomic commonalities, family characteristics, and mental histories are too broad or vague to ensure that the innocent will not be unjustly profiled or stereotyped. Those who have committed acts of school violence represent all races, social and economic backgrounds, varying academic achievement, and family circumstances. Although it is true that males constitute an overwhelming majority of the perpetrators, this is one of three major commonalities.

2. *“He just snapped.”* It is a rare that people “just snap.” According to the experts, most school attackers had a preconceived plan, indicating that their act was not impulsive. Overall, the planning phase included contemplating the attack, logistical preparation, and weapon/ammunition procurement.

3. *“No one knew.”* In nearly all cases, someone besides the perpetrator knew of the plan. Some used one of three social networking Websites, YouTube, MySpace, or Facebook. Additionally, friends of the attacker, siblings, or others knew of the idea or the plan, but in most cases did not tell an adult.

4. *“He hadn’t threatened anyone.”* There is fear that any type of threat; no matter how implausible, will lead to a school shooting or an attack of some kind. This situation has led to an increase in unwarranted suspensions and expulsions.¹⁹ At Rancho Middle School in Hesperia, California, 8th grader Trinity Mathieson was suspended from school for two days for writing down the names of those students who were bullying him. His mother needed this information in order to report the actions of the children to the principal. Writing down the names of his classmates on a piece of paper was not a criminal act, but the administration referred to it as a “kill list.” The climate of fear generated by an earlier incident at another school was used to

justify the suspension. “Most attackers never threatened, and an overwhelming majority who threaten never attack.”

5. *“He was a loner.”* A significant number of the most notorious school shooters did have close friendships with classmates, were involved in social activities, sports, school-related clubs, and extra-curricular activities. Being stereotyped as a “loner” is not a homicidal determinate.

6. *“He was crazy.”* For the most part, the perpetrators were never professionally diagnosed with a mental disorder. This is not to say that mental illness was not a factor. However, information from case histories did confirm that many individuals had recent past histories of depression, suicidal thoughts or attempts, as well as ineffective personal coping skills.

7. *“If only we’d had a SWAT team or metal detectors.”* Incidents begin and end quickly even when law enforcement responds promptly. Persons who are resolved to commit a crime will find a manner in which to do so.

8. *“He’d never touched a gun.”* In all cases of school attacks in which multiple fatalities occurred, firearm usage was the culprit. The weapons were either purchased by the attackers themselves, garnered from friends and relatives, or obtained from their own home environment. Moreover, the attackers usually practiced discharging the weapon prior to the event. The use of firearms is the second major commonality among school shooters.

9. *“We did everything we could to help him.”* Bullying by other students or groups of students prior to the attack was the major theme that emerged from analyzing the case histories. The shooters felt that the adults in the school environment either could not or would not assist them. Furthermore, friends and family members tended to minimize the bullying incidents. Bullying and other types of individual maltreatment is the third and final commonality. Consequently, teachers and school administrative staff were targeted in 50 percent of the fatalities.

10. *“School violence is rampant.”* Again, based upon a review of the available data, it is apparent that school shootings are extremely idiosyncratic events and not part of any discernible trend. Ironically, they may have received magnified coverage because of their rarity rather than their typicality.²⁰

gaging in discussion about non-violent ways of dealing with conflict and disagreements in and out of the classroom.

- Structuring ongoing professional development activities for school personnel, both at school and in the community, including parents and community members when appropriate. These activities were carefully evaluated for effectiveness and modifications made as necessary.

- Including parents in the planning, implementing, and evaluating of anti-violence activities by actually inviting them to school to see the school's philosophy in action.

- Focusing on consistent, strong leadership.²¹

Physical Environmental Precautions for Safer Schools

For decades, public health workers have initiated changes in the environment to prevent disease and protect and restore the public's health. Some environmental measures include quarantine to prevent the spread of communicable diseases, seat belts and airbags to reduce vehicle deaths and injuries; and community parks for safer outdoor physical activity that prevents obesity, heart disease, and other conditions related to a sedentary lifestyle. Criminologists, recognizing the strengths in this approach, followed suit by identifying some characteristics of the physical en-

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vironment that could be altered in order to deter criminal activity. They identified such interventions as altering a building's physical design, decreasing weapon availability, and controlling and monitoring the number of people in a building and their purposes for being there.²²

Because of these factors, the *Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design* (CPTED) approach recommends changes in the physical environment that make it more difficult

for perpetrators or assailants to commit violent acts. This plan does not address what motivates perpetrators to commit violent acts; it merely gives them less opportunity to act out their aggressions. But implementing safety measures does make people feel safer and more secure, and encourages a sense of well-being. Fear is immobilizing, and interferes with the calm that is needed for teaching and learning. In protecting the school environment, CPTED suggests focusing on five major principles:²³

1. **Natural surveillance** means "minimizing opportunities for out-of-sight activities." This involves using structural features that make it easier to see what is going on at all times, in all places; for example, having windows in the doors of each classroom, and at the entrance to the school office. This allows students and staff on the inside of the school to see those on the out-





side, and vice versa.

2. Access management. This refers to closely monitoring access to all school areas at all times, especially when school is in session. Entrances and exits should be clearly marked, and signs used directing visitors to monitored areas and steering them away from unsupervised locations. When visitors are given access, they receive nametags, which they must wear throughout the visit. At the conclusion of the visit, they return the nametag to the main office and log out; this logbook becomes an official record. Access to dormitories and other locations that are off limits to the public should be restricted through the installation of an electronic keycard/key pad system. Another example of managing access is using fencing, hedges, flowerbeds, or other landscaping features to regulate access to the school.

3. Territoriality. This term means having an area in the school that sends out an unmistakable message of “school pride” and “creating a warm and welcoming environment” that gives students a sense of ownership. These messages should come from students, teachers, staff, and administrators. For example, as you enter the school, there could be a mural with a painting of Christ or a sign painted in school colors. Trophy cases could display awards won by students, teachers, or staff as well as other school

Remember—advance planning does not mean you think that something will happen. It simply means you are prepared in the rare event that it does, and that you want to ensure everyone’s safety.


prizes, student artwork, or pictures of everyone at work and at play, etc.

4. Physical maintenance. This involves improving the physical appearance of the school with regular and consistent repairs and maintenance, so that it looks well kept at all times. This sends

out a positive message to students and parents. For example, immediately painting over graffiti, repairing walkways and stairways to maintain safety, keeping restroom fixtures clean and in working order, keeping water fountains clean and sanitized, etc. Pretend you are expecting a special guest to visit; how would you like your school to look? Use this as a rule of thumb to maintain your school environment.

5. Order maintenance. This means “fostering a sense of physical and social order” by immediately nipping unwanted behavior in the bud. For this to occur, an adult presence is needed whenever students are going from one area in the school to another, and wherever students congregate outside the classroom. Teachers and staff should watch for and immediately deal with unacceptable behaviors, such as fighting, bullying, name-calling, and other acts of aggression meant to belittle or put down other students.

Teachers should not only set and model the social norms for



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buzzer/intercom
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the school, but also monitor the activities in their classrooms and on the playgrounds.²⁴ Unacceptable behaviors should be immediately corrected, and acceptable behavior acknowledged and fostered. Teachers should instruct students in how to apply the principles of democracy, tolerance, and cultural understanding outside the classroom, and model these principles themselves in their interactions with students. This will help prevent student protests/strikes, and counter social norms that support intolerant attitudes toward women, ethnic/racial minorities, religions, or any other group.²⁵

Staying Alert and Reacting in an Emergency

If you and your school officials are vigilant in the areas suggested in this special issue of the JOURNAL, you probably will never have to implement the following emergency plan. Nonetheless, your school must have an action plan, should an armed assailant enter your school premises. Remember—advance planning does not mean you think that something will happen. It sim-

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ply means you are prepared in the rare event that it does, and that you want to ensure everyone's safety.

One of our universities uses the following lockdown procedure “to reduce exposure” of all persons at the university from the “immediate and ongoing threat of violence” by an armed assailant. The policy includes the following:²⁶

- Notifying everyone that the school should be locked down. This can be done in a number of ways (i.e., emergency notification system (see the article by Ehren Ngo and Rick Williams on page 40), public address system, a runner, telephone [classroom, cell], bullhorn, siren, two-way radio);
- After notification, all persons should act in the following ways:
 - ✓ Lock and barricade yourself in a classroom, office, or other closed location.
 - ✓ If violence occurs, take cover and tell others around you to do the same.

- ✓ If confronted while seated in an office or classroom, immediately fall to the floor.
- ✓ When walking down the hallway, look for an open room in which to take cover.
- ✓ Close, lock, and/or barricade doorways; turn off lights, and hide.
- ✓ If a room has shades or curtains, close them.
- ✓ When outdoors, get behind a tree, wall, or other barrier; lie down and wait for rescue.
- ✓ If caught in an open parking lot, hide behind the front wheel/engine area of a vehicle.
- ✓ Once in a secured location, stay put; wait and listen for directions from law enforcement.
- ✓ Limit phone calls to emergency purposes only.

Conclusion

The main key to preventing and dealing with the issue of school violence is a thorough understanding of the facts surrounding this problem. First, gather the facts. This involves conducting a thorough needs assessment of your school environment to determine how safe your school is against threats from within (i.e., interpersonal behaviors) and from outside (i.e., an assailant attack). Then determine the best proactive anti-violence prevention approaches to implement.

Schools can make a difference in teaching students to be non-violent and to settle disputes peaceably, even if they have limited resources. A school's greatest resource is manpower, people who want to make their schools safe places for learning and growth. Experts agree that the quality of school personnel affects the quality of education, and no doubt can affect the quality of violence prevention programs as well.²⁷ All Adventist schools should have a values education component included in all curriculums, for all grade levels. This should be taught from a biblical and doctrinal standpoint, focusing on the *Fruits of the Spirit* (love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance—Galatians 5:22, 23), as themes.

Safer school environments contribute to positive educational outcomes; unsafe ones contribute to poor future outcomes for everyone concerned. A collaboration among school administrators, teachers, staff, parents, PTA members, school boards, law enforcement, community programs and agencies, and the governing bodies of the worldwide church is needed to keep our schools safe.

*"Violence is neither ordained, nor is a necessary evil in our society. It is not caused directly by poverty or economic hardship, but is mediated by people living in poor economic conditions, living environments, and conflict-ridden schools. Violence begins in the minds of men,"*²⁸ and, with God's grace, violence can end there, too. ✍



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