

Selected Spiritual, Religious, and Family Factors in the Prevention of School Violence

R. Craig Windham, Lisa M. Hooper, and Patricia E. Hudson

The mass-casualty school shooting incidents in recent years have heightened concern about the safety of U.S. schools and prompted responses that, in many cases, have centered mainly on bolstering security on school campuses. Some researchers have concluded, however, that the most effective prevention efforts are those that are more comprehensive in scope. This article explores selected spiritual, religious, and family value factors that research has indicated may play an important protective role in strengthening resilience in young people and minimizing at-risk behavior that may be associated with school violence.

The lethal shooting sprees in suburban and rural secondary schools that peaked in the late 1990s in the United States have had a significant impact on communities that may have previously felt insulated from youth violence as well as on the nation as a whole (Moore, Petrie, Braga, & McLaughlin, 2003; Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2002). These cases, unlike more frequent but single-victim violent incidents that occur in urban schools, have involved multiple victims who were apparently selected arbitrarily (Moore et al., 2003). Although school shooting incidents are rare, they are "a significant component of the problem of school violence . . . [and their] impact cannot be measured in statistics alone" (Vossekuil et al., 2002, p. 13). The fear generated by such high-profile attacks has engendered efforts to develop new approaches to the prevention of school violence.

After the Columbine High School tragedy in 1999, many schools focused on bolstering physical security through the installation of metal detectors and surveillance cameras and the assignment of guards or law enforcement officers to patrol school campuses (Agron & Anderson, 2000; Yell & Rozalski, 2000); however, such protective measures have not always proven successful. In a recent school shooting incident in 2003, one student was killed and three were wounded by a teenager who managed to get an AK-47 assault rifle past guards and metal detectors in a New Orleans high school (Bragg, 2003). Some school systems have also implemented random searches and zero-tolerance policies that mandate strict punishment, even for first offenses. Ironically, though, McNeely, Nonnemaker, and Blum (2002) have found that students in schools with harsh disciplinary policies report feeling less safe than do students in schools where discipline is administered more moderately.

R. Craig Windham, Department of Counseling/Human and Organizational Studies, The George Washington University; Lisa M. Hooper, School of Medicine, Georgetown University; Patricia E. Hudson, Roman Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn, Safe Environment Program, Brooklyn, New York. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to R. Craig Windham, PO Box 9506, Washington, DC 20016 (e-mail: cwindham@gwu.edu).

The potential perpetrators of school violence are not only affected by personal factors and interactions with peers but also by societal, family, and spiritual/religious influences in their environment. According to Chandras (1999) and Rotter and Boveja (1999), families can play a major role in the propensity of adolescents to commit violent acts, and family-related issues may contribute to aggressive and violent behaviors by students in school. In addition, a number of researchers have found that adolescents who score high on measures of spirituality or religiosity are less likely than their peers to engage in violent or other antisocial behavior (Benda & Corwyn, 2002; Knox, Langehough, Walters, & Rowley, 1998; Saunders, 1999). Spirituality, defined by Kelly (1995) as "a personal affirmation of a transcendent connectedness in the universe" (p. 4), addresses issues such as life purpose and meaning, from which may emerge a code of behavior (Meyer & Lausell, 1996). Religion is a closely related but distinct construct, which Kelly defined as "the creedal, institutional, and ritual expression of spirituality" (p. 4). In this article, we review the professional literature regarding selected spiritual, religious, and family factors as they pertain to adolescents and at-risk behavior and consider the extent to which these factors, separately and together, might be useful in the prevention of school violence.

Individual and Social Risk Factors

Students responsible for school violence have come from a wide range of ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds, and research has shown that a multitude of factors—individual, social, and contextual—may contribute to students' violent behavior (Chandras, 1999; Verlinden, Hersen, & Thomas, 2000). According to Vossekul et al. (2002), most of the students who carried out highly publicized school shootings in recent years had trouble coping with personal failures or significant losses, and many felt persecuted or bullied. Bender, Shubert, and McLaughlin (2001) have indicated that these students committed violent acts as a reaction to being shunned and emotionally wounded by peers and essentially ignored by adults in their school.

In a study of rampage shootings in schools, Moore et al. (2003) concluded that most of the perpetrators showed symptoms of mental illness such as depression, incipient schizophrenia, and personality or stress disorders, with a prominent feature being suicidal thinking. Hopelessness has been cited as an important characteristic of adolescent suicidal ideation by several researchers, whereas hopefulness can be an indicator of spirituality in a young person (Dykstra, 1997; Empfield & Bakalar, 2001; Grimbol, 2002). Koplewicz (2002) stated that suicidal thoughts are more common among teenagers who are aggressive or impulsive by nature and whose response to stressful, humiliating events gravitates toward anger, agitation, or hopelessness. Then again, hope is often regarded as an important component of resilience.

Spiritual and Religious Factors

The writings of some of the students who have carried out mass-casualty school shootings are replete with words of despair, frustration, anguish, and anger.

In May 1998, 15-year-old Kip Kinkel shot both of his parents to death at his home in Springfield, Oregon. The next day, he drove to Thurston High School and opened fire, killing 2 classmates and wounding 25 others. Kinkel had grown up in a nurturing, middle-class family in a good community (PBS Online, 2000), but excerpts from a journal found in his bedroom provide a glimpse of the boy's inner turmoil before the shootings:

I am so consumed with hate all of the time. Could I ever love anyone? I am strong, but my head just doesn't work right. . . . I sound so pitiful. People would laugh at this if they read it. I hate being laughed at. But they won't laugh after they're scraping parts of their parents, sisters, brothers, and friends from the wall of my hate. Oh God, I am so close to killing people. So close. . . . The one reason I don't: Hope. That tomorrow will be better. . . . As soon as my hope is gone, people die. . . . Please. Someone, help me. All I want is something small. Nothing big. I just want to be happy. (PBS Online, 2000)

Kip Kinkel was sentenced in November 1999 to 111 years in prison without possibility of parole.

Garbarino (1999) has found in Kinkel and other adolescent boys who commit violent acts a "crisis of meaninglessness" (p. 154) and a sense of spiritual emptiness that can lead to despair. In contrast to this hopelessness about the future, religious or spiritual beliefs and practices can provide not only hope but also a sense of purpose and a buffering effect in terms of reduced suicide and depression among adolescents (Weaver, Flannelly, Flannelly, Koenig, & Larson, 1998). Participation in religion (e.g., attendance at services or church youth group activities) has been found to be associated with higher levels of hope and positive perceptions of the future, especially in male adolescents (Markstrom, 1999; Trusty & Watts, 1999). According to Thomas and Carver (1990), social competence among adolescents is characterized by an ability to make meaningful plans for the future, and one's level of personal religious commitment has a positive impact on such plans.

Regarding violence by adolescents, several researchers (Benda & Corwyn, 2002; Saunders, 1999; Werner & Smith, 1992) have pointed to the protective effect of religious and spiritual beliefs, involvement, and practices. Benda and Corwyn have concluded that for adolescents who were victims of abuse, religiosity is inversely related to committing violent acts. Saunders found that adolescents who scored high in spirituality, as measured by the Spiritual Orientation Inventory (Elkins, Hedstrom, Hughes, Leaf, & Saunders, 1988), were more likely to cope with crisis situations by being hopeful and proactive and not engaging in self-destructive behavior. Werner and Smith have noted that faith in a higher power and membership in a religious organization tend to be protective factors for adolescents in high-risk environments. Moreover, Trusty and Watts (1999) reported that frequent attendance at religious events and positive perceptions of religion are related to less delinquent behavior and less frequent drug use.

A major challenge of adolescence is identity formation, and an exploration of spirituality or religion can be a meaningful part of that process, opening the way for a consideration of values and other components of a sense of self during the psychosocial moratorium (Erikson, 1968; Markstrom, 1999). Garbarino (1999) suggested: "Spirituality and love can fill in the holes left in

the story of a boy's life and help him develop both a strong positive sense of self and healthy limits. . . . When it is grounded in spirituality and love, religion infuses life with purpose" (p. 155). Overall, research appears to indicate that spiritual and religious factors can play a positive and possibly protective role in the lives of adolescents.

Family Factors

Although schools and communities share in the responsibility for educating and nurturing young people, families have traditionally had the greatest impact on youth development and play a major role in the propensity of adolescents to commit violent acts (Chandras, 1999). The Federal Bureau of Investigation's model for assessing the likelihood that a student will carry out threatened violence focuses on several family risk factors (O'Toole, 2000). These factors include turbulent parent-child relationships, a lack of family intimacy, parental acceptance of pathological behavior in the child, few or no limits on adolescent conduct, and a sense of parental intimidation. Regarding bullying, Neufeld (2002) noted that school interventions may be impeded by family attitudes and behavior that tolerate or make light of insults, putdowns, and hurtful comments and actions by young people. On the other hand, young people who live in families or environments where human rights are respected, where brotherhood and sisterhood are recognized, and where goodwill and empathy toward others are valued are more likely to be insulated from negative moral influences that may contribute to social cruelty and violence (Garbarino, 1999).

Additional challenges that may be indirectly related to the family system and, thus, the adolescent's living environment are posed by the impact of technology (O'Toole, 2000). The popular culture and widespread access to the Internet, other electronic media, and cellular telephones support the ability of young people to "hang out" in an insular society of their peers (Taffel & Blau, 2001). Adolescents spend an average of 3 to 5 hours a day using various forms of media and entertainment such as television, video games, and online activities in which violent images are commonplace (Strasburger & Donnerstein, 2000). A number of studies have concluded that violence on television is consistently associated with aggressive behavior by young people (Singer et al., 1999). To balance the wave of "virtual" electronic impressions absorbed by students, Pipher (1996) urged families to turn off televisions and computers at least one night a week and to spend more time together at meals and outdoors in natural settings. Taffel and Blau (2001) suggested that families should strive to shield themselves from negative cultural influences with an "empathetic envelope" made up of values, expectations, and time spent together.

Synergy of Factors

The factors that influence an adolescent's life do not operate in isolation: They are parts of an interactive, ecological matrix that provides the context for the young person's development and behavior. There is preliminary evidence that spiritual and religious factors may enhance the effect of a strong, supportive

family in helping an adolescent achieve social competence and avoid problematic behavior (Oetting & Beauvais, 1987; Thomas & Carver, 1990). For example, Franke (2000) has found that teenagers who attended religious services with their parents reported lower levels of involvement in all forms of violent behavior. According to Mabe and Josephson (2004), empirical data suggest that religion has indirect, positive effects through family functioning as well as direct, health-promoting benefits for young people.

Research by Trusty and Watts (1999) implied that religiosity and parental involvement, together and separately, have a significant impact on the attitudes and behaviors of young people, and they surmised that religion may help engage adolescents in a positive way with social institutions. One of those institutions is the teenager's school. In a longitudinal study of more than 12,000 teenagers, feelings of connectedness to parents, school, and friends were found to provide protection against a variety of risky or violent behaviors (Resnick et al., 1997). In addition, Markstrom (1999) reported that involvement in a Bible study or youth group and more frequent attendance at religious services were associated with adolescents' school-related self-esteem.

Another area of possible synergy among and between religious, spiritual, and family factors involves the protective effect of a secure attachment bond. Bowlby (1968) documented the effect of security of attachment to a young person's primary caregivers with respect to well-being, violence, and anxiety. He also emphasized that availability of a responsive attachment figure could serve as a remedy to anxiety and fear. In a review of cases of boys who carried out rampage shootings at schools, Gurian (2002) discovered that all of them had experienced one or more of the following elements associated with antisocial behavior: periods of general neglect; some form of violence or abuse; inadequate caregiving; and lack of secure attachment, especially during infancy and puberty.

Kirkpatrick and Shaver (1992) investigated the idea that a personal relationship with God might convey the same benefits as a secure human attachment. They found that adults who reported having a secure relationship with God scored substantially and significantly higher on measures of general life satisfaction and lower on anxiety and loneliness/depression. Moreover, among those who reported insecure attachment relationships with their mothers, the security of an attachment to God was predictive of more secure relationships with other adults. Commenting on these findings, Aalsma and Lapsley (1999) contended that for adolescents, a felt attachment to God might help compensate for a poor or insecure attachment with parents or primary caregivers.

Adults outside the family can also play an important role in the spiritual development of adolescents. Preliminary interviews with a group of Roman Catholic middle school students who were preparing for confirmation suggest that youth ministers can serve as bridge builders to religious beliefs (Hudson, 2003). In a study of Mormon male adolescents, Thomas and Carver (1990) have concluded that in addition to a young person's own religiosity, the family's religious observances at home and the influence of an adult spiritual adviser or mentor are the two most important factors shaping an adolescent's values and future plans.

Increasing Counselor Focus on Spiritual, Religious, and Family Factors

Research indicating the possible relevance of spiritual and religious factors to the prevention of violence by young people has led to calls for counselors to give greater attention to these areas, if appropriate, when working with adolescents (Meyer & Lausell, 1996; Trusty & Watts, 1999). Aalsma and Lapsley (1999) asserted that the developmental challenges of adolescence may be especially amenable to spiritual or religious counseling. Addressing a young person's spiritual or religious beliefs poses a distinct challenge for counselors, especially in school settings. However, by ignoring religious and spiritual factors, a counselor could run the risk not only of failing to use possible protective resources but also of devaluing an adolescent's beliefs and values (Trusty & Watts, 1999). Houskamp, Fisher, and Stuber (2004) reported initial qualitative data suggesting that because many young people experience themselves as spiritual beings, understanding and interacting with them about their spiritual lives can be a significant adjunct to counseling.

Meyer and Lausell (1996) argued that, inadvertently, counselors "may have created a situation in which we shy away from any discussion of values and higher powers, communicating instead a neutrality of values and a belief that we are accountable only to our own senses of right and wrong" (p. 130). They advocated supporting a dialectical process in which young people can critically explore their beliefs. For example, if adolescents disclose and appear invested in certain religious, spiritual, or family values, counselors could assist them in considering whether their behavior is consistent with their stated value system (Trusty & Watts, 1999).

Summary, Conclusion, and Implications

As part of a report on youth violence, the U.S. Surgeon General (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001) evaluated dozens of intervention programs. The most effective programs took a comprehensive approach by mobilizing community resources, improving the social climate of the schools, encouraging positive peer interactions, and promoting parental and family involvement rather than focusing on single elements of the problem. Dwyer, Osher, and Warger (1998) maintained that a sense of partnership and shared responsibility among and between student, school, family, and community is fundamental to the success of school violence prevention efforts.

Some researchers have suggested that an adolescent who is prone to violent behavior might depersonalize others in order to remain strong enough to grapple with immediate challenges, but a preoccupation with daily survival could leave such young people devoid of spiritual "ballast" (Garbarino, 1999; Sandhu, Arora, & Sandhu, 2001). By contrast, a spiritual or religious connection and awareness could provide an impetus toward wellness, compassion, love, meaning, and hope (Miranti & Burke, 1998). The spiritual or religious perceptions and behaviors of adolescents seem to be of importance in psychological and

social development (Trusty & Watts, 1999). To complement their clinical work, some counselors may wish to consider encouraging spiritual or religious awareness in adolescents through retreats or community service projects.

The inclusion of family constructs and the family system in intervention strategies directed toward reducing school violence could also prove to be very useful (Garnezy, 1999; Kumpfer & Alvarado, 2003). Toward this end, school counselors seem to be in a unique position—given their proximity to their clients—to assess which students might benefit from more comprehensive intervention strategies. Such strategies could be targeted toward bolstering family skills, resiliency, and cohesiveness, which in turn might reduce risk factors and enhance protective factors often associated with school violence (cf. Garnezy, 1999; Kumpfer & Alvarado, 2003).

The studies presented here, while indicating promising areas of inquiry, do not directly address all the possible interactions among and between spiritual, religious, and family factors and school violence. Further research in this area is warranted. For example, Benson, Williams, and Johnson (1987) noted that adolescent boys—the most frequent perpetrators of school violence—are more likely to view religion extrinsically, as a set of guidelines or rules to be followed. Girls, on the other hand, are more likely to see religion intrinsically, including a sense of close relationship to God. Some researchers have found that while there are many psychological advantages to an intrinsic orientation, an extrinsic viewpoint of religion has been linked to possible negative outcomes (Aalsma & Lapsley, 1999).

There are several implications for counselors who regard spirituality or religiosity as a crucial part of the whole person. According to Josephson (2004), counselors must decide when, how, and in what depth to discuss spiritual or religious factors with clients, but he added that the importance of these issues for many young people and families leaves the clinician no choice but to face them in as direct a manner as possible. Another challenge, in the view of Trusty and Watts (1999), is learning about, understanding, and respecting diverse religious or spiritual perspectives and values, including ones that may be very different from the counselor's own. They add that counselors, while encouraging religious development and freedom, should take care not to infringe on the rights of students and parents.

The research reviewed in this article indicates that spiritual, religious, and family factors can play a potentially protective role in the lives of adolescents. Such factors seem to contribute to a strengthening of resilience and a minimizing of at-risk behavior that may be associated with youth violence. An awareness of these protective elements with respect to adolescents can provide important resources for counselors who want to enrich the developmental path of young people and help prevent any more tragic incidents of school violence.

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