CONSORTIUM ON NEGOTIATION AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION
Consortium of Georgia Universities for the
Advancement of Conflict Resolution Theory and Education

Working Paper Series #96-1
November 1996

Violence and Violence Prevention Among African American Middle School Children

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A Working Paper for the
Consortium on Negotiation and Conflict Resolution

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November, 1996

Acknowledgments

Note: This work was initially supported by a seed grant from the Consortium on Negotiation and Conflict Resolution. The project was then funded by the U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice (Grant No. 94-U-CX-0062). The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Justice or the Consortium. I am grateful to Demetrius Tyler Williams and Jurinski "Pete" Andrews for help in conducting the interviews and to Sarah Harris, Elizabeth Stark , William Boodie, and Yvette Edwards for help in coding the transcriptions. Skyline Office Services, under the able direction of Sue Thomas, transcribed the interviews.

Abstract

This study contributes to school-based violence prevention programs by describing typical violent interactions. The findings come from the content analysis of transcribed interviews with 58 African-American middle school students who reported their participation in 121 violent incidents. The most frequent opening moves were offensive touching, interfering with possessions, hurtful play (including teasing), backbiting, requests to do something, and insults. About half the incidents occurred in school and a quarter took place at home. Respondents who acted violently often interpreted the situation as one in which they were being attacked or threatened. Other interpretations were that antagonists thought they had done something wrong, or that antagonists were engaged in offensive behavior. In about half the incidents, violent respondents stated that the goal of their violence was retribution, and in a quarter, compliance. Most of those interviewed accepted responsibility for deliberately deciding to be violent. They justified their actions by saying they were acting rationally by retaliating for harmful behavior done to them, punishing others for offensive behavior, or defending themselves, their friends, or their relatives. Incidents often escalated as older family members joined the transaction. Nonviolent responses were discouraged by the bad public image they presented. The paper lists recommendations for school-based conflict resolution that follow from these research findings.

Violent Incidents Among African-American Middle-School Children

This paper describes the situations in which a random sample of African-American middle-school children are violent. I also examine their interpretations of these situations. For those who decided to respond violently, I describe the goals of their violent behavior and how they justify this use of threats or force against others. Such information is important because school-based violence prevention programs need to be built around accurate descriptions of the violent transactions in which students become involved. While research like this has been conducted with adult violent offenders, to my knowledge this is the first attempt to apply such a "social interactionist" approach to African-American middle-school students.

The findings and recommendations presented here come from a field research project. The objective was to carry out basic research using the theoretical framework of "social interactionism." The project was designed so that the findings can be applied to the development of "social-learning" curriculum materials to be used in school-based violence prevention programs. Accordingly variables such as these are explored in this paper:

1. The opening move in the incident,
2. The goals of violent actors,

3. Respondents' interpretations of the situation, and

4. Respondents' accounts (excuses and justifications).

I also explore other factors in this paper that help us design prevention programs such as the relationship between antagonists and the settings where violence occurred. As my research approach has been both qualitative and quantitative, I also include insights gained by the study of transcribed open-ended interviews.

My research emphasis is on the incident as the primary unit of analysis. One advantage of this approach is that it provides data for the accurate construction of reality-based violence prevention programs. These are commonly called such names as social skills training, anger management, cognitive behavioral interventions, social learning, life skills training, behavior-oriented counseling, and conflict resolution. Teachers or specially prepared trainers can deliver such programs, generally based on role playing and simulations, in regular school classes. Such programs aim to alter violent values and behaviors. These social learning and behavioral interventions stress the value of nonviolence, and teach nonaggressive methods of responding, often through structured human relations exercises. Thus, they aim to improve "social skills." My research problem was to tie such classroom curriculum materials to the social reality of violence among African-American middle school children.

Lately there has been an increase in school-based violence prevention efforts. The U.S. Public Health Service report, for example, Healthy People 2000, calls for the "teaching of nonviolent conflict resolution skills in half the nations schools by the end of this decade" (U.S. Department of Education, 1992). The National Institute on Dispute Resolution estimated in

1991 that there were 2,000 dispute resolution programs in schools: in 1994 they estimated 5,000 (Filner, 1994).

While programs increase, however, research and evaluation have yet to provide a substantial foundation on which to create school-based violence prevention policy and programs. Basic research has yet to create an information base for effective program development. As of the date of this report, we still do not know what works in social skills middle-school violence prevention (Tolan and Guerra,1994). Existing evaluations of social learning programs, while scarce, are inconclusive. Others, ongoing, have not yet released their findings. Consequently, some researchers, such as Daniel Webster, the author of "The Unconvincing Case for School-Based Conflict Resolution Programs for Adolescents," (1993) are skeptical of its success.

We lack clear guidelines for violence prevention curriculums, not only because we lack positive evaluation findings but because we lack basic research that can be applied to the question of how to design social skills curriculum in classrooms. School-based violence prevention is in a period of experimentation. It is thus appropriate that some pilot programs are based on the findings of basic research. This study contributes to filling this gap.

Extent of the Violence Problem

The National Crime Victimization Survey is an ongoing national survey of household members more than 12 years old. It tells us that in 1991 the risk of being a victim of violence was greater for those 12 years old than for anyone who was 24 or older (Snyder and Sickmund, 1995). Rates of robbery and simple assault are higher among persons ages 12-15 than they are for any other age group. For example, the simple assault rate for middle-school children 12 or older, is

77.6 per 1000, three times the rate for those 35-49 (Perkins and Klaus, 1996). While numbers of some types of violent crime are declining, the risk of being a victim of simple assault has risen among juveniles ages 12-17. We expect this upward trend to continue. Juvenile arrests for aggravated assault, for example, are projected to rise over the next 15 years: estimates of increase range from 21% to 129% (Snyder and Sickmund, 1995).

The National Crime Victimization Survey also gives us estimates for the rate of non-lethal violence among African-American children of middle-school age. According to this survey, Black males between the ages of 12 and 15 sustained one violent crime for every 14 persons in 1992. This is a rate of victimization much higher than for other ethnic groups. Differences in crimes committed with handguns are particularly great: among those 12 to 15 years old, the rate for black male victims of handguns is five times the white rate. Homicide statistics mirror these data: in 1992, the homicide rate for black males, 12 to 24 years old, was about ten times the rate for whites (Bastian and Taylor, 1994).[1]

Many African-American deaths caused by violence in the United States come from arguments. For example, 173,103 homicides with victims classified as "Black" were reported to the FBI from 1976 to 1992. Two percent were classified as lovers triangles, 4% as argument over money, and 34%, or 57,945, as "other arguments" (Fox, 1994). Seventy-five percent of the African-American homicide victims caused by "other arguments" were 39 years of age or less.

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[1] For other national surveys estimating rates of adolescent violence see also the annual Youth Risk Behavior Survey (Centers for Disease Control) and the National School Crime Supplement to the National Crime Victimization Survey (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1989, and the forthcoming report of a second survey taken in 1995).

Eighty-one percent were male. Disputes, often beginning over trivial matters, are one of the main causes of death for young, African-American males.

The Study of Violent Transactions

In the criminological literature, a conceptual and methodological framework has existed for some time for examining the transactions that lead to criminal violence. This is contained in works by those who favor what is now called a "social interactionist" approach to the study of violence (See especially Felson, 1982; Levi, 1980; Lockwood, 1980; Luckenbill, 1977; Savitz, Kumar, and Zahn, 1991; Tedeschi and Felson, 1994; Toch, 1969). I have followed this theoretical rationale in gathering and analyzing information for my study. In their book supporting this theory of violence, published in 1994, Violence, Aggression, and Coercive Actions, Tedeschi and Felson state:

> The term social interactionist was given to the present theory of coercive actions for two reasons. First, the theory interprets coercive actions as social influence behavior; that is, coercive actions are intended to produce some change in the target person. Second, the theory emphasizes the social interaction between antagonists in coercive interchanges. The relationship between the parties and the dynamics of the interchange between them are central for explaining coercive actions . . . The social interactionist approach could be described as a decision theory . (p.174)

Before the thorough exposition of this theory in Tedeschi and Felson's book, research studies applied such a conceptual framework to homicide. Luckenbill (1977) and Levy (1980), for example, looked at the "opening move" in the violent incident. This is usually an action viewed as offensive by those who respond violently, especially when the victim is known to the offender and can be characterized as an "adversary," (as opposed to a "lover"). As defined by

Luckenbill, the opening move in homicide is an "event performed by the victim and subsequently defined by the offender as an offense to face" (1977, p. 179). He goes on to state:

> What constitutes the real or actual beginning of this or any other type of transaction is often quite problematic for the researcher. The victim's activity, however, appeared as a pivotal event which separated the previous occasioned activity of the offender and victim from their subsequent violent confrontation. Such a disparaging and interactionally disrupting event constitutes the initial move. (p.179)

When we explain violent events through the perspective of violent actors, a key task is to understand how people view the circumstances they are in immediately before acting violently. "Symbolic interactionists" such as Athens (1978), whose work is based on interviews with adult prisoners, presents a detailed description of this idea. According to Athens, this incident-level variable, the violent person's "interpretation of the situation," concerns a decision by violent persons about the probable intentions of their victims and what action to take in response to this understanding. Two steps are involved. First, violent actors put themselves in the place of their opponents and judge the meaning of their actions. Then, they make a judgement about what action to make when faced with this hypothetical course of action.

When Athens analyzed interviews with adult violent offenders, many of whom had been convicted of armed robbery, he concluded that "interpretations of the situation" fell into these categories:

1. The offender believes that the victim is attacking him or an intimate or intends to do so.

2. The offender believes the victim is refusing to comply with his desires.

3. The offender believes that the victim is deriding or belittling him.

4. At first the offender interprets the meaning of the victim's behavior as frustrating his desired course of action and then believes the victim is deriding or belittling him.

Another task of the "social interactionist" when trying to understand violence from the perspective of the violent is to look at "accounts.“ These are the excuses and justifications given to an interviewer by a respondent who has been violent. Such statements are made to explain to others what appears on the face of it to be bad behavior. According to Scott and Lyman (1968), "the study of deviance and the study of accounts are intrinsically related, and a clarification of accounts will constitute a clarification of deviant phenomena." (p.62)

Accounts can be divided into two categories: (a) justifications, when a person accepts responsibility for freely deciding to commit the act but denies the act was wrong because it was "justified" by the circumstances, and (b) excuses, when a person admits the act was wrong but claims that something interfered with his free will to act otherwise. Self-defense and retaliation are examples of justifications. Anger and alcohol use are common examples of excuses.

While we know something of the violent interactions of adult offenders, very little research of this type has been done with middle-school students, especially qualitative ethnographic studies. Research methods that apply the ideas of social interactionists are expensive and time-consuming. For these reasons, such qualitative studies of violence among middle-school students are rare. The general purpose of my study was to fill this gap by answering these questions:

1. What are the characteristics of the situations in which violence occurs among these children? What are the settings, relationships, and opening moves?

2. How do these boys and girls interpret this situation when they respond violently?

3. What are the goals of their violence?

4. What accounts justify their violence?

5. What are the patterns of event sequence that show how these incidents escalate from opening move to final combat?

6. What are the obstacles to nonviolent responses?

7. What recommendations for school-based violence prevention follow from such a social interactionist analysis?

Let us now turn to the research techniques we used to accomplish these goals.

Methodology

Definitions

Following Gelles (1979), I nominally defined violence as "an act carried out with the intention, or perceived intention, of physically injuring another person." This definition I operationalized by the widely used Conflict Tactics Technique scale (Gelles, 1979). Thus, every case in my incident data base has at least one physical indicator of force or violence such as throwing something at the other, pushing, grabbing, shoving, slapping, kicking, hitting with a fist, hitting with an object, threatening with a gun or knife, or using a gun or knife.

The "opening move" was defined as the actual beginning of the transaction, as determined by those coding the interview. It is that activity of the respondent, the antagonist, or a third party that appeared to us as the key event that began the interactional sequence that ended in a violent confrontation. The "interpretation of the situation" was defined as the meaning credited to the behavior of those in the incident by the respondent.

Data Collection

My findings are based on some 700 pages of interview transcriptions from 58 interviews. (The complete text of these interviews will be available from The Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research sometime in 1997.) These recorded conversations explored incident dynamics from the young person's perspective and were concerned with behaviors, emotions, values, and attitudes at different steps of the violent encounter.

We selected fifty-eight respondents randomly from a middle-school population of about 750 in a poor, African-American section of a large southern city. This is one of America's most violent urban areas. The school was in a neighborhood with high rates of reported violence, surrounded by a public housing project, with a reputation for violence. These rumors were confirmed by crime statistics. From 1987 to 1995, 24 homicides occurred at the project. In 1995, one aggravated assault was reported for about every ten residents in the project, a rate much higher than the general U.S. rate.

We conducted these interviews in a school with a student population that had witnessed or heard about recent violent incidents in the school itself and in the areas around their homes. One of these events, which occurred in the school close to the time we were there, was described on the television news and in the newspaper of the city. Such happenings contributed greatly to middle-class black parents abandoning this school and to white families with children abandoning this school district. Two of my respondents describe in these words the setting in which we conducted our field work:

> P5: I remember one day, someone had got into a fight in the hall and they tried to break it up and she got stabbed in the jaw. She's okay now . . . Somebody got shot . . . She paralyzed . . . Another problem, they be taking people's clothes and shoes and if they don't

> get it, they gonna kill them. There's a boy who go to school here, he in the eighth grade. They tried to rob him. They even took his gun. They gave it back though, but they were gonna kill him, but they gave his gun back.

* * *

> P10: It's not really even safe to walk to the candy lady. I remember one time, they just broke out and started shooting. I had to take cover for myself. It ain't safe to go nowhere, really. You never know if somebody start shooting. I don't know why they started shooting. Somebody had a conflict with somebody. There about ten bullets over here, about 15 bullets. They just started shooting in numbers. They just didn't care about nobody, who you is. You be walking by, they just start shooting.

In the neighborhoods our respondents came from, social control mechanisms struggled with the problem. The formal interventions of the criminal justice system were often used. While often distrusted by children, sometimes seen as "white folks" oppressing blacks, the juvenile justice system was invoked by parents seeking to control their children. Personnel social control measures were also used, especially corporal punishments. We see this is the example below:

> P10: My little brother, he go to school here. My mother had to take him to Juvenile Friday. She had to take him to Juvenile 'cause he say he grown, he say he better than her . . . He say, "You think I'm scared or something like that." It ain't about being scared 'cause those white folks don't care about putting you in jail!
>
> I told my Mama, "It ain't about him being locked up. All she got to do is do like she been doing, beating him. But that don't solve nothing either. He still won't act like he want to be grown and all that.

The 58 interviews yielded 121 incidents, our primary unit of analysis. Using formal methods of content analysis, we reduced the interview transcriptions to a quantitative data base, with the incident as the unit of analysis. We also employed a structured method of qualitative analysis, by selecting and indexing interview excerpts, along with the ideas and theories that emerged from them.

Table 1 shows the characteristics of the young people who spoke with us. As we see, our simple random sample selected equal numbers of boys and girls and about the same number of students in grades 6, 7, and 8. The age of the respondents ranged from 11 to 18, with a mean of 13.2 and a standard deviation of 1.4. All but five of these young people described violent incidents to us in which they had been actors. Random selection in this school, thus, was an efficient way of collecting a large set of incidents to analyze, in spite of the difficulties discussed below.

Data Collection Difficulties

Since getting back signed parental permission forms was difficult, we were only able to complete interviews with about 60% of the random sample we selected. The others failed to return permission forms, in spite of our efforts. In more than three months of field research in the school we met with teachers repeatedly about our need for consent forms. We made pleas at faculty meetings. We offered group incentives such as paying the rental of buses for field trips if permission slips were returned. In spite of our diligence, our sample resulted in being biased by the exclusion of children who did not return interview permission forms signed by parents. With this limitation in mind, we may say that the incidents we report here approximate the violent interactions that occur among the children of the population of our selected school.

Interview Method

Following procedures developed in my previous research on prison violence (Lockwood, 1980), we conducted an open-ended interview about involvement in incidents with each person in our sample. Such an interview is also described by Levi (1980) and Toch (1969). Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. In these sessions, held in a private room next to the

counselors' offices, we elicited a description of the behavioral moves and counter-moves in the violent disputes. We also probed for the thoughts and emotions experienced by the interview respondent at each step of the dispute interaction. For the protection of human subjects, interview subjects were identified only by code numbers. My agreement with the school district institutional research review board also called for us to refer to the district as "a large urban school district in the South."

These methods appeared to work, for we learned a great deal about involvement in illegal activities, especially assaults, that were otherwise hidden and unreported. The success of our approach is partially documented by the many students telling us about their involvement as perpetrators of serious violent incidents. If these young people had been reported to the authorities, some would have been liable for serious crimes, including simple assaults, aggravated assaults, and armed robberies.

Data Analysis

Working with transcriptions of the interviews, which ranged from five to 40 pages long, we conducted both quantitative and qualitative analysis, with the incident, not the person, as our unit of analysis. A quantitative data collection instrument slowly developed as the variables and values used to examine the interactions emerged from the interviews. The categories were not constructed in advance, but emerged from the data during coding. Thus, my approach to the problem was inductive. Having asked the "open-ended" questions we did, we could develop "grounded theory," i.e., deriving explanations about the situation after data collection, not before. Let us now turn to the results of our efforts.

Research Findings

Rates and Types of Violence

Ninety percent of the 58 students questioned had been involved in at least one violent incident during the 12 months preceding the interview. The frequency of the different types of violence in these incidents is shown in Table 2. Twelve percent of the respondents had been involved in at least one violent incident in which a threat with a gun was made. In one incident a gun was used. Six youths, all boys, were victims of armed robbery. Two other boys told us about committing armed robberies. One of our respondents, a 13-year-old boy, confessed to us that he had robbed a man outside a shopping mall of $11.50 by holding a gun to his head. His older brother had asked him to come along and rob somebody with him. In two cases, on the sidewalk, antagonists with guns took from respondents the clothes they were wearing at the time, shoes and jackets. In another case some boys tried to take the bicycle of a friend of the respondent, who then fought them. The gains from these armed robberies were very small: $11.50, a video game, a used jacket taken off a victim, chips and soda taken from a youth on his way home from a corner store. None of these events with guns were drug-related. None occurred in school.

Location of Incidents

The location of the opening move in these violent incidents is presented in Table 3. As we see, about half the violent events in these children's lives began in areas under the control of the school such as classrooms, halls, cafeterias, and school buses. The most frequent location for opening moves on school property was the classroom itself, where 38% of the events in schools began. Other common places where incidents began are difficult to supervise areas where larger

numbers of students congregate such as hallways and stairs, school buses and bus stops, cafeterias, and gym and recreation areas. About a quarter of the incidents began in the home, generally inside the house or apartment. Another 25% began in public areas such as streets, sidewalks, or parks, although here occurred the most serious confrontations, robberies or attempted robberies with guns.

Gender, Age, and Grade

From the view of both frequency and severity, the problem was nearly as severe for girls as it was for boys. The mean number of incidents for boys is 2.2. For girls it is 1.9. This difference is so slight that the T-test showed no statistically significant difference on gender. While no girls were victims of armed robbery, in the school itself girls carried out all the incidents in which knives were used.

The frequency of violence differed little by age or by grade. When an analysis of variance was carried out, looking at the mean number of incidents for the ages 12, 13, 14, and 15, no statistically significant differences on age were found. Similarly, no statistically significant differences were found for the mean number of incidents for the grades 6, 7, and 8.

The ecology of violence in these situations caused respondents and antagonists to have generally the same characteristics. In schools and public places boys tended to fight with boys and girls with girls, although there were many exceptions. In the home, however, sisters often fought with brothers. We estimated the age of the antagonists from the respondents' narratives, finding that opposing parties tended to be in similar age ranges. One reason for this is that many incidents occurred in school, where actors of similar ages are forced to congregate together. Also, since the participants in incidents were often friends or acquaintances, and middle-school

children associate with those of the same age and sex, antagonists shared the same demographic characteristics.

Relationship

As we see in Table 4, most of the participants in these events were known to each other. Many were intimates, i.e., family members and friends. Of the 23 incidents between family members, 22 were fights between brothers, sisters, and cousins, who were often living in the household. Only five percent were strangers, with these cases being robberies. The example below illustrates a typical incident between a sister and her brother in their home:

> P14: Last night we had a fight because he tried to wear my shoes. I got some new shoes and he tried to wear them. I told him he can't wear my shoes and he says "I can wear 'em if I want to."
>
> Then my Mama say, "I bet you don't wear her shoes."
>
> I say, "I betcha, too." Then he hit me, and we just got in a fight. My Mama came down and broke it up.
>
> He said, "I'm gonna wear your shoes tomorrow to school."
>
> I said, "You can't wear them, they are too little."
>
> He said "They ain't too little, yes I can wear them."
>
> Then my Mama say "You ain't going to want to wear those girl's shoes."
>
> He say, "I betcha I do."
>
> My Mama say, "What you say?"
>
> He say, "I ain't say nothing." And then he got my shoes. He say, "I can throw them on top of the house."
>
> I say, "No, you won't."

Then, next thing I know he had hit me, and then I say, "You still ain't wearing my shoes. I don't care if you do hit me." Then we got in a fight. I pushed him off the bed. He tried to throw them on top of the house. He hit me in the mouth. We got in a fight . . . He got mad because his shoes were tore up. He got a bike, but he ain't got no brakes, so he slam them.... Then we just got in a fight. He hit me, and then when I pushed him back, he looked like he was gonna run from me. He was gonna hit me and run so when I caught him I hit him back . . . I grabbed him . . . He had hit me but he didn't hit me no where in my face because he know my Mama would be mad about hitting me in the face, so he hit me in the arm. So, when I caught him in the house in the kitchen, I pushed him up against the table.

He say "I don't want to hit you." I had picked up the broom and I hit him. .. See he kicked me. We were just playing then but he hit me in the arm and it hurt so I got for real on him. He hadn't ought to hit me in the arm or try to throw my shoes on top of the house

Dan: What was on your mind when you picked up the broom?

P14: I said, "Now I won't be hit."

Dan: After you hit him with the broom, what did he do?

I say, "He hit me in the arm and kicked me."

Then she say, "All right, y'all are going to be under punishment for two weeks." She made me go in my room, made him go in his room, and then about an hour later, she made us apologize. I didn't want to apologize, but he did.

The Opening Move

Table 5 presents the frequency of the categories in our typology of opening moves. Five types of opening moves began most of these incidents. These are the following: (a) offensive touching or "attacks," (b) interfering with possessions, (c) rough play, (d) backbiting, and (e) requests to do something. From these key events began most of the transactions that ended in violence.

Events we classified as "offensive touching or physical attacks" were the most frequent opening moves. ("Robberies with weapons or physical force" and "rough physical play" formed

separate categories in our typology.) In cases where interfering with possessions was accompanied by offensive touching or physical attacks, coders chose which type of event seemed primary. The "operational definition" of offensive touching or attack looked to the behavior of the one who made the opening move, as described by the respondent. "Offensive touching and physical attack" was thus defined to include opening actions in the transaction where one party, apparently unprovoked, for no reason explained by the respondent, throws something, pushes, grabs, shoves, slaps, kicks, or hits with an object or a fist. While "bullying," and "intimidation" might be terms that apply to many of these events, these concepts refer to the intentions of antagonists, of which we lacked precise knowledge. Below are examples of opening moves we coded as "offensive touching or physical attacks":

> P1: When I first started school, I had a whole bunch of trouble. I had school fights. For three days, they tried to jump on me, take my materials. We had to go the office. Every time I left school they would jump me.
>
> * * *
>
> P6: It happened last week about 12:45. This boy hit me on my cheekbone, and I just backed off. I didn't hassle. I just said, "I didn't do nothing wrong." It happened at lunch time. That's about it.
>
> Dan: Do you know why he hit you?
>
> P6: No. He said something, I didn't say anything. He just hit me.
>
> P6: Once, another time. We were in Social Studies. This person slapped me the other side of the head and I got up and said "Don't hit me no more." He slapped me again. But that was my first fight like that. Then I talked to the principal and we both got an in-school suspension, which meant we could be in school, but we were suspended.
>
> Dan : Who made the first move?
>
> P6: He did.

Dan: What did he do?

P6: He hit me up side the head.

Dan: And what did you do to have him hit you?

P6: Nothing.

Dan: You didn't say anything?

P6: No.

Dan: And then after he hit you, what did you do?

P6: I said, "Don't hit me again, just leave me alone." Then he kept on hitting me. And then he hit me two times. I got up and I started hitting back.

* * *

P7: Well, we was in this science class and my science teacher had asked me to take names on the board and I took the names, I had his name on the board . . . Then another girl took names and the teacher told her to keep the names that I had took on the board, and she forgot one name, so I told her and he told me not to say anything. Then I had said it, and he slapped me. Then I got up and then I just started fighting . . . I got mad and then everything did break loose and I just started fighting . . . I got up and I hit him. Then he hit me. Then I started punching him and he started punching me, and then my friend jumped in. A girl . . . She jumped on his desk and started punching him in his head.

The public view of adolescent violence being based on such things as gang warfare and drug dealing is often a subjective construction of reality. In my study, as we see by Table 5, we found violence to be more likely caused by such seemingly trivial events as "backbiting." This common opening move we defined as an act where one person said or was thought to have said something bad about another person, who finds out about it. Below are examples:

P7: We were in the classroom and we was talking, and being I had said something, and then this other girl, I had been talking to this other girl, she went back and told her. And then the same girl who told her went on and told a story about what I had said. And then my friend wanted to fight, and then I told her, "Come on, then."

* * *

P9: She say, "You not my friend." Her friend say I call her a B.. and all that.

I say, "I never call you a B. . . . She kept on pushing and hitting me and when we got into the classroom she called her cousin, started hitting me. I started hitting her. Then the teacher broke up the fighting and sent us to the office.

Respondents' Interpretation of the Situation

We defined "Interpretation" as the meaning given by the respondent to the behavior of the antagonists and the third parties following the opening move. This tells us how the opening move was understood and appreciated in the light of the respondent's beliefs, judgments, interests or circumstances. As we see in Table 6, the largest category, in which 41% of the incidents fall, is the interpretation that antagonists are attacking the respondent or an intimate. These comments, in which respondents use pronouns referring to antagonists and then judge their intentions, illustrates this concept:

They be picking on me.

They trying to take my materials.

She started to get serious.

He hurt me.

Respondents also often interpreted the situation as one in which they were treated wrongly and offensively in ways other than being attacked or threatened. They also believed that

their antagonists thought that they themselves had done something wrong. Then, the violence that followed was a punishment response, an act carried out to manage bad behavior.

Justifications and Excuses

An account is a statement given to a listener by a person who has done something that can be considered deviant. Some accounts are justifications, words that deny the wrongfulness of behavior. Others are excuses; they accept that the behavior is wrong but claim that actors had no control over their actions. Looking at accounts for violence is important because they tell us about some ideas (beliefs, values, attitudes) that govern behavior. Table 7 presents the typology of accounts used in our incident narratives. As we see, justifications are used far more often than excuses. This implies that students viewed their violent behavior as rational and explained it as following from a decision-making process that judged violence to be justified by the circumstances.

The most frequent justification was "retaliation for harmful behavior." Here antagonists were often the first to carry out acts of physical violence or offensive touching. Then, when respondents responded violently, they could deny that the antagonist was a victim because, from the perspective of the violent middle-school student, the antagonist deserved the retaliation that he received. Below are examples of justifications of this type:

> "I was over there minding my business and he came over and clipped me up side my head . . . I hit him and then we got into a fight."

> "He hit me first."

> "He took the cards out of my hand and threw them at me and then he threw a shoe at me and then I hit him back."

"She kept on hitting and pushing me."

"We were playing and he started hurting me."

Threats also justified violence. These are examples:

"Girl was threatening me."

"She put her hand in my face."

The next most frequent type of justification is that the behavior of the antagonist, while not physically harmful, offended the actor, as we see by these examples:

"I got mad because she was talking behind my back."

"He put his hands in my lasagna."

"I don't like nobody to steal from me. Don't lie to me."

"She had no business calling me those kind of names."

"She was doing something she shouldn't be doing."

Appeal to loyalties is also a frequent justification. We see examples below:

"If she slaps my cousin, I'm going over there."

"He hit my sister so I hit him."

Students also justified violence as a self-defense measure, a strike logically calculated to stop a continuing course of victimization, as one student said, “If I didn't hit him back he was gonna keep on hitting on me."

The excuses listed in Table 7 are far less common than the justifications. This means that students seldom explained their violence as the result of factors that interfered with free will such as anger, alcohol, or drugs. The most common of these infrequent excuses was that violent

students were reluctant actors pushed into a fight by an antagonist. For example, while reluctant at first, this young person tells us how he eventually yielded to requests and challenges.

> I got into a fight with one of my best friends. He said that he wanted to fight me but I didn't want to fight him. So, I told him to go ahead and hit me. When he hit me, I hit him back. Then when I hit him, he fell on the ground. I started hitting him in the face. Then I said, "I don't want to fight you, you'll just get hurt."

Anger, surprisingly, was seldom offered as an excuse. When it was, it was often described as a response to pain that followed from teasing or rough play. We heard explanations such as "I was upset and took it seriously." For example:

> I had another friend and we were wrestling and he hit me in the nose and I got mad and I hit him back and we started fighting. He starting hitting, but I blocked him and punched him in the eye and went home.

Goals of Violence

In 91 of the 121 incidents these middle school students made a clear decision to respond violently after the sequence of events had begun. In the other cases, respondents were victims of offensive touching or physical attacks and chose not to fight back. The goals of their violence are reported in Table 8. As we see, retribution, compliance, and self-defense or defense of others are the most common goals. Let us now turn to an examination of factors that must be considered when creating guidelines for effective conflict resolution programs.

Obstacles to Non-Violent Solutions

Violent subcultures are partly maintained by pressures to avoid peaceful solutions to confrontations. One of these obstacles to walking away from trouble is "impression management." When young people fail to respond violently when it is expected, they risk

creating a flawed public image. This can have practical and psychological consequences since appearing as weak can accelerate subsequent victimization.

The example below illustrates the dynamics of a nonviolent response where the opening move is "rough play." The boy who refuses to fight is influenced by his mother, who has successfully pleaded with him to avoid fighting. Nevertheless, nonviolence has its costs.

> P5: I see him when we play football, we're on a team . . . He taller than me . . . He go on my friend had pushed him in the mud by mistake, he go up in my face and then he say after the game we gonna fight and I won't fight him. I start walking home and he start talking about this stuff and I went around the corner. He gonna tell everyone he beat me up . . . Then he want to be friends . . . He thought I was scared of him, but I just didn't want to fight.
>
> Dan: So how come you just walked away, you didn't fight with him?
>
> P5: I don't know, I just didn't want to fight. My Ma told me just walk away.
>
> Dan: Then, how did you feel when they told you afterwards they thought you were afraid?
>
> P5: It hurt my feelings. I just say I don't feel like fighting.... They say so you a sissy boy, but I ain't, I just don't feel like fighting.

Escalation of Incidents by Older Family Members

Serious violence can result from seemingly trivial opening moves and counter-responses as incidents escalate. Often this is because family members of increasingly older ages get pulled into the escalating transaction. Consequently, negotiation and conflict resolution programs need to look beyond the school. Mediators of school conflicts need to be able to work in neighborhoods. They should be prepared to influence older family members who might move in to retaliate against those whom they perceive to have harmed their children, younger brothers or sisters, or cousins.

A typical example is the incident described below. It began at home between neighbors. Then it was continued on the school bus by children. The final episode was on the street, at the school bus stop, between the mother of a child and the school children she fought with on the bus. The respondent, having once begun the conflict in the neighborhood, was forced with her antagonists on the bus. In this sense, schools, similar to other institutions like prisons, helped the violence by forcing together victims and offenders in "back against the wall" situations from which they cannot flee.

While school officials, here the principal, may diligently intervene in the affairs of students, they also need to be aware of outside family members becoming involved.

> P10: I used to stay in my house, keep me out of trouble, do what I was supposed to do, come home, do my homework. I might stay on the porch, listen to the radio. One day, I was at home. Mama used to work all the time, so there wasn't nobody really there with us but my older brother, but he wasn't there because he was out doing wrong, and we stayed home all the time.
>
> This lady, she came up to our house and I told her there wasn't nobody at the house and I guess she felt I was being smart with her so she went and got her dog and the girl who was supposed to be so bad and fighting me and be so much of a bully, all her little friends that she hang around, and they came, talking about jumping me. I just told them, "You know what I'm saying. Get out from in front of my door..." They tell me to come out. They start cussing, but I ain't go out there . . .
>
> The next day I get up and get ready to go to school. They standing at the bus stop and they went to the same school I did, elementary school. They were just talking and stuff like that, insulting me. So, I got on the bus. They were calling me a lot of names. I still wasn't saying anything. Then one of them, she came up behind me, pushed upside my head. I still wasn't doing anything because back then I was scared . . . now I know. Then she pushes me... and me and her get in a fight. Then, they jumping on me. A great big girl on the bus that I ain't even socialized with, she hit me.
>
> The driver told me come to the front . . . When we got to school the principal came down. The principal, she knew they were bad. They were rude. They were talking all out of turn. I told her what happened. She just told me if I have any more problems to let her know.

> The bus driver knew what was going on, too. Like I had told the truth, so he knew what was going on . . . She suspended them, threw them off the bus.
>
> We got home, my Mama went out there and fought all of 'em. She beat all of 'em up. When they got home, when we got home, my Mom got in a fight with them. I told her when I got home everything that was going on, and I told her don't worry about it because by her being an adult and them being children, she would go to jail and I wouldn't see my Mama.
>
> She went there . . . it made me feel bad to see her go out there and act like that . . . That she could go to jail, who was going to watch us . . . 'cause my Mama wasn't going to be able to watch us . . . My Mama, she 51 years old, I mean, but she don't look like it. She don't act like it either . . . She act like the children out there . . . tell my Mama, "Don't do that," but don't nobody call the police, so I was glad for that.

Implications and Recommendations

Many events described in this paper occurred in classrooms, during activities supervised by teachers. Others occurred during organized recreational activities under the direction of youth leaders. This shows the limits of custodial or supervisory solutions to the problem and raises the possibility that congregating youth in organized programs itself contributes to the problem. Where young people such as these are brought together by community and educational agencies, violence is likely and staffs have a responsibility to deploy violence prevention strategies.

In schools with high rates of violence, prevention programs, run by teachers, integrated into the regular curriculum, would have a plentiful supply of real life events occurring amid them that could be material for instructional purposes. The interactional dynamics and the values that play out in classroom incidents are very similar to violent events occurring in other environments in these children's lives. This clearly points out the central role the classroom can have in school-based violence prevention.

Certain popular policies seemingly would have little impact on the events described in this paper. Regarding calls for teen curfews, for example, one should note that most of the violent incidents reported to us occurred at school, in the home, or in structured institutional recreation programs, settings that would be unaffected by curfews. Also, while drug law enforcement is often linked to violence prevention, and many arguments have been made associating youth violence with the drug traffic, in this study we found otherwise. Armed robbery was the opening move most associated with handgun use among the middle school children in our study. The incidents with lower levels of violence concerned events other than drugs such as unprovoked offensive touching, interfering with possessions, backbiting, and noncompliance.

My analysis of these incidents leads to these recommendations for violence prevention for middle-schools with African-American students:

1. Since most students are likely to become involved in incidents, despite age or gender or grade, programs should target the entire population of the school. A minority male emphasis is misguided.

2. Interventions should focus in part on reducing the incidence of opening moves that begin violent scenarios. Many of these take place on school property, often in classrooms. Offensive touching, interfering with possessions, rough play and teasing, and backbiting should be viewed as behaviors with a high risk of leading to violence that are preventable.

3. Interventions should also focus on training young people to manage the inevitable confrontations that begin by requests met by noncompliance. Interactive conflict resolution

exercises, simulations for role playing, should be based on scenarios created from this sequence, that is, a request met by noncompliance.

3. Since most violence in the home is between siblings and cousins, it is recommended that interactive social learning programs practice through role playing nonviolent ways of resolving conflicts at home with brothers, sisters, and cousins.

4. As we have seen in my analysis of the "interpretation of the situation," an important connection exists between students feeling that they are attacked and their violent behavior. It is recommended that interactive social learning programs teach middle-school students ways of responding nonviolently when they interpret situations like this.

5. Our analysis of justifications and excuses suggests guidelines for the values and attitudes that should be targeted for change. Above all, these include changing the belief that physical retaliation is an acceptable justification for violence.

6. The data on location presented here imply that schools and homes should be the settings targeted for violence prevention training. Fortunately, these locations are environments inhabited by small groups of persons well known to each other, in stable relationships. The antagonists in conflicts are often in these small groups. This is a situation offering good potential for successful prevention efforts based on social learning models.

7. Our data show that robbery was the opening move in incidents involving guns. There is little that school-based conflict resolution training can be expected to do about this. It is recommended that measures be taken to reduce the large numbers of inexpensive handguns that are available to the young people who prey on African-American children in poor neighborhoods.

8. Given that the violent incidents begun by middle-school children often escalate by pulling in older family members, it is recommended that mediators who receive early warning signs of conflicts not only concern themselves with the children involved but also reach out to their parents, brothers and sisters, and cousins.

9. School-based conflict resolution programs need to be very sensitive to the strong chance that nonviolent ways of avoiding quarrels will be rejected because of the bad impression that refusing to fight when the situation calls for it makes on others. The solution of this problem calls for campaigns to change the way the entire school population views such factors as justifications for violence. The involvement of students themselves in the planning of such campaigns should help to devise realistic ways of overcoming this obstacle to change.

In conclusion, we suggest that these policies and programs for school-based violence prevention that are consistent with or perhaps inspired by the empirical findings of this report and that focus on the specific aspects of incidents examined in our work, may help to reduce the incidence of violence among African-American Middle-School children.

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Tables

Table 1
Characteristics of Interview Respondents

	Number	Percent	Mean Incidents
Gender			
Male	29	50%	2.24
Female	29	50%	1.93
Total	58	100%	2.09
Grade			
6	21	36%	2.42
7	17	29%	2
8	20	35%	1.8
Total	58	100%	
Age			
11	3	5%	3.33
12	16	28%	2.19
13	15	26%	2
14	18	31%	1.83
15	4	7%	1.75
16	1	2%	3
18	1	2%	3
Total	58	100%	

Note: The T-test for the mean difference for number of incidents by gender was not statistically significant. Similarly, Analysis of Variance for grade or age showed no statistically significance differences.

Table 2
Type of Violence in Incidents Among African -American Middle School Students

	Number of incidents where behavior occurred at least once	Percent of total incidents (n=121)
Threw something	18	15%
Pushed, grabbed, shoved	57	47%
Slapped	24	20%
Kicked/bit/hit with fist	78	64%
Hit with something	13	11%
Beat up	12	10%
Threatened with gun	8	7%
Threatened with knife	8	7%
Used knife	1	1%
Used gun	2	2%

Note: Percentages do not equal 100% because these can be multiple responses.

Table 3
Location of the Opening Move in Violent Incidents Among African-American Middle School Students

	N	%
School locations (subtotal)	**(64)**	**(55%)**
Classroom	24	20.5%
Hall or stairs	15	12.8%
School Bus	6	5.1%
Physical Education: Gym (5), Locker room (1), Playing fields (1)	7	6.0%
Cafeteria	5	4.3%
Outside school, on grounds	3	2.6%
Other location in school	1	0.9%
School recreation room	2	1.7%
School bathroom	1	0.9%
Home locations (subtotal)	**(27)**	**(23%)**
Inside home	22	18.8%
Outside home, on property	5	4.3%
Public areas (subtotal)	**(27)**	**(23%)**
Sidewalk or street	14	12.0%
Outside public basketball court	2	1.7%
Other area of park, including playground, pool (1)	3	2.6%
Outside commercial establishment, store, mall, etc.	2	1.7%
Travel to school: walking to bus (1), waiting for bus (1)	2	1.7%
Other: Church recreation room (1) , Summer camp (2), Social work agency recreation room (1)	4	3.4%
Total, all locations	118	101%

Table 4
Relationship between Respondent and Antagonist in Incidents among African-American Middle-School Students

	Number	Percent
Acquaintance	73	62%
Relative	23	19%
Friend (as declared by respondent)	16	14%
Stranger	6	5%
TOTAL	118	100%

Table 5
Opening Moves in Violent Incidents Among African-American Middle School Students

	Number	Percent
Offensive touching, including unprovoked attack: someone, apparently unprovoked, for no reason explained by the respondent, throws something at, pushes, grabs, shoves, slaps, kicks, or hits someone else.	24	20%
Possessions: taking or harming possessions or interfering with something someone is using (but not robbery)	18	15%
Play: verbal teasing (playful put downs, called "Jonesing" by our respondents) or rough physical play, including sports such as basketball.	17	14%
Backbiting: one person said or was thought to have said something bad about another person, who finds out about it and confronts the "backbiter."	14	12%
Request to do something: (followed by noncompliance or a defiant comment)	11	9%
Insults: not meant to be playful	9	8%
Armed robbery with gun	8	7%
Accusations of wrongdoing	2	2%
Advances to boyfriend or girlfriend of actor	2	2%
Challenges: physical or nonverbal gestures	1	1%
Defense of others	1	1%
Threats of physical harm	1	1%
Told authority figure about bad behavior of actor	1	1%
Debate over politics	1	1%
Other actions perceived as offensive	9	8%
TOTAL	119	102%

Table 6. The Interpretation of the Situation by Respondents

	Number	Percent
Physical attack: Antagonist is physically attacking me or my friend or relative.	48	41%
Accusation: Antagonist thought I said something bad about him	10	9%
Threat: Antagonist is threatening me or my friend or relative	10	9%
Challenge: Antagonist is challenging me	3	3%
Robbery: Antagonist is trying to rob me	4	3%
Dislike: Antagonist does not like me	1	1%
Target: Antagonist looks vulnerable to robbery	1	1%
Bystander: Antagonist is arguing with someone else and shooting starts	1	1%
Other bad behavior: Antagonist is otherwise doing something wrong	39	33%
Total	117	100%

Table 7
Accounts: Justifications and Excuses for Violence by African-American Middle School Students

	Number	Percent
Justifications		
Retaliation for harmful behavior	36	38%
Behavior otherwise offended the actor	15	16%
Appeal to loyalties: aid friend or relative	11	11%
Self-defense or stop victimization	7	7%
Behavior threatened the actor	6	6%
Antagonist refused request	3	3%
Antagonist swung first	1	1%
Other	2	2%
Excuses		
Pushed into it by antagonist	6	6%
Free will impaired by anger	4	4%
Unintentional: Did not mean to do it	4	4%
TOTAL	96	100%

Note: although the data come from 121 incidents the total number in this table is 95: 22 respondents are excluded who did not respond violently when attacked, and in four incidents accounts were missing.

Table 8
Goals of Middle School Respondents who Acted Violently

	Number	Percent
Retribution: punish person for what they did. Restore justice	50	55%
Compliance: get person to stop offensive course of action	23	25%
Self-defense	8	9%
Defend other person	4	4%
Save face or defend honor	3	3%
Join friends in attack	2	2%
States that response is not rational	1	1%
TOTAL	91	100%