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# School Violence Assessment: A Conceptual Framework, Instruments, and Methods

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This article outlines a philosophical and theoretical framework for conducting school violence assessments at the local level. The authors advocate that assessments employ a strong conceptual foundation based on social work values. These values include the active measurement of ecological factors inside and outside the school that reflect the circumstances of each community, empower school constituents, and provide formal mechanisms for school and community participation in the assessment and intervention process. On the basis of these concepts, specific internal and external areas of assessment of school safety are reviewed. Methodological and technical issues are examined, such as the selection of appropriate data sources, the design of instruments, and ensuring the quality of self-report data.

KEY WORDS: *assessment; empowerment; instruments; methods; school violence*

Social workers involved in education as practitioners, researchers, and advocates have routinely argued that school safety policy and interventions should be based on sound scientific evidence and data (Astor, Benbenishty, Marachi, & Meyer, 2006; Astor, Rosemond, Pitner, Marachi, & Benbenishty, 2006; Stone & Gambrill, 2007). In fact, evidence-based practices surrounding school safety and other areas have become a cornerstone of social work practice (Stone & Gambrill, 2007). This focus on evidence is even more pressing for social workers engaged with school reform and school safety interventions because most federal and state guidelines now require evidence of effectiveness for funding purposes. In the current climate of local school accountability, social workers and educators alike are often charged with a dual focus of employing evidence-based programs (EBP) and demonstrating local effectiveness of the programs at the school site level (Astor, Benbenishty, et al., 2006; Astor, Meyer, Benbenishty, Marachi, & Rosemond, 2005; Benbenishty, Astor, & Zeira, 2003). These tasks require ongoing assessment of school safety issues.

This ongoing assessment process is critical in centralized educational systems (such as school

districts and state departments of education), where the allocation of school safety resources (for example, the number of school social workers or the amount of fiscal resources distributed among schools in a local area) is influenced by the media and personal perceptions surrounding the nature and scope of the problem in each school. Such intuitive perceptions may be erroneous as a result of many factors (see Gambrill, 2005, for a review). Hence, systematic assessment of school safety issues is essential to help build the foundation for school- and district-level accountability.

Although many school safety programs are implemented by social workers, social work perspectives on the structure, content, or implementation of school safety assessments are rare in the school social work literature (Astor, Marachi, & Benbenishty, 2006; Astor et al., 2005). In this article, we argue that social workers and academicians associated with school social work should advocate for routine ecological assessments that could be supported at the district, state, and regional levels. The article presents a rationale on why social workers and educators should work toward ongoing school safety assessments at the local site level and parallel district levels. It examines the variables included in an

ecological school safety assessment and discusses multiple sources and perspectives that can be used to conduct such assessments.

### **WHY SOCIAL WORKERS SHOULD BE CONCERNED WITH ONGOING LOCAL SCHOOL SAFETY ASSESSMENTS**

One striking feature of school violence centers on the heterogeneity of schools in their levels of violence within the same cultures (Benbenishty & Astor, 2005). Even more surprising, heterogeneity of violence exists in schools within the same neighborhoods (Benbenishty & Astor, 2005). Research indicates that some schools may have up to five times more violence than other schools within similar geographic boundaries (Benbenishty & Astor, 2005; Olweus, 1993). One reason for this variation stems from the fact that in many schools, students, teachers, and the school social dynamics continually change, leading to varying degrees of the problem over time. The fluid nature of school violence highlights the need for ongoing assessments in each school as a core component in the intervention process. Careful ongoing assessments within each school should help paint a picture of the unique circumstances and drive interventions suited for each school.

However, even though the need for such assessments is recognized by national laws that require local school safety assessments, very few schools collect this detailed local data (Astor & Benbenishty, 2005). For instance, No Child Left Behind requires schools to measure school safety to determine whether they are "persistently dangerous." Despite this requirement, most schools across the United States do not conduct surveys or report to the public any form of systemic assessment. For example, none of the 9,000 schools in California are designated as "persistently dangerous" (Astor & Benbenishty, 2006). And although the Los Angeles Unified School District, with more than 700,000 students and hundreds of schools, has recently promised to invest many resources in 14 schools it has publicly stated are believed to be dangerous, the selection of these schools did not emerge from a systemic collection of data but were, rather, identified on the basis of articles and stories in

the *Los Angeles Times*. This means that problem schools are identified mainly by the local, state, or national media. These kinds of safety judgments in the absence of any systematic data are happening in many districts across the country (Astor, Benbenishty, et al., 2006).

Reliance on newspaper articles and local television news for stories surrounding school violence is a highly unreliable way of designating schools as "dangerous" and may erroneously be reinforcing class and ethnic stereotypes. In Los Angeles, for example, all of the 14 designated schools are located in low-income communities and serve students of color. How might social workers in such large districts advocate for a comprehensive assessment that empowers students, family, and teachers to communicate their views and experiences rather than relying exclusively on newspaper articles or television news stories? How can the process of school safety assessments be aligned with social work values of community voice, continuous participation, and capacity building?

Social work, as a profession, has long advocated for interventions that include the voices, participation, solutions, and input from the entire community. School safety assessments, if done in partnership with each individual community, can offer a solution to this problem. Knowing the scope of the violence problem at each school site—from the perspective of all the constituents—honors a long-held social work belief that interventions should reflect and be responsive to the unique circumstances and needs of each community, should empower constituents, and should provide mechanisms for community participation (Astor, Benbenishty, et al., 2006; Astor, Benbenishty, & Meyer, 2004; Benbenishty & Astor, 2005; Benbenishty et al., 2003).

There are other reasons why social workers should advocate for comprehensive assessments at the local site. Widespread confusion over the role of evidence-based practices is one key reason. In the districts and schools there is often confusion surrounding the interplay between selection and implementation of EBPs and the need for local assessment. It should be clear that implementation of programs proven

effective elsewhere should not preclude local ongoing assessment in each new site using the program. This assessment process is imperative because often EBPs were developed and tested in ecological settings that differ significantly from those in which they are being implemented (for example, a program may have been tested in rural Minnesota or suburban Washington with mainly white students but then adopted as an EBP in inner-city New York or Los Angeles with Latino or African American populations). Therefore, EBP's effectiveness in different ecological-cultural settings cannot be assumed.

Furthermore, mainly for economical reasons, districts tend to implement one EBP for a whole district, regardless of the huge variations in circumstances, scope of the problem, and needs of the different schools within the same district (Astor & Benbenishty, 2005). Given such issues, social workers should advocate for the implementation of EBPs and at the same time ensure local assessments are conducted and monitored systematically to help decide which programs are appropriate to implement at local school sites.

### **A CONCEPTUAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL SOCIAL WORK FRAMEWORK FOR USING DATA AT LOCAL LEVELS**

So, why aren't school ecological assessments at the local school level done more often? We think there are several reasons for this, including the lack of a conceptual model to use data, the unclear focus on how data could or should be used in the community in a manner consistent with social work values, and the confusion over ways to use or interpret data from multiple sources and perspectives. Furthermore, social work literature lacks theoretical discussions that could guide these kinds of assessments. The need for ongoing assessments at each school not only should be pragmatic, but also should be aligned with social work values and theoretical perspectives. For example, we have argued in our work that a social work assessment process should be part of an ongoing practice that empowers all school constituents (Astor, Benbenishty, et al., 2006; Astor, Benbenishty, & Meyer, 2004;

Benbenishty & Astor, 2005; Benbenishty et al., 2003). The following sections detail our views on how to approach these issues.

### **Comprehensive Ecological Framework**

In many prior articles, we describe a social work ecological model that uses multilevel contextual data in the development and implementation of interventions at the local level (for detailed examples of the model, see Astor & Benbenishty, 2005; Astor & Benbenishty, 2006; Astor, Benbenishty, et al., 2006; Benbenishty & Astor, 2007; Benbenishty et al., 2003). Our work emphasizes the importance of student, teacher, principal, and parent input as the core decision-making components in adapting EBP school safety interventions. Data from these groups continually inform each stage in the whole cycle of building awareness to the problem of violence in school, mobilizing the school to take action, planning school responses, implementation, evaluation, new assessment, and replanning (see Astor, Benbenishty, et al., 2006). This conception of gathering the voices and opinions of all community members through surveys is an ecological assessment that is different from other "pre and post" forms of assessments of schools safety programs (Astor, Benbenishty, et al., 2006; Astor, Benbenishty, & Meyer, 2004; Benbenishty & Astor, 2005; Benbenishty et al., 2003).

In this model, reports and information provided by members of the school community, including students, parents, teachers, and administrators, allow each constituency to democratically identify needs, limitations, strengths, and resources so that choices can be made regarding which intervention components to implement. Moreover, the process of implementing school safety programs is conceived of as continuous and always changing to respond to emerging needs of the school community. Having data at the individual school-site level from these groups can contribute to the understanding of whether that specific school has a school violence problem and what are the characteristics of this problem, the adaptation of a school safety program to a specific school, and the evaluation of the implementation process and outcomes of the program over time.

We suggest reframing this social feedback cycle by viewing it as an important empowering and democratic process that engages the school community in shared decision making (for example, Astor, Benbenishty, et al., 2006; Astor, Marachi, & Benbenishty, 2006; Astor, Rosemond, et al., 2006; Benbenishty et al., 2003). Hence, the initial assessment phase gathers the opinions, reports, and feelings from all school constituents with the goal of increasing their involvement in the school community. Inclusive democratic polling of diverse views helps to empower all school constituents who can then collectively voice their unique experiences within the school. Finally, sharing the findings publicly contributes to collective decision making and a sense of community empowerment.

### **Altering How Assessment Is Understood and Presented Back to the School Community**

Processes involved in implementation of the assessment affect the quality of the assessment. The most important variable affecting implementation pertains to the way assessment itself is perceived by all the school constituents. For instance, school violence, as a topic, is a politically charged social problem. It raises emotions such as fear and blame (Yeh, 2006). Assessments are often used as part of a political process that puts blame on schools, punishes educators and families, and deflects responsibility from the school district. District-level administrators may want to assess levels of violence in certain targeted schools to publicly show how violent these schools are (for example, to justify removal of staff at that school). We find that principals are often distrustful of the hidden motivations for assessments when they occur haphazardly or in only a handful of schools. These are examples of assessment perceptions held by individuals at the local site level that should be addressed before engaging in an assessment. We recommend attending to the following major stages in the assessment implementation process.

**Preparation.** It is essential that the assessment rationale and procedures be introduced and the school constituents be prepared before the school embarks on any data collection or

use process. Thus, as part of raising communal awareness it is important to bring together the various school constituents to discuss the role and the need for data to move in the direction of joint action. Whenever possible, members of the school community should be encouraged to participate in the design of the assessment process.

**Carrying Out the Assessment.** It is important to use the data collection process to increase the positive involvement of teachers, parents, and students. For instance, multiple-perspective surveys involve all school constituents and communicate respect about their input. Qualitative methods such as mapping violent hot spots in and around the school and focus groups with parents and teachers can also have empowerment effects on participants. Under certain circumstances, students in the school can be involved in the assessment processes as part of their academic curriculum. We have observed some schools that incorporate the collection of data into their academic mission with students (for example, in social science, literature, and mathematics courses).

**Postassessment Procedures.** Paradoxically, how assessment is handled after data collection may have more impact on the community and school than all other stages. It is essential that the findings and tentative conclusions of the assessment process be communicated to all members of the school community in a prompt and appropriate manner. This rapid feedback process has many advantages. Again, feeding the voices of the school back to the community communicates the respect and appreciation for all stakeholders involved. It is also an important means of mobilizing students, teachers, and parents to help in tackling the issues raised in the assessment. This stage of feeding the data back to all the community members, fulfills the implicit, and sometimes explicit, promises made to the school that the assessment would be used to help improve the situation rather than to cast blame on any one group. If the approach of communicating the findings is one of mutual shared goals, there is greater likelihood that future assessments and interventions will be supported.

## **The Importance of Including Multiple Perspectives**

We argued that it is important to assess school violence from multiple perspectives for several important reasons. First, each type of respondent (that is, students, teachers, principals, and parents) serves as an informant who has access (and sometimes exclusive access) to important information. For instance, teachers are the most important source of information on the guidelines they receive from administration with regard to responses to infractions (such as bullying or spreading rumors). Principals may be the only source of information about the ways a school district supports or funds local safety policy. Parents may know best whether the school is perceived by the families as safe or dangerous (Stevens & Sanchez, 1999). Students are victims of violent acts unknown to adults in schools. Hence, it is important to include all of these stakeholders.

The assessment of multiple perspectives should include an examination of convergence among the various members of the school community. Discrepancies and disagreements on how school safety is perceived can be informative. Diverse views of school dynamics reflect possible conflicting norms within the school and the community's ability to work jointly toward reducing levels of violence (Benbenishty & Astor, 2005). Large disagreements between staff and students or between administration and teachers may indicate that a school does not have a shared mission. One important step in creating schoolwide safety interventions is reaching a schoolwide awareness regarding the seriousness of the problem (Olweus, 1993). Gaps in awareness among school community members need to be addressed as part of the implementation of intervention programs (Olweus, 1993; Sullivan, 2000).

To illustrate, if a survey indicates that parents perceive the level of school violence as high, whereas students and staff report that current levels of violence are actually low, it may suggest that efforts should be directed toward helping parents and other community members to get to know the school better. If, on the other hand, parents have an idyllic view of the school and

their children report feeling unsafe, outreach efforts should be directed toward increasing the parents' involvement in supporting and protecting the students.

Empirical findings indicate that discrepancies between students, staff, and parents do exist. Benbenishty and Astor (2005) reported that students and teachers perceptions tend to be quite close, whereas principals have different assessments. When the principals' assessments were examined, two separate issues emerged. First, the principals tend to underestimate the seriousness of the problem. Second, principals seem to not be aware of many behaviors or interpret behaviors differently than students and teachers (Benbenishty & Astor, 2005).

Parents are rarely included in assessments of school violence. Researchers have developed instruments with versions designed to assess parents' perceptions of school violence (for example, the Safe and Responsive School Safe Schools Survey [SRS]) (Skiba, Simmons, Peterson, & Forde, 2006). However, comparisons with the reports of students and parents are virtually nonexistent in either the practice or research literatures. This is unfortunate given the literature on the importance of parental involvement in school (for example, Yang et al., 2006). Assessing involvement in school violence (perpetration and victimization) from the perspectives of both the parents and the students may have clear implications for school-based interventions. For instance, the literature on the effects of parenting on adolescents risk behavior strongly indicates the importance of parental monitoring and communication (for example, Steinberg & Duncan, 2002). Parents' assessment of risk behaviors in schools and the comparisons between parents and students perspectives can, therefore, have important implications.

Finally, assessing school violence from multiple perspectives communicates to all school constituents that their points of view are valued. In multiple studies both parents and teachers responded positively to being asked their opinions and views (Astor & Meyer, 1999; Astor, Meyer, & Behre, 1999; Behre, Astor & Meyer, 2001; Meyer, Astor, & Behre, 2002). We

believe that surveys conducted simultaneously among parents and teachers provide valuable information and opportunities for shared decision making.

## **TARGET OUTCOMES THAT SHOULD BE ASSESSED AND MONITORED**

### **Reports of Behavioral Victimization**

Acts of violence in the school are the most important target outcomes. Hence, all forms of victimization in schools should be assessed. There is a tendency in some assessments to focus on the most severe and rare violent acts (Skiba et al., 2004). However, some researchers argue that lower intensity, higher frequency events such as minor disruption, bullying, or incivility may be more important in predicting overall school safety (Skiba et al., 2004). A range of sexual harassment victimization should also be addressed (such as unwanted attempts to touch and kiss, peeping, and so forth). In addition, a range of nonphysical victimization should be included. Social exclusion, spreading malicious rumors, and using the Internet to humiliate and embarrass students are behaviors that may cause great emotional harm and should be included in assessments.

Inclusion of such a wide range of acts provides a more detailed understanding of violence in each school. This is important for intervention planning because different types of violent acts may require differential responses. Thus, schools with moderate types of violence will likely respond with different interventions than schools inundated with weapons.

Furthermore, because most acts of school violence are between students, existing literature on school violence assessment rarely mentions staff violence toward students. Yet, there is empirical evidence from across the globe documenting that this violence exists and is detrimental to students who experience it (for example, Benbenishty, Zeira, Astor, & Khouri-Kassabri, 2002; Hyman, 1990; Kim et al., 2000). Given the short- and long-term consequences of such victimization (for example, Hyman & Perone, 1998; Hyman & Snook, 2000), assessments should include emotional, physical, and sexual victimization by staff. These assessments should

measure a wide range of violent acts that include verbal-emotional (for example, humiliation), emotional (for example, spreading bad rumors), moderate physical (for example, pushing and shoving), severe physical (for example, cutting with a knife), property damage (for example, vandalism or theft), bullying, verbal threats to harm, threats with a weapon (for example, knife), sexual harassment or assault (for example, forced kissing or removal of cloths), and victimization perpetrated by staff (for example, emotional, physical, or sexual).

### **Subjective Feelings of Fear and Overall Sense of Safety**

Emotional reactions to violence, such as fear and lack of sense of safety, should also be assessed. These may go beyond specific instances of victimization and be associated with places and times. These types of emotions are important because they could translate into negative behaviors such as not attending school or bringing weapons for protection (Astor, Benbenishty, Meyer, & Rosemond, 2004; Furlong & Sharkey, 2006).

Two existing instruments measure such emotional reactions. The first, SRS (Skiba et al., 2006), assesses the perceptions of students, school staff, and parents concerning school safety and school climate. The second, California School Climate and Safety Survey (CSCSS) (Furlong, Chung, Bates, & Morrison, 1995), is a student self-report questionnaire designed to measure school climate and safety-related experiences. It consists of 102 items with questions involving demographic information, perceptions of school climate, safety and security, social support, school violence victimization, and a hostile attitude index. A short form of this instrument (54 items) has been shown to have good psychometric qualities (Furlong et al., 2005).

## **ECOLOGICAL CONTEXT VARIABLES THAT SHOULD BE ASSESSED AND MONITORED**

We have proposed a "school violence in context" approach that details key internal school contexts and external school contexts that influence school violence (Benbenishty & Astor, 2005). In this layered social contextual view, schools are

seen as nested within external contexts (for example, culture, neighborhood, and families) that have an impact on school violence (for a review of similar socioecological models, see Skiba et al., 2006; Swearer & Espelage, 2004).

Schools do not merely reflect outside influences, they also create internal social contexts that can alter (enhance or exacerbate) outside influences on school violence. Thus, social dynamics within the school, such as school policies, teachers' support of students, and student participation, are examples of internal school social-context variables that can have a major impact on school violence.

Comprehensive assessments should include both internal and external safety factors. The following are examples of factors to be considered when selecting external and internal domains to be assessed.

### **External Contributing Factors**

External contributing variables are outside forces that contribute to school violence (for example, parental involvement, poverty, community delinquency, and political oppression). The community, school, classroom, family, and peer group interact with student characteristics to influence both desired and undesired school behaviors (Osher et al., 2004).

A distinction should be made between external factors that are easily alterable and factors that are relatively stable. Individual schools ought to focus on external factors that are amenable to change by the specific school. For instance, increasing positive parental involvement could contribute to a peaceful school and, therefore, is an important area to assess (Walker, Wilkins, Dallaire, Sandler, & Hoover-Dempsey, 2005). By contrast, a thorough assessment of community-wide violence may be beyond the scope and resources for any given school. Indeed, a district-wide assessment should include external contributing factors that are not easily susceptible to immediate changes, such as economic factors, neighborhood crime, and poverty. This type of knowledge could provide a social context for high-risk schools that require special district support. These kinds of variables could help identify city-wide goals that eventually advocate

for the pooling of city resources that include law enforcement, probation, foster care, parks, after school programs, and religious organizations.

### **Internal School-Based Factors**

Turning to the school's internal dynamics, schools can reduce violence by creating a positive internal climate that mediates the negative effects of external factors. It is therefore important to assess relevant aspects of school climate. Osher and colleagues (2004) described school-level factors that are related to school violence, such as the structural aspects of the school (for example, school size), the school culture (for example, the value of student participation), and the school resources (for example, social capital of the school community). Osher et al. also described specific areas that should be examined for the presence of potential warning signs. These negative variables include dangerous aspects of the school environment, such as a large number of risky student behaviors and nonexistent school safety policies. Other school-based red flag areas that can be measured by schools include teacher-student relationships, student-peer relationships, disciplinary practices, school building characteristics, parent involvement, teacher support, fairness of rules, and student perceptions of the school safety environment (Dwyer, Osher, & Warger, 1998).

### **METHODOLOGICAL AND TECHNICAL CONSIDERATIONS WHEN CONDUCTING LOCAL ASSESSMENTS**

There are several sources of information and measurement techniques consistent with a social work perspective. Among the most relevant methods are students' self-reports, administrative databases, and several qualitative techniques (for example, observations, focus groups, and mapping of dangerous locations in school). In previous publications, we described extensively qualitative methods employed in school assessments (Astor, Benbenishty, Marachi, & Meyer, 2006; Astor, Benbenishty, & Meyer, 2004; Astor et al., 1999; Benbenishty & Astor, 2005; Benbenishty et al., 2003). In the following sections, we focus on student surveys and the utilization of administrative data.

## Using Self-Report Surveys

School surveys could provide opportunities to hear the voices of many students and staff in school (Benbenishty et al., 2003; Benbenishty & Astor, 2007). When similar instruments are applied in all schools in a district or a region, the findings allow for important comparisons. Levels of physical victimization can be compared across all schools in the district and schools with extremely low or high levels of victimization can be identified. Over time, the progress or deterioration of a school or a school district can be tracked. The methodological literature on potential limitations and pitfalls of self-report questionnaires is extensive. Nevertheless, there are feasible means to improve the reliability of self-reports on school violence. Measures should be taken in two stages: designing the survey instrument and administering the survey.

### *Adopting or Designing a Survey Instrument.*

Schools we have worked with either adopt or create their own instruments to help them carry out assessments of school violence and violence prevention programs. The use of validated instruments is recommended over "home grown": instruments. Existing validated scales could be used to address most assessment needs of schools. Under certain circumstances, however, adding questions to a validated instrument could be useful to address an idiosyncratic school concern. Nevertheless, as a rule we recommend selecting from a range of already available validated instruments. When choosing among these instruments and when slight modifications may be required, practitioners should consider the following issues:

- Clarify that school is the context in focus. In some questionnaires (for example, Youth Risk Behavior Survey) the wording of many questions does not specifically pertain to the school context (for example, questions about carrying a weapon do not specify school grounds). Hence, students may be responding to violent acts that take place in the community. These types of questions could be improved by clarifying the context. For instance, in the CSCSS

(Furlong et al., 1995) students were asked, "Did any of these things happen to you at school in the past month (30 days)?" The survey defined *at school* as "anywhere in school buildings, on school property, on a school bus, or at a school bus stop."

- Include concrete behaviors. Often questions are worded nebulously regarding exposure to weapons or being the victim of "violence." For instance, Furlong and Sharkey (2006) noted that older students in rural locations may report "carrying a weapon" because they went hunting or because they have a pocket Swiss army knife on a key chain. These authors recommend specifying the purpose of the behavior (for example, for self-protection).
- Use appropriate time frame. An appropriate time frame should be specified for questions regarding violent acts. When questions do not clarify the time frame, the interpretation of the responses is less clear. Thus, a question such as "Were you ever hit by a staff member in school?" may be less informative for an emerging intervention program than the question "Were you hit by a staff member in the past month?" With high-frequency behaviors, such as name calling, it might be helpful to focus on a relatively short time frame (such as "How many times were you \_\_\_ in the past month?") rather than a longer period of time that may be harder to recall accurately. With these high-frequency behaviors, the goal is not to get an exact recounting of the precise day, but, rather, to get an impression of at least one incident during the past month.
- Include validity checks. Some students do not read the questionnaire and respond carelessly. One way to help identify these students is to insert "validity checks." These are items that any student who actually reads them would answer only one way. For instance, Furlong et al. (1995) inserted the item "We had 10 field trips last year." If a student responds "yes" to this item, it is reasonable to suspect that the student did not read the item carefully

because schools do not usually have such a large number of field trips a year. A more direct validity check suggested by Furlong and associates (2004) are questions such as "I am reading and responding to this survey carefully" and "My answers to these questions accurately reflect my feelings."

### **Ensuring the Administration Quality of Self-Reports**

The utility of an assessment instrument may be limited or enhanced by the ways in which it is administered (Cross & Newman-Gonchar, 2004).

**Anonymity.** We strongly recommend that questionnaires be anonymous and that the concept of anonymity be communicated clearly to students and staff. For instance, the questionnaire should indicate in bold letters that students should not write their names, to keep their identity confidential. Students and staff are not expected to write their names on the questionnaire, but such a request helps emphasize a disinterest in identifying students. Items such as gender and grade level should not create an impression that they could be used to trace the respondent. Finally, students who complete the questionnaire can be asked to personally insert the questionnaires into a large covered box, so that their questionnaire cannot be identified.

**Administration Procedures.** There is evidence that the administration of a survey has a major impact on its validity. The more general methodological literature indicates that questionnaire administration influences how truthful respondents are in their responses. Anything that enhances the credibility, the perceived expertise, and the trustworthiness of the survey administration should improve the validity of the data (Graham, Roberts, Tatterson, & Johnston, 2002).

There are several ways to enhance the administration of such assessment questionnaires. Whenever possible, external personnel should administer the questionnaires. When a class teacher distributes questionnaires regarding school violence, students may fear exposing their behaviors. Furthermore, when questionnaires

include references to school and class climate, students may be reluctant to assess the teachers unfavorably. Teachers' attitudes can be communicated in subtle ways (such as a tone of voice). If external proctors are not feasible, teachers should administer assessment instruments in classes they do not teach.

Furthermore, personnel should be trained and prepared to administer questionnaires. Training should ensure that surveys are administered in ethical and sensitive ways that protect the well-being of all students, standardize the methods of administration, and increase the validity of surveys by providing clear instructions to students and creating an atmosphere that promotes open and truthful responses.

**Internet-based Surveys.** In recent years, there have been more opportunities to use Internet-based surveys. Computer-based surveys are more cost-effective when many students and schools are involved. Findings in this area suggest that computer-based surveys may promote more accurate reporting of sensitive adolescent behaviors, such as weapon carrying, drug use, and sexual behavior (Turner et al., 1998).

There are disadvantages to Internet-based surveys. Many low-income, rural, and inner-city schools may not have the required infrastructure. Some students, who have not been exposed to computers, may not feel comfortable with the technology. Computer-based surveys also raise concerns about identity protection. Currently, many Internet-based surveys require a process of "login in" intended to establish eligibility and to prevent fraud. Some individual students may still be reluctant to trust the anonymity promised. Continuous advances in Internet technology and availability suggest that future school assessments will be conducted through the computer. Research should be carried out to ensure that students' rights are not jeopardized and the quality of self-report surveys is enhanced by this technology.

### **Using Administrative Data**

Schools collect a wide array of behavioral information that is rarely used. For example, administrative data, if logged reliably, could be used to track violent incidences. Hence, a school

can tally over time the number of office referrals, suspensions, and police calls and reports. Administrative data will be more reliable with the severe violent events.

Morrison and associates (2004) examined the use of office referral records as indicators of school violence. They reviewed literature that casts many doubts on the validity and reliability of these records. However, we argue that this kind of data is often unreliable because of poor procedures. With better procedures and oversight, the reliability and validity can improve greatly. Consequently, it is recommended that schools plan ahead and use a proactive approach with administrative data. Forms and processes involved in office referrals often reflect the specific goals and policies of the school. Office referrals should be well documented, providing clear information on the reason for the referral that identifies characteristics of the students involved (that is, grade and gender) and the staff's responses to the infractions reported.

A careful analysis of reliable administrative data can help a school understand the characteristics of local violence. It can provide valuable information for interventions, such as the places and times most susceptible to violent acts, the grades that are involved most often, the distribution of events during the school year (for example, at the start or toward the end), the proportion of office referrals that are repeated for specific classes, and an array of policy issues (such as parent involvement around disciplinary action taken by the school) related to school safety.

## CONCLUSION

Hare (1994) argued that school social workers adopt roles that position social workers to influence policy in the educational arena. This article presented the important role that social workers involved in education can play in carrying out ecological assessments of school safety. We think that practitioners, administrators, or policymakers who take it upon themselves to lead the school in this area create unique opportunities to influence educational school safety reform. They can use data to create opportunities to intervene with individual students and groups of students in schools and can develop

evidence-based ways of matching programs to specific school site needs. 

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