

# **SOME PREDISPOSING FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH SCHOOL VIOLENCE AMONG ADOLESCENTS IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN NIGERIA**

***Udo, H. I., Sogbeye, T. G. & John, T. A.***

*Dept. of Physical and Health Education, University of Uyo, Akwa Ibom State  
helen\_udo@yahoo.com, 08037571176*

## **Abstract**

*School violence has gained attention in recent years with the rise of aggressive behaviour in schools, and it is currently considered a growing public health issue across the globe. This has led to a considerable increase in the number of public policies and programmes aimed at tackling the problem, as well as to a very large number of empirical studies. Research suggests that school violence victims may experience physical harm, psychological trauma, such as anxiety, loneliness, depression, low self-esteem, poor academic outcomes, low school attendance, suicidal ideation and in rare cases, extreme outbursts of lethal aggression. The act of school violence vary in severity and frequency, and include behaviours such as social isolation, threats and intimidation (including through electronic communications), school fights, possession and use of weapons, property theft and vandalism, sexual harassment and assault, abuse from school staff, gang violence, and hate crimes. It is essential to intervene in order to improve the quality of life of children/adolescents at school. Recommendations are therefore put forward to raise awareness on media about the risk of violent programmes and also parents should be educated on the importance of selecting non-violent, educational TV programmes the for children .*

**Key words:** *School, Violence, Adolescents, Programmes.*

## **Introduction**

School violence is a pervasive problem and one that requires great attention from educators, policy makers and researchers. School violence is widely held to have become a serious problem in recent decades in many countries, especially where weapons such as guns or knives are involved. It includes violence between school students as well as physical attacks by students on school staff (The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 2017). School violence is an experience that affects students, teachers, school property, the educational process and the community (Stephens, 1997). Students who have been victims of school violence report some of the following symptoms: an increase in believing they are too unsafe to attend school (Brenner, Simon, Anderson, and Barrios, 2002), feelings of depression and suicidal

thoughts (Klomek, Marrocco, Kleinman, Schonfeld, and Gould, 2007), more psychological distress than students who were seldom or never victimized (Holt, Finkelhor, and Kantor, 2007), and a decreased liking of school (Dulmus, Sowers, and Theriot, 2006).

The term “school violence” emerged in 1992 (Eisenbraun, 2007). Throughout literature, school violence has been defined in many ways with no one definition accepted as final (Furlong, Manuel Chung, Bates, and Morrison, 1997). Definition of school violence represents a continuum of behaviours (Lewis, Brock, and Lazarus, 2002) revolving around physical harm, psychological harm and property damage (Astor, Pitner, Benbenishty, and Meyer, 2002). According to Prinsloo and Nesor (2007), “school violence is regarded as any intentional physical or non-physical (verbal) condition or act resulting in physical or non-physical pain being inflicted on the recipient of that act while the recipient is under the school’s supervision”. These physical and non-physical acts of school violence affect teaching and learning negatively because they result in fights and attacks on the victims. Similarly, Crawage (2005) described school violence as “the exercise of power over others in school related settings by some individual, agency, or social process”.

The environment and climate necessary for effective teaching and learning is increasingly undermined by a culture of school-based violence and this is becoming a matter of national concern. This implies that teachers spend most of their time focusing on solving problems associated with school violence instead of focusing on effective teaching and learning. Other studies (Harber and Muthukrishna, 2000; Prinsloo 2008; Prinsloo and Nesor, 2007) also showed the magnitude and effects of violence on teaching and learning as a national concern; this is even more worrying because school violence is escalating despite the measures that have been put in place by the Department of Education in the United States. In a study in South Africa by Burton (2008), it was found that about 1.8 million of all pupils between Grade 3 and Grade 12 (15.3 percent) had experienced violence in one form or another. Burton also found that 12.8 percent of the learners had been threatened with violence, 5.8 percent had been assaulted, 4.6 percent had been robbed, and 2.3 percent had experienced some form of sexual violence because it takes place in the classroom or on the school grounds. In 2004, the United States Department of Education and the United States Secret Service issued a joint report that examined 37 instances of targeted school violence occurring in U.S. School between 1974 and June 2000 (Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum, and Modzeleski, 2004).

In Nigeria, secondary education has been taken seriously from its earliest times not only as an acceptable qualification for good jobs but also as the gateway to a sound higher education both for academics and professionals. It is

pertinent to note that most of the children found in secondary schools are adolescents; aged between 11 and 20 years. Adolescence is a transition stage, a difficult stage and a delicate stage that needs to be handled with caution by both the adolescent and all those who have influence over him, especially the parents (Chukwu, 2003).

Incidence of violence in tertiary, secondary and primary schools in Nigeria is no longer news. Evidence of violence abounds in our society and institutions of higher learning. Only a few minutes of reading from the print media or listening to the electronic media will amaze a modest observer at the extent violence occurs in this country. Chukwu, (2003) observed that violence is prevalent in the primary school which is the foundation level of our education system. A recent United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) supported study in Nigeria showed prevalence of school violence as 4.7 percent. Adolescents constitute 20 percent of the world population and majority of them are in the post primary school and higher institutions of learning. This group of people is often prone to violence either as offenders or as victims (Federal Ministry of Education, UNICEF, 2007).

Children exposed to violence are more likely to report stressful life events than non-exposed children (Martinez-Torteya, Bogat, Eye and Levendosky, 2009). When faced with adversity, younger children who reside within problematic environments may exhibit fewer prosocial emotions and increased personal problems (Sternberg, Lamb, Guterman, and Abbot, 2006). For example, abused children are more likely to display temper tantrums, frequent fighting and threatening of other students. Other issues exhibited by these adolescents in classrooms are eating problems, concentration difficulties, generalized anxiety and increased physical complaints (Volpe, 1996). When examining the types of abuse most likely witnessed by children, Ceballo, Dahi, Aretakis and Ramirez (2001) reported that younger adolescence are more likely to witness violent interactions than to experience physical abuse. In addition, adolescents tend to witness fewer crime-related traumas such as shooting, shoving and punching (Wright and Steinbach, 2001).

National survey results collected after 1999 have also indicated that school violence remains a concern. Data from the 2005-06 School Survey on Crime and Safety indicated that school violence is an area of immense concern to school principals who completed the survey (Nolle, Guerino, Dinkes, and Chandler, 2007). Reported rates of violent incidents at school were at 31.2 incidents per 1,000 students with 77.7 percent of the participating schools reporting that there had been a violent incident on their campuses. Of all the schools that responded to the survey, 52.2 percent indicated that there had been at

least one student threat of attack without a weapon, and 8.8 percent of the participating schools reported threats that were made with weapons. Vandalism incidents were reported by 50.5 percent of the participating schools at a rate of 4.0 incidents per 1,000 students. Student bullying also was reported by 24.5 percent of the participating schools as occurring once a week or more often. Middle schools reported bullying more frequently (43%) than did primary schools (20.6%) and high schools (22.3%).

### *Individual Factors*

The main individual factors associated with violent behaviour during adolescence include all biological, genetic and psychological factors. Biological and genetic factors refer to the influence that genetic information transmitted by the parents has in the development of some characteristics or peculiarities of the children. On the other hand, amongst the psychological factors related to behavioural problems during adolescence, one can find: irritability, that is to say, the tendency to react in an impulsive and abrupt way to small provocations are closely linked to a low tolerance for frustration (Baron and Bryne, 1998); the lack of empathy or the ability to put oneself on the other person's place and recognize and perceive the emotions from the other (Evans, Heriot, Friedman, 2002); the poor satisfaction with life in general (MacDonald, Piquero, Valois, and Zullig, 2005); the desire of dominating others and of showing power through a non-conformist social reputation based on respect (Carrol, Hatti, Durkin, and Houghton, 1999); and a negative attitude towards the social rules and institutional authorities (Emler and Reicher, 2005). Some of these factors, even if they have been referred to as "individual", since they are beliefs, attitudes and ways of thinking, clearly include a social component, such as in the case of empathy, social reputation and attitude towards institutional authority. In fact, those characteristics of the person are balanced by the adolescent's; experience in his/her immediate social contexts. Individual factors related to violence in adolescence are; irritability, impulsiveness, low frustration tolerance, low empathy, poor satisfaction with life, desire of dominating others, non-conformist social reputation, negative attitude to authority (Rodriguez, 2004).

Study by Barry (2006) pointed out that a positive climate at home might discourage adolescents from searching for social recognition in other contexts such as the school, whereas their perception of a deep lack of social capital in the family might be translated into a feeling of insecurity and emptiness that leads them to look for a reputation based on the respect and recognition from others, which in turn seems to be a key factor leading adolescents to take part in antisocial and violent acts. With regard to school context, the quality of the classroom environment based on friendship among peers and positive

interactions with teachers have all recently been singled out as important for the adolescent's psychosocial adjustment (Audreou, 2000; Reinke and Herman, 2002). Adolescents sharing these characteristics are likely to perceive the school as a useful learning context, the purpose of which is to help them construct a successful future as citizens. Other studies conclude that aggressive adolescents at school show a very strong need for social recognition, they would like to be considered as powerful, socially accepted, different and rebellious by their classmates (Rodriguez, 2004). In other words, some authors suggest that the desire for popularity, leadership and power leads to the involvement of many adolescents in disruptive behaviours, providing them with the opportunity to construct their desired social reputation (Carrol *et. al.*, 1999; Emler and Reicher, 2005; Kerpelman and Smith-Adcock, 2005). In fact, it has been documented that aggressive adolescents normally show somewhat negative attitudes to institutional authorities such as the police, the law, and also school and teachers, (Adair, Dixon, Moore and Sutherland, 2000).

### *Family Factors*

Some characteristics of the family system seem to be associated in a great extent to the development of behavioural problems in adolescents. The psychological explanations emphasize that the probability of the adolescent implicating him/herself in antisocial behaviours increases when the family socialization process is altered by factors such as erratic discipline, frequent conflicts or the lack of parental support. Research has shown that a negative family environment characterized by poor or negative communication, with parents (Lambert and Cashwell, 2003) and by lack of cohesion and parental support has a substantial and negative effect on the development of behavioural problems in the adolescence period (Dekovic, Wissink and Meijer, 2004). Family factors associated with violence in adolescents include; Problems of communication within the family, Lack of affective cohesion, Poor parental support, Presence of regular conflicts, Dysfunctional strategies on conflict resolution, Uninvolved or authoritarian parental style and family history of problem behaviour (Lambert and Cashwell, 2003).

In this sense, it is well known that the quality of family relationship is crucial to determine the level of competence and trust with which the adolescent faces the transition period from childhood to adulthood. The parent-adolescent relationship significantly influences children's psychosocial adjustment, when it comes to negotiating the main adolescence tasks such as identity and autonomy acquisition, and consolidate the necessary bases for the development of important cognitive and social abilities. Nevertheless, if the interaction between family

members is not a quality one, it can constitute a risk factor of special relevance which may predispose the adolescent to learn violent and socially inappropriate responses. More specifically, previous research has shown that a negative family environment characterized by poor or negative communication with parents (Lambert and Cashwell, 2003) and by lack of cohesion and parental support has a substantial and negative effect on the development of behavioural problems in the adolescence period (Demaray and Malecki, 2002). The presence of high levels of family conflict and the strategies used by parents to resolve these conflicts, play a very important role in this sense: strategies such as threats and insults, the lack of collaboration between family members and not regulating the negative effects, have been related with the presence of behavioural problems in children (Cummings, Goeke-Morey, and Papp, 2003).

Another factor that has proven to have a close relationship with children's and adolescent's behavioural problems is the parental style, which can be defined as constellation of attitudes towards the child that, jointly considered, create an emotional environment where parental behaviours are expressed (Sternberg, *et al.* 2006). Adolescents coming from authoritarian homes do not usually present behavioural problems, although, when discipline and punishment are too rigid, the probability of the adolescent engaging in antisocial behaviours becomes higher. Adolescents with uninvolved parents are generally the less socially competent and present adjustment problems in all domains.

Generally speaking, the research carried out on the different consequences associated to the effect that parental styles have on children, has shown that the authoritative style is more directly related to children's psychosocial and behavioural adjustment than the rest of the parental styles (Beyers and Grossens, 1999). Some researchers point out that adolescents coming from indulgent homes do not interiorize norms and social rules adequately and therefore are more likely to be involved in behavioural problems (Weiss and Schwarz, 1996).

### *School Factors*

The school is another fundamental socialization context for the individual together with the family and it is considered as an institution intended to prepare individuals, for life and adulthood. It has been observed that some intrinsic characteristics of the educational centres can favour the development of violent behaviours in the schools. For example, the overcrowding of students in the classroom, the lack of clear behavioural regulations for the students and authoritarian teacher orientation versus the democratic one (Lambert and Cashwell, 2003). Indeed, prior research has shown that perceiving peers in the classroom as friends or colleagues and having positive and supportive

interactions with teachers are both relevant protective factors in the development of misbehaviours and have been linked to adolescent psychosocial and behavioural adjustment at school (Demaray, Malecki, Davidson, Hogdson and Rebus, 2005). School factors associated with violence in adolescence include; Poor organization of the centre, Friends with problem behaviour, Lack of motivation from teachers, Negative teacher-student relationship, Violence tolerance, Social rejection by peers, Negative environment in the classroom (Lambert and Cashwell, 2003).

In relation to the role carried out by teachers, study by Reddy Rhodes and Mulhall (2003), indicated that when teachers establish positive contacts with students, offering them individual attention, treating them with respect and giving support, aggressive behaviour in the classroom decreases. On the contrary, when teachers neglect students and treat them disrespectfully, they are promoting aggressiveness in the class (Reddy, Rhodes, and Mulhall, 2003). Therefore, teachers contribute in a very special way to both perception of social climate in the classroom by students' well-being and contribute to the escalating of violence in schools. Finally, another school factor that has been associated with behavioural problems in adolescence is social acceptance by peers. Rejected students seem to be, therefore, a heterogeneous group in which at least two subgroups, have been identified; aggressive rejected and non-aggressive rejected (Harrist, Zaira, Bates, Dodge, and Petit, 1997). Approximately, 40 to 50 percent of rejected students show a violent behaviour profile (Astor, *et al.*, 2002) while the other half are passive and shy and do not exhibit aggressiveness at school (Verschueren and Marcoen, 2002).

### *Social Factors*

In the adolescence period, it is not only fundamental to take into account the socialization elements in the family and the school, but it is essential as well to consider the influence of cultural and social communication instruments in the socialization process. Both the most traditional communication channels such as the press, the cinema and the television, and the internet or videogames reflect somehow cultural models and values of society. Therefore, in this information society, mass media exert a crucial socialization function and fulfill a very important role in the transmission of social contents (values, beliefs and attitudes), particularly during childhood and adolescence. According to a classic study carried out in Estados Unidos (EEUU), the National Television Violence Study (Federman, 1997), it was estimated that over 50 percent (between 58 and 61 percent) of Television programmes contained violent scenes. Only four percent of these violent programmes raised a topic against violence. These

figures repeated themselves in the studies of other countries such as Spain (Bercedo, Redondo, Pelayo, Gomez, Hernandez, and Cadenas, 2005) and in more recent researches in the United States. Social factors related to the presence of violence include; Attractive characters, Realistic settings, Justified violence, Rewarded violence, Use of conventional weapons, Absence of negative consequences, Humorous context (Foaham and Juvonen, 2002).

This fear is observed in many students who do not give away the name of these bullies and avoid isolated places in the school, who do not offer help to their victimized peers, just because they fear possible reprisals or becoming the target of harassment and violence. In addition to the fundamental importance of television in adolescents' life, internet already constitutes the basic social and interpersonal communication channel, and videogames the entertainment space. Regarding the possible consequences of the violence present at these videogames, different experimental studies with adolescents have documented that the use of these games can reduce prosocial motivation and promote exploitation of peer in future social interaction, due to the development of a hostile causal attribution bias (Lambert and Cashwell, 2003).

A study carried out in Estados Unidos with 1,254 participants revealed that only 80 percent reported playing no electronic games in the previous six months. Of 1,254 children who listed frequently played game titles, almost half (48.8 %) played at least one violent (mature-rated) game regularly and 33 percent of boys and 10.7 percent of girls played games nearly every day (Astor, *et al.*, 2002). Likewise, different studies have proved that boys use game consoles more often, spending approximately an hour a day playing and that the average age for starting playing is around 8.8 years old (Bercedo *et al.*, 2005). Other effects of the audiovisual exposition to violence, in addition to learning attitudes and behaviours, are the cognitive and emotional unawareness of the audience towards violence itself and suffering of victims as well as the increasingly fearful perception of becoming the victim of a violent act (Donnerstein, 1998). On the effect of the internet is an uncharted territory (Tarplay, 2001), although it is easy to understand and its impact is similar to that exerted by television on the one hand, and videogames on the other. The reason is that in the internet, one can find many real violent scenes such as tortures, gender violence and violent sex (Vitaro, Brendgen and Tremblay, 2000) and, at the same time, it is also a leisure and virtual game tool. On top of this, there are other risks associated with its special characteristic easy access, guaranteed anonymity, and difficulty for parents to supervise web pages logged in by children.

### **Intervention Strategies for School Violence**

Since behavioural problems take place in a particular context, the school, it seems obvious that interventions need to focus not just only on individuals but also on the system, as will be discussed hereinafter. Practices for intervention can be generally divided into primary, secondary and tertiary prevention strategies. In the primary prevention sphere, we find the strategies designed to prevent the problem from occurring before signs of the disorder appear (Meyers and Nastasi, 1999). This kind of intervention includes the participation of all the students, as well as of all the school staff and it seems to be the best choice in order to carry out a really successful prevention (Aber, Jones, Brown, Chaundry, and Samples, 1998). The main objective of these interventions is to modify the school environment by improving peer relations and promoting prosocial behaviours. Many of these programmes include as well training for teachers and procedures to motivate parental involvement. These interventions are based on the conception of school as a general coexistence system that is necessary to boost in order to facilitate positive relations and impede the negative ones, by involving all the members of the educational community in this process, and including the families. In this sense, and in order to prevent and minimize violent behaviours in the schools, it would be necessary to: adopt a non-violent style to display emotions and disagreements and to solve school conflicts; develop a non-violence culture through the explicit rejection of any behaviour that provokes victimization; and break the “silent conspiracy” that is usually established around this problem. Other recommendations to prevent school violence from the organisational context proposed by Olweus (1991), Rue (1997) and Boyle (2005) are summarised as follows:

1. Favour the students’ identification with the school and increase their participation when taking decisions in a democratic way.
2. Create a good environment in the school, a place where students feel accepted as individuals and have positive adult role models.
3. Include the education on values and activities designed to develop social and personal abilities from a democratic and inclusive approach.
4. Create and define a student code of conduct that makes sense for the students and that can be discussed with them.

Teachers’ commitment is crucial to put these strategies into practice as well as it is the role they play in preventing violence in the schools.

### **Recommended Strategies to Prevent School Violence from the Classroom Context**

Give more responsibilities to the students, for example in the mediation between peers in order to solve conflicts.

1. Involve students in cooperative and non-violent conflict resolution activities.
2. Periodically introduce social reflection elements such as debates on conflicts and problems in the class and openly discuss them with the group.

The setting off of all these efforts entails an important resources package for the adolescents both personal and social, which is the best way of preventing social conflicts in the educational centers. The benefits of these activities reside in the fact that they promote relevant aspects such as the choice of alternative solutions rather than the use of violence, the evaluation of the consequences of violence for students, the joint taking of decisions amongst members of the classroom and the group thinking.

Tertiary prevention strategies are those focused on individuals, within established problem and designed to remediate that problem, decrease the duration and minimize the negative effects (Meyers and Nastasi, 1999). These measures are therefore adopted with those students that have already been identified as victims or aggressors. On the one hand, with respect to victims, the first step of the intervention usually lies in ensuring their safety in the educational center. In parallel to this punctual action, victims should get psychological support so they can express their emotions regarding the bullying situation and thus minimize the arousal of possible depressive and anxious symptoms (Boyle, 2005). Victims of school violence also need training in the following aspects; how to deal with new attacks from bullies, how to assertively answer to their peers, how to avoid dangerous situations and how to ask for help. Therefore, the training in social skills and assertiveness is a key element in this instance (Yung and Hammond, 1998).

On the other hand, interventions with violent students should cover two relevant areas: the supervision of the aggressive behaviour and the development of an appropriate social behaviour. On some occasions, it will be necessary to carry out punctual punitive measures with aggressors, although any intervention aimed at solving long-term school violence must take re-education into consideration, and not only punishment. In order to achieve this, specific programmes on problem solving strategies, self-control techniques, as well as to develop empathic abilities, can be very useful (Boyle, 2005).

Nevertheless, as it has already been pointed out, if interventions exclusively focus on 'problematic' students, we will be overlooking other relevant contextual factors for the explanation of behavioural problems. An effective intervention strategy should pay attention to those environments and change the nature of social relations established within. This perspective implies a more proactive and preventive approach to the problem of violence at school which is, at the same time, more coherent with both theoretical and empirical knowledge of child and adolescent behaviour, mentioned above. These views emphasise that child behaviour is closely linked to particular characteristics of the immediate social environment and, especially, to family and school environments, so that both contexts should be equally involved in establishing alternatives and solutions.

### **Conclusion**

School violence is a problem that is great in magnitude and is national in scope. Adolescents who are at risk for committing violence possess multiple demographic, social, cultural and individual characteristics that place them at a greater risk. Gender, age, ethnicity, past victimization, and drug or alcohol use are among many other factors that contribute to violent adolescents at school. The family environment in which a student lives can also influence his or her behaviour at school. Among other factors, if parents are too lax or too controlling, their children maybe at a greater risk. The school itself also needs to be considered when discussing the potential for violence. Victims of violence have been shown to suffer negative consequences both socially and academically. Various prevention and intervention programmes are suggested, such as creating a school-based team, renovating the school environment, changing teaching strategies, providing social skills training including adults in school, and providing training and awareness for cultural sensitivity. Once preventive programmes are in place, and more research has been conducted concerning effectiveness, a better understanding of school violence and ways in which to lessen its impact can be determined.

### **Recommendations**

It has become clear that school violence is a complex problem that includes an interaction of various causes, including psychological, biological, behavioural and social related ones, as well as various forms including moral, verbal and physical ones. In the light of this, the following recommendations are suggested;

1. Raise awareness on media about the risk of violent programmes which contribute to increase violence and conflict among adolescents.
2. Continuous phase of in-service educational programmes for the school teachers regarding prevention and control of violent behaviour among adolescents and proper handling of such cases.
3. Implement an educational programme to parents about the importance of selecting non-violent TV programmes for their children.
4. Establish a clear reporting and referral mechanism for violence against children in schools.
5. Strengthen active participation of children in child protection activities through initiative organized by teachers in collaboration with parents.
6. The parents should be encouraged to adopt the best parenting styles in the upbringing of their children.
7. Counsellors should organise regular seminars and conferences for parents to enlighten them on the importance of adopting good parenting styles in their homes.

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