Chapter 47
School Violence Inside Youth Prison Schools

Morghan Vélez Young-Alfaro
California State University – Fresno, USA

ABSTRACT

School violence inside youth prisons proves challenging to explore. The diversity among incarcerated students, variation in the layout and management of youth prison schools, and the trauma caused by confinement factor into how school violence unfolds. This chapter makes four contributions to land-scaping the study of school violence inside youth prison schools. First, contrary to popular stereotypes, students have offenses across a spectrum of non-violent to violent crimes. Second, classrooms in some youth prisons are the only social spaces and violence gets funneled into them. Third, school violence intervention programs used in youth prison schools must contend with the trauma-inducing aspects involved in living in a correctional setting. Fourth, public discourse misplaces attention on punitive responses outside of a complex understanding of the students, experiences inside youth prison schools, and possibilities beyond schooling behind bars. These contributions scaffold future directions in research on school violence in youth prison schools.

INTRODUCTION

This exploration of school violence inside youth prison (YP) schools offers four contributions to the study of school violence (Hirschi, 1969; Nemmetz, 2010; Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). The four contributions come to light through the course of exploring the YP school setting as well as the impact of the wider juvenile justice and institutional context that circumscribes this discussion of school violence. First, the students show that they often defy popular stereotypes of them as scary and predatory (Rios, 2006; Rios & Rodriguez, 2012) and categorically disconnected from school (Akers & Sellers, 2009; Vélez Young-Alfaro, 2017; Vélez Young-Alfaro, Phillips, & Nasir, n.d.). Second, the spatial layout and operational management of YPs increases or decreases the likelihood of violence in the classrooms. The variation among YPs and their schools state-by-state and county-by-county is a consequence of a decentralized juvenile justice system. YPs and their schools hold diverse policies and practices across the U.S.

Third, school violence prevention and intervention programming already exist in many YP schools, but not always for the explicit purpose of reducing school violence and disciplinary issues. Violence prevention and intervention curriculums – such as restorative justice programming – are often for general rehabilitation purposes brought in by community-based organizations (Spaulding, 2017; Tsui, 2014). However, even though these programs maintain proven effectiveness to reduce school violence and increase school connectedness in the community – discussed in greater length elsewhere in this book – the programs are circumscribed in the YP context by the fixation on safety, which includes locked cells, chains, and threats of violence (Shelden, 2008; Vélez Young-Alfaro, 2017). Finally, this chapter contributes to research on school violence in terms of showing descriptively the need for future research, policy reform, and practice innovations to pivot towards the conditions needed to widely reframe public discourse about who the students are in YP schools. It is important to complicate the image of students in YPs as well as their classrooms and, specifically, diminish the powerful assumption that these are categorically criminal students.

While defining school violence should not be oversimplified (Henry, 2000), in this chapter violence inside YP schools is specifically about physical altercations such as shoving, hitting, restraining, and throwing objects towards another person. This definitional approach allows for cross comparisons with diversely operated YPs (e.g. demographic, geographic, and legislative variations). That is, when students and adults engage in violent altercations, the events are expected to be recorded in the formal documentation of each facility. Typically, these documents are part of the requirement for reporting to public oversight bodies. Hence, the discussion in this chapter relies on an understanding of YP school violence based on such reporting. Additionally, when school violence and violence outside of the school day take place, the violence happens within the security context of the *total institution* (Bickle, 2010; Flores, 2013; Goffman, 1961). That is, often, but certainly not always (Vélez Young-Alfaro, 2017), violence is responded to with immediate physical restraint by adults.

YP schools are defined as locked detention facilities for minors charged in the juvenile court. The juvenile court oversees the students' court proceedings, incarceration, and probation. Some YPs are managed at the county level by the Probation Department while other facilities are managed by the state office. The specific management does not indicate a difference in the prison experience for the students: students are locked in cells sometimes with bars or heavy metal doors, or occasionally in a bunk-style arrangement; they wear jump suits and footwear that is slipped onto the feet (i.e. no shoe laces); students cannot move without permission such as in the case of using the toilet or wanting to speak quietly with an adult; shackles, handcuffs, and weaponry such as pepper spray are used; use of coercion and restraint by correctional officers is an established response to ensure facility safety (Ford & Hawke, 2012; Shelden, 2008; Vélez Young-Alfaro, 2017; White, 2017). Ultimately, researchers point out that local and state managed facilities are both essentially prisons and though the exact practices vary prison-by-prison, these practices are themselves trauma-inducing (Dierkhising, Lane, & Natsuaki, 2014; Ford an&d Hawke, 2012; Goshe, 2014).

In the literature on adult prisons, the use of coercion and restraint is often referred to as the "suppression effect," referring to an active attempt by the prison management to suppress potential infractions including violence (Tahamont, 2013, p. 35). Some students in YP schools have violent histories and do not engage in violence; however, the opposite is also true. Referred to as the "peer effect" by some (Tahamont, 2013, p. 36), juvenile justice researchers for many years have shown the correlation between increases in deviance among youth when surrounded by peers with high needs in correctional settings (Greenwood, 2006). Ultimately, considering the connection between offense type and school violence

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