

School Violence

One in five South African secondary school pupils is a victim of violence, including assault, robbery and even cyber-bullying.

- The Centre for Justice & Crime Prevention

1. Introduction

We have become so desensitised to violence that we no longer utter an outcry when we read about the latest violent incidents in our schools. In many areas it is common for learners to carry among their books, knives, guns and other weapons – almost as if these have become their new educational tools.

In a recent roundtable discussion on school violence in South Africa, the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention (CJCP) presented the results of its second National School Violence Study¹. This briefing paper will highlight some of the discussion points.

2. The Extent of the Problem

The CJCP's study points to a disturbing fact: most of the incidents of violence in schools are perpetrated by the learners themselves. This runs contrary to the popular belief that it is most often outsiders – such as gangsters or *tsotsis* – who enter school premises and commit acts of violence. And this finding has been corroborated by the University of South Africa's school violence study²:

“...they [schools] actually perpetrate the violence themselves or reproduce it by their failure to act, rather than have it imposed upon them from the

outside.”

However, this does not mean that schools, and learners, can be seen in isolation from their surrounding social realities. Schools are to a large extent influenced by the community in which they are located, and often reflect the prevalence of violence within the wider community. A majority of the learners who had experienced violence at school said that crime was rife in their community and/or that they had witnessed a fight in their neighbourhood.

The CJCP study gathered information from 5 939 learners, 121 principals and 239 teachers from secondary schools across all 9 provinces. It is also important to note that 19.9% of the schools sampled were located in metropolitan areas; 22.8% were in urban areas and over half (57.3%) were in rural areas. Of the learners sampled, 12.2% had been threatened with violence by someone at school; 6.3% had been assaulted; 4.7% had been sexually assaulted or raped; and 4.5% had been robbed at school.

The study also indicated that provincial location was a significant predictor of school violence. The Free State had the highest percentage of violent victimisation (30.4%), with the Western Cape (28.7%) and Limpopo (25.2%) following. On the other hand, the Northern Cape (11.2%) showed the highest number of sexual assaults.

3. What Lies Behind It?

As mentioned above, school communities reflect what happens in the broader community. How the community is organised, environmental factors such as family instability and unemployment, levels of criminality, and levels of substance abuse, are all factors that contribute to how learners behave. For example, the CJCP study revealed a strong correlation between the general level of crime in a province and the level of violence in schools in that province. Thus, the Free State had the highest overall levels of crime and also the highest levels of school violence across all crime types.

Children or learners exposed to violence at a young age often 'communicate' through violence. This speaks to what appears to be an underlying social problem in South Africa: the quick resort to violence as a mechanism to 'resolve' disputes or tensions. And, of course, when this form of behaviour is acquired at a child's most impressionable age, it is difficult to shake off, and thus becomes replicated in the next generation.

Family structure and circumstances also play a key role in the learner's risk for victimisation and violence perpetration. The breakdown of values within the family was constantly cited during the roundtable discussion as a significant contributor to school violence. The CJCP study showed evidence that family criminality – where a learner's sibling, parent or caregiver had been in jail – significantly increased the learner's chances of violent victimisation or of perpetrating violence.

According to the CJCP study, other factors that play a significant contributory role in youth (and school) violence are: poverty and unemployment; the availability of drugs and alcohol; gang activity; lack of access to recreational opportunities and facilities; and inadequate housing.

4. Potential Solutions

It is a matter of some concern that issues of school violence have not always been uppermost on the agendas of policy makers. For instance, it appears that school violence has not been discussed at a portfolio committee level³, and in a recent question posed to the Minister of Basic Education, the impression was given that the

Department of Basic Education (DBE) was not fully aware of the scale of the problem⁴.

However, some initiatives have been put in place by the DBE. Under the rubric of the 'whole-school approach' the DBE is currently developing a 'School Safety Framework' that will ensure that a comprehensive school safety programme is implemented. The Minister of Basic Education has also signed a 'Collaborative Partnership Protocol' with her Police Service counterpart. The Protocol aims to:

- strengthen safe school committees in addressing crime and violence in schools;
- allow police officers to assume an active role as members of safe school committees;
- link all schools to local police stations (currently 15 772 schools are linked);
- raise awareness among children regarding crime and violence;
- mobilise communities to take ownership of schools; and
- encourage the establishment of reporting systems at schools⁵.

The DBE has also developed training manuals to address bullying at schools, and this training – for principals, governing bodies, parents, teachers, learners, and provincial and district officials – has been rolled out since March 2013⁶.

Various steps have also been taken by provincial education departments. For example, the Western Cape Education Department has, as part of its intervention strategy, adopted legislation that provides for random search and seizure of drugs and weapons. The Western Cape Provincial School Education Act⁷, which was passed into law in 2011, states that no person may bring any dangerous objects, alcohol or illegal drugs onto the school premises during or after school hours. The Act further empowers any school principal or his or her delegate to search any learner, or the property of any learner, for any dangerous object, alcoholic liquor, or illegal drug, if the principal reasonably suspects the presence thereof on the school premises or during a school activity. If there is reasonable and reliable evidence that a learner is concealing a dangerous object or illegal substance in the body of that particular learner, the principal may request a member of the South African Police Services to conduct a more extensive search of that learner's person, which may entail the removal of clothing.⁸

Individual schools and communities have also taken steps to address the problem. Some schools have resorted to employing private security companies, while others have approached their local Community Police Forums for help.

Other role players and NGOs are also undertaking initiatives. For example, the Catholic Institute of Education has developed a Child Safeguarding Policy for all Catholic schools in South Africa. The underlying principles that guide the policy are that all schools create safe environments; that everyone involved with the school supports the care and protection of children; that all children have equal rights to protection from abuse and exploitation; and that all staff have a duty to keep children safe from abuse.

5. Conclusion

The CJCP study points to the fact that violence is a

serious problem in our schools and that its pervasiveness is contributing to the education crisis South Africa is facing. A multitude of factors contribute to school violence, and it will require a multi-pronged approach to address the issue properly. While the societal challenges may seem huge, the first steps must be to safeguard the schools – to teach learners about violent behaviour and how to deal with it; to teach conflict-resolution approaches; to equip educators to deal with violent behaviour; and, perhaps most importantly, to equip parents and families with the insights and skills to avoid violence in the home and the community.

Kenny Pasensie
Researcher

¹ Patrick Burton & Lezanne Leoschut (2103): *School Violence in South Africa: Results of the 2012 National School Violence Study*. Available online <http://cjcp.skinthecat.co.za/articlesPDF/65/Monograph12-School-violence-in-South%20Africa.pdf>

² Vusi Mncube & Clive Harber (2012): *The Dynamics of Violence in South African Schools*. Available online at <http://www.unisa.ac.za/Default.asp?Cmd=ViewContent&ContentID=27066>

³ A member of the Portfolio Committee on Basic Education who attended the CPLO roundtable indicated that the issue of school violence has not been on the agenda of the portfolio committee.

⁴ Internal Question (1265): Dr Mulder asked the Minister of Basic Education whether her department was aware of how many incidents of violence occurred in schools. The Minister answered that the DBE did not keep records, but that the provincial departments did.

⁵ *School Violence in South Africa: Results of the 2012 National School Violence Study*, op. cit.

⁶ *Ibid*

⁷ The Act is in line with the Education Laws Amendment Act (2007) which makes provision for the search and seizure of drugs and weapons on school premises. The Act also empowers principals to test for drugs.

⁸ *The Dynamics of School Violence in South Africa*, op. cit.