Introduction to the Special Issue “School Violence and Safety”

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The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has stressed that school violence is a top public health concern due to long-lasting detrimental effects on students’ physical health and emotional well-being. Schools are agents of socialization that directly influence student development, educational progress, and life-course trajectories (Gottfredson, 2001; Muschert, Henry, Bracy, & Peguero, 2013; Rios, 2011; Shedd, 2015). After one’s own family, school is often the first place a child learns society’s norms, values, and culture; students come to understand their roles and responsibilities in society as well as in civic orientations and engagement (Muschert et al., 2013; Rios, 2011; Shedd, 2015). John Dewey (1916) first called attention to the link between education and democracy and proposed that public schools could level the playing field between the advantaged and the less advantaged as well as serve as an apprenticeship for civic life. Since Dewey’s (1916) seminal work, and given the powerful socializing effect of schools, researchers have scrutinized the socialization processes that occur in schools, recognizing the long-lasting and far-reaching impact schools may have on society. Thus, violence and disorder within schools has received increased attention and scrutiny over the years.

The Safe School Study Report to the Congress (1978) of the National Institute of Education (NIE), was one of the first studies to focus on assessing the level of violence in U.S. schools. The landmark study suggested that school violence is not predominantly committed by “outsiders” but rather the students themselves. Thus, the study clearly denoted that school administrators and policy makers can indeed implement policies to ameliorate violence in schools and between members of the school community. The study suggested policies that can facilitate an administrator’s objective of reducing violence at school. These include increasing efforts of student governance and rule through enforcement, treating students fairly and equally, improving the relevance of subject matter to suit students’ interests and needs, and reducing class size. The study also presented results reflecting that unemployment, poverty, and neighborhood conditions are not relevant factors contributing toward violence in school. Rather, school characteristics such as size of student enrollment, student–teacher

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ratios, principal’s fairness, firmness, and consistency of discipline are more important for reducing school violence (Gottfredson, 2001; Muschert et al., 2013; NIE, 1978). The Safe School Study Report to the Congress (1978), researchers have continued to explore the possible causes, related factors, and consequences of school violence as well as the programs that attempt to ensure safety for students.

With this noted, the issue of school violence and safety remains a serious social, cultural, policy, educational, and juvenile justice issue in the United States today. Some suggest that in the aftermath of mass shootings at Columbine High School, Virginia Tech, and Sandy Hook Elementary School, the social, cultural, political, and justice responses to ensure healthy and safe learning environments have only heightened expectations to address violence and disorder within schools (Addington, 2009; Muschert et al., 2013; Rios, 2011; Shedd, 2015). The historic, persistent, and current concerns about school violence and the public commitment to ameliorate violence and to ensure safety for U.S. students can be exemplified in the 2014 Office of Justice Programs and the Department of Justice of the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) administered program within the Office of Justice Programs and Department of Justice to oversee $75 million USD to develop and implement the Comprehensive School Safety Initiative (CSSI). CSSI is designed to improve the safety of schools and students nationwide by developing, supporting, and vigorously evaluating school safety programs, practices, and strategies. NIJ highlights that the goals of CSSI are centered on partnerships between school professionals and researchers to develop and test approaches that address the real-world safety needs and priorities of U.S. schools and students. It is within this overall social, policy, and research context or agenda that this special issue about school violence and safety was conceived. Therefore, this Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice special issue “School Violence and Safety” focuses on theoretical approaches toward understanding school violence and safety. In general, this issue emphasizes how interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks can facilitate researchers, policy makers, and community stakeholders’ understanding of the correlates, antecedents, and outcomes that are associated with school violence and safety.

In the lead article of this special issue, Nadine M. Connell’s research entitled, “Fear of Crime at School: Understanding Student Perceptions of Safety as Function of Historical Context” explores the role of individual- and school-level predictors of students’ perceptions of student safety. Her results suggest that students who are more aware of school safety measures are less likely to report feeling unsafe, whereas those who have observed weapon carrying at school are more likely to feel unsafe. Differences also exist by gender and age. Implications for school security protocols and future research are discussed.

The next research study by Samuel Peterson, Nicole V. Lasky, Bonnie S. Fisher, and Pamela Wilcox entitled, “Gendered Opportunity and School-Based Victimization: An Integrated Approach” provides a thoughtful account of how gender moderates the relationship among low self-control, routine activities, friends’ characteristics, and school-based victimization using a nationally representative sample of 10th-grade public school students. Their results suggest that friends’ characteristics matter more for females across two types of victimization. Other gendered effects exist, indicating that the effects of certain characteristics of friends vary by gender, depending on the extent to which they influence participation in school misconduct.

In Dorothy L. Espelage, Gabriel J. Merrin, and Tyler Hatchel’s research entitled, “Peer Victimization and Dating Violence among LGBTQ Youth: The Impact of School Violence and Crime on Mental Health Outcomes,” the authors longitudinally explore the moderating role of school violence and peer victimization on the association between sexual orientation and mental health. They find that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) individuals with lower rates of victimization had significantly lower rates of suicidality compared to LGBTQ individuals with higher rates of victimization. The researchers also note that interventions need
to consider multiple forms of victimization and school environment as potential risk and protective factors for LGBTQ youth.

The authors concluded that urban, African American youth are confronted with daily occurrences of violence in their schools and in their communities, which can reinforce school fears. Therefore policymakers need to consider the current situations in urban schools, and policies need to focus on restoring the individual to the community and promote a sense of safety. In the next study entitled, “Urban African-American Youth and their Caregivers’ Perceptions of School Safety in Chicago: A Social-Ecological Perspective,” Jun Sung Hong, Dexter R. Voisin, and Jungup Lee explore the significance of individual-, family-, school-, and community-level factors associated with school safety perceptions from the perspectives of urban African American youth and their caregivers in Chicago.

Next, Justin W. Patchin and Sameer Hinduja highlight the importance of investigating inconsistent results when it comes to deterrence theory and deterrence-informed policy approaches associated with addressing bullying. In their study entitled, “Deterring Teen Bullying: Assessing the Impact of Perceived Punishment from Police, Schools, and Parents,” they examine whether youth are actually being deterred by these methods and messages. Data are drawn from approximately 1,000 students in two middle schools on their perceptions of punishment from various sources as well as their participation in both face-to-face bullying and cyberbullying. Their findings demonstrate that students are deterred more by the threat of punishment from their parents and the school, and least deterred by the threat of punishment from the police.

In the following research, Deanna N. Devlin and Denise C. Gottfredson investigate whether specific school resource officers (SROs) roles, rather than the presence or absence of SROs, influence school crime and reporting of crimes to law enforcement differently. In their study entitled, “The Roles of Police Officers in Schools: Effects on the Recording and Reporting of Crime,” they find that the level of crime recording and reporting increased with SRO presence. Further, they report that schools with law enforcement only SROs recorded more crimes than non-SRO schools, and schools with mixed SROs reported more crimes to law enforcement officers.

In the next study, entitled, “The Effect of School Conditions on the Use of Restorative Justice in Schools,” Allison Ann Payne and Kelly Welch use data from a nationally representative sample of schools to examine school conditions that influence the use of restorative responses to violence and misbehavior. The researchers identify characteristics of a school that affect the likelihood that specific restorative justice techniques will be implemented, which can reveal opportunities for diminishing disparities, improving outcomes for students, and reducing the odds of juvenile justice system involvement.

And finally, Miner P. “Trey” Marchbanks III, Anthony A. Peguero, Kay S. Varela, Jamilia J. Blake, and John Major Eason examine the significance of racial and ethnic disparities associated with school disciplinary practices and juvenile justice contact. In their research entitled, “School Stringency and Disproportionate Minority Contact: Investigating Racial and Ethnic Disparities with the School-to-Prison Pipeline,” they draw from the Texas Education Agency’s Public Education Information Management System to investigate the relationship between school discipline practices and juvenile justice contact. They specifically focus on racial and ethnic disparities in urban, rural, and suburban schools. Their findings indicate that both stringent and lenient school discipline practices have effects on juvenile justice referrals as well as racial and ethnic disparities across distinct school locations. However, there are important and distinctive nuances that are presented and examined.

The research included in this special issue addresses a range of perspectives about school safety and violence. The various articles touch on causes and correlates of school violence, vulnerabilities of particular segments of the student population, the evident complexities and symbiotic relationship between educational and juvenile justice systems, and the security approaches to ameliorating school violence as well as some unintended consequences. Thus, each of these articles identifies points for intervention, suggestions for juvenile justice policy, and promising directions for future
research. Each study presented in this special issue stands out for its original and noteworthy contribution to the literature on the significance of school violence and safety in youth violence and juvenile justice scholarship. To that end, it is also important for the editors to add that it has been a pleasure to read these manuscripts, engage with the researchers, and see these research articles through to publication in this special issue. We deeply thank the contributors for their patience, attention to details, and timely effort and commitment toward contributing to this special issue. We also thank the editor-in-chief of Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice, Dr. Chad Trulson, for his support and stewardship as well as providing us with the opportunity to be guest editors of this special issue. And finally, we wish to express our deepest gratitude to all the reviewers who took time from their busy schedule to evaluate the manuscripts and provide insightful suggestions, which significantly enhanced the quality of the studies. The research presented here reveals that there are important advances to the field that can be achieved by attempting to better understand the correlates, predictors, contexts, and consequences associated with school violence and safety as well as youth violence and juvenile justice. As denoted and highlighted by the research presented here, we encourage future research to further expand our understanding of school violence and safety in order to ensure healthy learning environments for all students. It is vital that all students feel safe, attain the knowledge and skills necessary to graduate, enter the labor force and become productive, and ultimately lead the United States into its future. The next wave of research about school violence and safety needs to pick up where this scholarship leaves off to help provide important opportunities for theoretical and empirical advancement on educational progress and success as well as on youth violence and juvenile justice.

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