

**Putting Research Into Practice in School Violence Prevention and  
Intervention: How Is School Counseling Doing?**

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### **Abstract**

This article reports the findings of a national survey of practicing school counselors regarding their knowledge of current research in school violence prevention and intervention. The authors describe four active areas of youth violence research over the past two decades and present findings that suggest that a potentially dangerous gap may exist between research advances and their incorporation into the day-to-day practice of school counselors in the United States. Implications of the findings are considered along with strategies for bridging the research-to-practice gap as recommended by the school counselors themselves.

## **Putting Research Into Practice in School Violence Prevention and Intervention: How Is School Counseling Doing?**

During a series of recent state and regional conference workshops for school counselors on the subject of school violence, the first author of this article conducted informal surveys of workshop participants to assess their familiarity with several important advances in the youth violence knowledge base that have occurred over the past twenty years. In every case, only a small percentage of the workshop participants were familiar with the advances that, based on their prevalence in the professional literature, have become common knowledge among youth violence researchers. This raised the question as to whether these “straw poll” survey findings were incidental or whether they reflected a more widespread and potentially problematic disconnect between school violence research and practice. An answer to that question was sought in this study.

### **Two Decades of Research**

During the past two decades, significant strides have been made in understanding and addressing student violence in school. Associations have been established between various types, patterns, ecological/family antecedents of youth aggression and safe/effective counseling approaches to its prevention and intervention.

#### **Types: Reactive and Proactive Aggression**

Research has shown that youth aggression is not a single phenomenon and that it can be classified into distinct types as determined by an aggressor’s motivation and behavioral response. Hunt (1993) identified five types of aggression (over-aroused, impulsive, affective, predatory, and instrumental) that are more commonly grouped into

two primary categories of reactive and proactive aggression as previously introduced by Dodge and Coie (1987). Reactive aggression is characterized as a hot-blooded, automatic, defensive response to an immediate and often misperceived threat, whereas proactive aggression is described as a highly organized, calculated and premeditated tool that is applied for the aggressor's personal gain and satisfaction (Dodge, Lochman, Harmish, Bates, & Petit, 1997). Reactive aggressors act impulsively to protect themselves from others, while proactive aggressors act strategically to assert control over others, and these differences in motivation for the two forms of aggression have shown to require corresponding differences in prevention and intervention approaches. Reactive aggressors appear to respond best to counseling approaches affording them opportunities to build self-esteem, thereby reducing their tendency to feel threatened and overreact defensively in day-to-day interactions with others (Sterba & Davis, 1999). Proactive aggressors respond most effectively to counseling approaches that eliminate (through consequences) the personal gain they receive from their appetitive behavior toward others and promote their interaction with others according to acceptable social rules (Brown & Parsons, 1998). Given the distinctly different motivations and needs of reactive and proactive aggressors, prescribed counseling interventions for the two do not appear to be interchangeable; it seems that unless the form of intervention applied is appropriately matched to the type of aggression observed, treatment outcome is at risk of being ineffective and even counterproductive (McAdams & Lambie, 2003).

### **Patterns: The Cycle of Aggression**

We now know that incidences of reactive aggression do not typically occur as spontaneous events but, instead, occur in a cyclical pattern of events involving

progressive stages of emotional escalation (Walker, Colvin & Ramsey, 1995). Violent episodes that appeared to have come without warning may actually have had early warning signals if observers had been trained to recognize the various stages in this “cycle of aggression” (Walker, Colvin & Ramsey, p. 164). The cycle begins with an individual in the “triggering” stage struggling to manage a rising but as yet unspecified anxiety as observed through some change from usual or baseline behavior. Unable to resolve the growing anxiety at this stage, the second or “escalation” stage is entered in which the inner anxiety is externalized through overreaction to some normally routine stressor. At the point that verbally or physically aggressive behaviors are incorporated in this escalation, the third or “crisis” stage is entered in which the deliberate violation of behavioral limits may be seen as a primitive plea for external intervention (Star, 1984). Intervention and/or physical fatigue eventually lead to the fourth stage of “recovery,” in which there is a progressive decline in the physical crisis stage symptoms, leading ultimately to the “post-crisis” stage where emotional arousal has given way to remorse and self-reproach. Counseling approaches at each of the triggering, escalation and post-crisis stages of the aggression cycle have shown to be effective at diffusing immediate crises and preventing future ones, whereas counseling approaches for individuals at the crisis and recovery stages have proven to be ineffective and potentially dangerous, as they can further fuel the aggressor’s anxiety and its associated crisis behavior. At these stages, counseling and problem solving must give way to firm direction and attention to safety.

## **Ecological Antecedents of Aggression**

It is now clear that the antecedents of youth aggression extend beyond the aggressor alone. Years of research efforts to identify a particular physical characteristic, personality type or mental health diagnosis in youth that can reliably predict their aggression have been inconclusive (Farrell et al., 2006; Quinsey, Harris, Rice & Cormier, 1998). For every study suggesting the predictive validity of an individual characteristic, there is another that would seem to dispute it. Consequently, studies of youth aggression as purely an individual phenomenon have given way to investigations of youth aggression as an “ecological” phenomenon having origins in the relationship between individuals and their environment (Goldstein, 1994; McAdams & Foster, 1999). An ecological model of school aggression posits that its source lies in the interaction between student variables and variables present in the school’s setting, personnel and organizational culture. Variables among students include the unique propensities for reactive or proactive forms of aggression that they bring to school. Variables in the school setting include the presence or absence of factors in the setting that maximize safety and security for potential reactive aggressors and that minimize benefits and gains (of aggression) for potential proactive aggressors. Variables among school personnel include their abilities to recognize predispositions for reactive and proactive aggression in students and to provide a setting that is conducive to addressing them. Finally, variables in the school organization include the degrees to which violence prevention and intervention are considerations in the establishment of school policies and in the pre-service and in-service preparation of all school personnel. In the absence of reliable predictors of school violence, the assessment of violence risk becomes a

necessary alternative (Dawes & Van der Merwe, 2007). Current knowledge suggests that a comprehensive approach to violence risk assessment and management in schools that takes ecological variables into consideration may be essential to safety and effective outcome in these tasks.

### **Structural Family Antecedents of Aggression**

Of all the environmental factors influencing a child's development, family structure appears to play the most pivotal role in determining whether or not a child assumes an aggressive or non-aggressive course of behavior (Paylo, 2005). Family "structure" refers to recurring interaction patterns within a family that define how family members relate to one another and the outside world as evidenced in three structural elements: *hierarchy*, *boundaries* and *alignments* (Becvar & Becvar, 2006). Hierarchy refers to the power or leadership structure within a family. Faulty hierarchy exists when parents fail to assume primary leadership in family decisions and the care of children (Kilpatrick & Holland, 2006). Without appropriate parental modeling, direction and support in their assessments of day-to-day challenges, children of families with weak hierarchical structure are at increased risk of inaccurate assessments and excessive (including violent) responses to mis-perceived threats (McAdams et al., 2009). Family boundaries are the unspoken rules that regulate the amount of communication that occurs within families and between families and the outside world (Kilpatrick & Holland). Families whose boundaries are closed and impermeable are unable to adapt to change soon find their interests to be in conflict with those of an ever-changing environment (i.e., school and community). Children in these families are predisposed to consider aggressive behavior as one means of surviving in a world they have been taught is

always “out to get them” (McAdams et al.). Alignments refer to the necessary bonds that are formed among family members to achieve basic family tasks. There can be a variety of alignments among various members of a family, but a secure parent-child alignment appears to be essential. It is through a secure alignment with parents that children formulate their own notions about appropriate adult respect, intimacy, and problem resolution. When alignment in parenting is disrupted by serious spousal turmoil, children are at increased risk for violent behavior. In particular, children who witness threats and acts of violence by their parents and between their parents are the most likely to become violent themselves (Erdiller, 2003). The established influence of family dynamics on violent behavior in youth explains why efforts to describe, predict, and address youth school violence on the basis of personality or character traits alone have proven ineffective (Quinsey, Harris, Rice, & Cormier, 2006). School-based interventions that strengthen positive family involvement appear to be necessary in order to adequately address the unmet mental health needs of violent and potentially violent students (Epstein, 2001).

### **Research to Practice?**

As illustrated above, the past twenty years of academic research have resulted in a substantial body of knowledge about youth violence antecedents and predispositions that can help school counselors to optimize risk assessment, increase safety through advance risk management, and facilitate earlier and more comprehensive prevention and clinical intervention. However, it has been suggested that a sizeable gap exists generally between counseling research and practice, and especially the practice of masters-level counselors (Lambert, Garfield & Bergin, 2003). As explanation,



proponents of this view suggest that masters-level counselors tend to view empirical research as abstract and over-generalized, costly and time consuming, better suited for doctoral-level counselors, and often out of touch with real experience and intuition (King & Otis, 2004). Whereas doctoral-level counselors are more likely to appreciate the research process, they also tend to view it as the domain of counselor education rather than clinical practice. The utility of the school violence research is called into question if research findings are not being consistently and effectively disseminated to school counselors and integrated into their work. Further, school counselors assume unnecessary risks when they attempt to work with aggressive students without the most current knowledge of how to safely do so. The goal of this study was to examine the degree to which a suspected and potentially dangerous gap currently exists between the research advances in school violence prevention and intervention and their incorporation into the day-to-day practice of school counselors in the United States. It also sought to identify strategies for bridging this gap as recommended by the school counselors themselves.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The target population for the study was practicing school counselors in the United States. The target participant sample for the study included 900 practicing school counselors from elementary schools, middle schools and high schools across the country (approximately 300 from each setting). The target sample size was determined on the basis that an anticipated 40 percent return rate (typical for survey research) would yield a final sample that would be large enough to ensure sufficient geographical

representation and meaningful statistical analysis. Targeted participants were selected through systematic sampling (every Nth listing) of the 7,909 school counselors listed in the directory of The American School Counselor Association.

### **Procedure**

A survey entitled the *Student Violence Experience and Understanding Questionnaire* was forwarded electronically to each of the individuals in the target sample with instructions for its subsequent completion and electronic return. Follow-up requests for participation were forwarded at two-weeks and one month after the initial distribution. The author-developed survey sought information about the participants in four topic areas: (a) their demographic profile, (b) their personal experiences with school violence and views regarding trends in its frequency and seriousness, (c) their level and source of knowledge about four specific aspects of youth aggression research, and (d) their recommendations for means improving school counselor readiness to address school violence. Requested demographic information included participants' gender, race, state of residence, level of education and length of tenure as a school counselor as well as their respective school's grade level, setting (urban, rural, suburban), size and public-private status.

To determine the scope of their personal exposure to school violence, participants were asked to provide the approximate number of violent incidents that had occurred at their school during the past full academic year. Regarding their views on school violence, the participants were asked to assess the seriousness of student violence at their school as well as trends, if any, in its frequency and severity.

To assess knowledge of school violence research, participants were provided with a brief descriptor of reactive and proactive aggression, the cycle of aggression, the ecological antecedents of aggression and the structural family antecedents of aggression (Table 1). For each, they were first asked to rate their level of knowledge as: (a) Working Knowledge (clearly understood and incorporated into work), (b) General Knowledge (some familiarity without working knowledge), or (c) No Knowledge (no previous familiarity with the concept). They then identified the primary source of their knowledge as stemming from one of the following: (a) their graduate education, (b) specialized training, (c) personal reading, (d) on-the-job experience (e) the questionnaire itself or (f) another source not listed.

**Table 1**

*Research Topics and Survey Descriptors*

<b>Topic</b>	<b>Descriptor</b>
1. Reactive & Proactive Aggression	Research has established that two different types of aggression, Reactive Aggression and Proactive Aggression, underlie most youth violence, with each type having distinctive characteristics and requiring its own distinct methods of prevention and intervention.
2. The Cycle of Aggression	Research has established that the majority of youth violence occurs not as a single event but rather, as a sequence or cycle of escalating events, each of which has distinctive symptoms and requires distinctive forms of intervention.
3. Ecological Antecedents of Aggression	Sources of school violence have been found to lie in each of four interdependent or “ecological” quadrants of a school environment: (a) the physical setting, (b) the school personnel, (c) the students, (d) and the administrative structure, each of which requires distinct prevention and intervention methods.
4. Structural Family Antecedents of Aggression	Links have been found between specific dysfunctional family structures and violence in children. Knowledge of these structural deficits can inform school counselors of circumstances present in students’ family lives that could predispose them toward violent behavior, and offers distinct pathways toward more timely and accurate intervention with at-risk students.

In the final section of the survey, participants were asked first to identify what they felt *should* be a school counselor's primary resource for knowledge about school violence prevention and intervention. They were then encouraged to offer their personal recommendations for expanding this and other information resources for school counselors on work with violent and potentially violent students and to offer any other comments on this topic that had not otherwise been addressed in the survey.

A pilot administration of the *Student Violence Experience and Understanding Questionnaire* was conducted with 10 counselors (school and mental health) to ensure that its requested content was clear and meaningful. Analysis of this pilot administration resulted in revision to the final survey with regard to both its requested content and question structure.

### **Analysis**

Survey data was analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. Using descriptive analysis, participants' responses to multiple choice survey questions were grouped according to their frequencies and then ranked by percentile. This produced a statistical profile of responses from which general participant characteristics and preferences could be determined on the basis of their achieving a simple majority (>50%). Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was applied to detect possible differences among counselors' reported levels and sources of knowledge on the basis grade level. Finally, participants' narrative comments were subjected to exploratory conceptual analysis involving three levels of data coding as described by Hahn (2008).

The first level involved “open coding” (p. 6), wherein repeated words and phrases were identified and labeled according to their expressed meaning or emphasis. At the second or “focused coding” level, (p. 7), data having the same or closely related labels was sorted into groups that were then labeled according to the shared meaning or focus of the data within it. At the third or “axial level” (p. 7), the focus of the data within the groups was reviewed and group labels were refined as necessary to reflect their distinctive thematic content. This analysis produced a conceptual profile of current thematic trends in participant recommendations for improving school counselor preparation to address school violence.

## **Results**

### **Sample Characteristics**

From the original 900 surveys distributed, the final sample included 416 (46%) that were returned fully completed, 98 (11%) that were returned as “undeliverable,” and 64 (7%) that were incomplete. No response was received for the remaining 322 surveys (36%). The 310 women and 106 men in the final sample were almost equally divided among elementary, middle and high-school settings, and represented 45 states across the nation. The majority of participants worked in public schools (94%) located in rural (38%) and suburban (43%) settings having over 400 students (74%). Most held master’s degrees (83%) from CACREP accredited counselor education programs (78%) and had four or more years of experience (73%) in their professional roles as school counselors. Data on race/ethnicity were incomplete; however, on the basis of data received, it appears that underrepresented racial/ethnic groups comprised not more than 32 percent of the sample.

Previous studies recommend that telephone contact be made with a sampling of non-participants to verify sample representativeness. Because telephone contacts were not available for the participants, such contact was not possible. However, data for 21 individuals who chose to complete only the demographic portion of the survey suggested that their characteristics were generally comparable to those of the participants in terms of their gender ratio (14 women and seven men), their balanced representation of elementary (8), middle (5) and high school (5) grade levels, and their modal range of years in school counseling practice (4-6 years). Additionally, all in this group held masters degrees and worked in large suburban public school settings.

### **School Violence Frequency, Seriousness and Trends**

On the survey, participants were asked to report the annual frequency of violent incidents occurring at their school in ranges from one to more than 10, to rate the seriousness of those incidents from not serious to very serious, and to indicate any increasing or decreasing trends they saw occurring in school violence frequency and seriousness. With regard to frequency, it seems that nearly all participants had experienced some school violence during the past year. A slight majority (51%) reported having encountered two to five incidents, followed by those who had encountered more than ten incidents (23%), six to ten incidents (19%) and one or no incidents (6%). As for the seriousness of the school violence problem, a clear majority reported the problem as being “moderately serious” (63%), followed by those seeing it as “not serious” (28%) and “very serious” (7%). In contrast to previous research, the participants in this study did not differ significantly across elementary school, middle school and high school grade levels in their assessments of violence frequency and seriousness or in their

collective assessment that current rates and seriousness of school violence were stable rather than on the rise or decline. Less than 20 percent of the participants at any grade level indicated that there was an increasing or decreasing trend in the frequency and/or severity of violence at their schools.

### **School Counselor Knowledge**

Findings for the survey questions relating to participants' levels and sources of knowledge about select aspects of youth aggression research are presented in Tables 2 and 3 respectively. As shown in Table 2, less than a fourth (23.11%) of the respondents reported having a working knowledge of the four topics being integrated into their school counseling practice, and over three fourths reported having either limited knowledge (45.41%) or no knowledge (31.48%) of the topics at all. Participants felt most knowledgeable in the topic of Family Structure and Youth Aggression, with over a third (38.95%) reporting that they had a working knowledge. Conversely, they felt least knowledgeable in the topic of Aggression Ecology, for which a working knowledge was reported by only 6.28 percent.

**Table 2**  
*Reported Levels of Counselor Knowledge*

Topic Area	Level of Knowledge		
	Working	General	None
Reactive-Proactive Aggression	18.00%	47.50%	34.50%
Cycle of Aggression	29.23%	56.92%	13.85%
Ecological Model of Aggression	6.28%	27.75%	65.97%
Family Structure & Youth Aggression	38.95%	49.47%	11.58%
Average	23.11%	45.41%	31.48%

With regard to the source of their knowledge about the four topics, Table 3 illustrates that the majority of participants acquired their current knowledge through informal rather than formal means. More than a third (38.44%) of the participants reported that they acquired their current knowledge through personal reading and on-the-job experience, while nearly as many (31.34%) reported being introduced to the information for the first time in the survey itself. Less than a third of the participants (30.21%) reported that they had acquired their knowledge through formal counselor education and specialized training programs. In striking contrast to this, when asked what *should* be the primary source of this knowledge, 92 percent of the participants reported that it should come through those two venues. The participants reported family structure and child aggression to be the topic most often addressed in formal training (47.9%), whereas they reported the ecology of aggression to be the topic least often addressed formally, with over half (63.35%) being introduced to it for the first time in the survey.

**Table 3**

*Reported Sources of Counselor Knowledge*

Topic Area	Source of Knowledge				
	Counselor Ed.	Specialized Training	Personal Reading	On-the-Job Experience	Survey Information
Reactive & Proactive Aggression	12.50%	10.50%	22.50%	20.50%	34.00%
Cycle of Aggression	20.00%	18.97%	26.67%	18.46%	15.90%
Ecological Model of Aggression	4.71%	6.28%	13.09%	12.57%	63.35%
Family Structure & Youth Aggression	32.11%	15.79%	14.21%	25.79%	12.11%
Average	17.33%	12.88%	19.11%	19.33%	31.34%



Approximately half of the participants in the study offered optional recommendations for improving the way in which school counselors are currently being informed about methods to address school violence. From those recommendations, exploratory conceptual analysis produced six primary themes that included: (a) providing better education and training in graduate counselor education programs, (b) giving as much emphasis to hands-on prevention and intervention skill development as to theory, (c) being proactive rather than reactive in the provision of training, (d) offering regularly reoccurring training, (e) making training accessible and affordable, and (f) adapting training to the specific school context and culture.

### **Discussion**

The results of this study hold both promise and cause for concern. One area of promise lies in the fact that the frequency and severity rates of school violence appear to be stable across grade levels rather than on the rise as previous research has suggested. This finding is particularly important at the formative elementary grade level where a trend toward increasing violence has previously shown to be the greatest (McAdams & Lambie, 2003). Hopefully, it can be credited to the effectiveness of school violence prevention initiatives that have been implemented in recent years.

Of continued concern is the finding that current levels of student violence are perceived as a serious problem in schools, with a majority of school counselors encountering two to five incidents in any given academic year. Depending upon the severity of the violence encountered, this rate of incidence is sufficient to place many schools within their states' federally mandated distinction as "Persistently Dangerous"

(Department of Education, 2004). What seems to be clear is that school violence is occurring with regularity, and that school counselors and other school personnel need to be prepared to address it. Unfortunately, it also seems clear that school counselors do not possess the level of knowledge that is available and needed to maximize effectiveness and safety in doing so.

For example, the fact that only 18 percent of the school counselors in this study possessed a working knowledge of Reactive and Proactive aggression suggests that 82 percent were at risk of mismatching their prevention and intervention efforts to the needs of the aggressive child. Dodge (1991) has suggested that through such mismatching, an effective outcome is unlikely, and the mismatched intervention may actually serve to accelerate rather than attenuate the violent crisis.

Similarly, the Cycle of Aggression offers a means for early detection of reactive aggression and provides a menu for identifying and applying appropriate and inappropriate counselor responses at each stage of behavioral and emotional acceleration in the cycle. The finding that only 29 percent of the school counselors in the study possessed a working understanding of the Cycle of Aggression, suggested that most were at risk of intervening in ways that were contraindicated for the student's stage of escalation and more likely to exacerbate the crisis than to resolve it.

By far, the view of student violence as an ecological rather than an individual phenomenon was the least understood topic by the participants in this study. With only six percent reporting a working knowledge of this topic, it is assumed that 94 percent could be applying a more insular, child-centered approach to their violence prevention and intervention efforts. The evidence is clear that addressing only the aggressive

student's contribution to school violence, while ignoring equally significant contributions from school personnel, the school setting, and the school's organizational structure is likely to be met with failure and frustration (McAdams & Foster, 1999).

The most promising indicator of aggression research reaching school counselor practice was in the area of the family's contribution to student violence, about which 40 percent of the participants reported to have a working knowledge. Still, the fact that a majority of the participants reported approaching violent students in isolation from their families is grounds for continued concern. For over 40 years, family systems researchers have concluded that efforts to change the behaviors of children without also understanding changing the family structures that support those behaviors are likely to be temporary at best (McAdams et al., 2009).

With only 29 percent of the participants reporting a working understanding of the four topic areas combined, the results of this study confirmed that advances through research in understanding of school violence prevention and intervention are not reaching the school counselors in ways that affect their day-to-day practice. Despite two decades of discovery that could make their work with violent students safer and more effective, it seems that 77 percent of the participants were approaching their work with violent students as though the discovery had never occurred. It is promising, however, that nearly half (45%) of the participants reported a general knowledge of the four topic areas, as this suggests that at least some level of interaction between school violence research and practice is available and occurring. Even more promising were the participants' expressed awareness of the need for more thorough and current

knowledge about work with violent students and their provision of recommendations for how that should be achieved.

### **Recommendations**

The recommendation *for student violence to be more regularly and thoroughly introduced as a topic in counselor education* emerged as the most prevalent qualitative theme. Whereas the participants appeared to recognize the limitations of counselor education to prepare them fully for all aspects of school counseling practice, they suggested that the frequency and seriousness of school violence in today's schools warranted its coverage as a topic for basic school counselor preparation. Their collective sentiment regarding just what topics should be covered during initial preparation was captured in the statement of one participant who said: "There should be an emphasis on how to assess it before it happens (e.g., violence warnings signs), on lines of protocol to follow when something happens and on how to organize community counseling assistance after something has happened (e.g., grief counseling)." Collective sentiment was less clear regarding just where in counselor education curricula violence training should be provided; however, the devotion of all or part of a course to the topic was suggested by some.

The second theme among participant recommendations was the need *for both counselor education and specialized training to provide school counselors as much with practical skills to apply in school violence prevention and intervention as with theoretical knowledge needed to conceptualize them*. With regard to counselor education in particular, a general feeling was expressed that when coverage of school violence was provided in the curriculum, it tended to overemphasize theory and underemphasize skill

development. The particular kinds of skills needed were stated clearly by one participant and echoed by many others: “Counselors need skills to recognize problems; deescalate a crisis; and work individually with both bullies and their victims and to work effectively administrators, teachers and parents to develop plans for keeping all students safe.” To maximize opportunities for acquiring such skills during counselor education, it was suggested that there be more “pairing of college classroom training with actual work in the field to make the classroom learning more real and to make it 'stick'.”

A number of participants used specific terminology from the survey to express the third recommendation: *for education and specialized training in violence prevention and intervention “to be more proactive and less reactive.”* Despite the fact that nearly all participants had experienced violence in their schools, they suggested that a mentality of “it won’t happen here” may sometimes be standing in the way of ensuring that school counselors are provided with sufficient advance training. To further illustrate, one participant wrote: “When violence breaks out at other schools, there seems to be this feeling that those schools were doing something wrong, and that we won’t have the problem, because we’re doing it right. Trouble is, we don’t know what that ‘right’ thing is!” On the whole, participants tended to agree that no school was immune from risk of violence, and that advance preparation among all levels of school personnel was a necessity.

The fourth recommendation was *for training in school violence prevention and intervention to be a recurring event* to ensure that school counselors have access to the most current concepts and methods. This necessity was illustrated clearly by one participant who wrote: “I learned a lot in graduate school, but that was over 20 years

ago. I think it is critical to stay informed on the latest research and skill development.” It was echoed by another who referred to the school violence problem as an “ever-changing topic.” To ensure the continued relevance of their approaches to school violence, participants offered four specific suggestions: (a) that specialized training programs include topics drawn from “exemplary” violence prevention and intervention programs that seem to be working, (b) that refresher training be required annually and “at the regional or at least at the district level,” (c) that school counselors “have access to a forum of experts with ideas for specific problems via the internet,” and (d) that grant writing opportunities be available “to bring in the most innovative violence prevention curriculum and training” into schools.

The fifth recommendation was *for training to be specialized in terms of the specific needs of a particular geographical region, school district and, sometimes, even a particular school*. Participants generally seemed to agree with one who suggested that “there is just no way that a graduate education program can make us ‘experts’ in so many issues (related to school violence).” Rather, they tended to embrace the position articulated by another who concluded that in order to intervene effectively with violent students, “they (school counselors) have to know each individual student and not clump them with a theory they learned in school.” National and regional school counselor conferences were cited as an important venue for keeping counselors current with research and best practices, but because “each school has very different dynamics to consider,” locally sponsored in-service trainings that focus “on real-life experiences of what people are dealing with in their classrooms” were viewed as an essential supplement.

The final recommendation related to the need for *regular training in school violence prevention and intervention to be accessible and affordable*. It was generally agreed that even the most effective and up-to-date training is of little value if its expense and/or time requirements made it unfeasible for school counselors to attend. Echoing the reality of this view, one participant lamented: “with the extreme budget limitations on our school presently, the only way I can pursue enhanced knowledge is to take money out of my own pocket and take days off. I know I need the training, but I simply can’t afford to do either of these to get it.” The expanded use of local community training resources in violence prevention and intervention was suggested as an alternative to more costly state and regional seminars for ensuring adequate training accessibility to during hard economic times. The provision of current and relevant self-learning materials was recommended as a similar alternative. Regarding its utility, one participant proposed that: “If updated resource materials were provided to us to read and learn on our own, I believe that counselors would utilize the opportunity to remain current in knowledge, skills and trends in school violence.”

### **Implications**

Transforming advances in school violence research into more effective programs of prevention and intervention appears to be a shared responsibility among school counseling researchers, educators, administrators, and practitioners. Counseling researchers can facilitate the transformation of research discoveries into action by clearly developing and articulating the practical applications of new knowledge. They can further maximize the practical utility of their discoveries by balancing theoretical

research with research aimed at clinical application and by reporting their work in publications that are accessible to counselors in practice.

Counselor educators can ensure that research outcomes inform counseling practice by integrating new knowledge into graduate and specialized training program curricula. Curricula in school violence etiology, prevention and intervention must be regularly modified and updated with new research discoveries to ensure that the scope of school counselor preparation remains adequately matched to the scope of the problem that counselors are currently encountering in the field. Fortunately, the need for a massive overhaul of present counselor education curricula is not indicated. Rather, it seems that the necessary curricular changes could be effectively achieved through the integration of new knowledge relating to school violence into existing counselor education coursework.

School administrators can fill a critical link between research and practice in school violence by staying abreast of new knowledge applications and making them accessible to school counselors in their schools' professional literature libraries and in pre-service and in-service training programs. They can increase the accessibility of violence training for school counselors by establishing links with training resources in the local community, thereby reducing dependence on state and national training resources that often limit access due to prohibitive costs. Similarly, they can increase access by scheduling training during work hours and not on weekends or evenings that require counselors to choose between meeting their personal and professional needs.

School counselors can effectively extend the benefits of research in their schools by being proactive consumers of professional literature and training and incorporating



new knowledge into their school counseling practices. Systemic changes in school counselor preparation are clearly needed to afford greater access by school counselors to knowledge and skills in school violence prevention and intervention. However, due to urgent issues of safety and student well-being, school counselors cannot wait for others to close the knowledge gap for them. Instead, they must combine personal exploration of the professional counseling literature with participation in all accessible training opportunities to ensure that they remain current in their abilities to recognize, prevent, and if necessary, to intervene safely and effectively in dangerous situations.

### **Limitations**

Generalization of the findings of this research is subject to several notable limitations. The first limitation relates to the size and scope of the sample. Despite systematically randomized sampling and a 90 percent representation of states, the 416 members of the final sample comprise only 5 percent of the nearly 8000 school counselor members in the ASCA directory; thus the representativeness of that group as a whole must be considered with caution. A second limitation has to do with the fact that the participants' responses were based largely upon the limited descriptors of the subject matter provided by the researchers. Inaccurate participant understanding of the subject matter due to insufficient or unclear information could result in inaccurate responses to questions about that subject matter. A third limitation concerns the underrepresentation of urban schools in the sample. Without inclusion of the considerable numbers of school counselor who work in an urban school setting, the findings should be considered, at best, incomplete.

### **Future Research**

Despite its limitations, this exploratory study is an important first step, in that no similar inquiry regarding the translation of research to school counselor practice in addressing school violence appears to have preceded it. As such, subsequent studies of the topic are invited in order to confirm the reliability of its findings and provide for their broader generalization. To build on the current findings, future studies might include the use of more comprehensive descriptors of the research topics to ensure that topics are not rated as unfamiliar due merely to insufficient information or unclear terminology. Sampling in future research might be expanded to include school and even regional or state-level educational administrators in order to better understand their anticipated role in maintaining the existing research-to-practice void and to enlist their crucial input into the formulation of strategies for closing it. Sampling could also be expanded beyond the school setting to include mental health counselors, for it is unlikely that the current disconnect between youth violence research and counseling practice exists within school counseling alone. Future studies might also include an examination of those regions, states, localities and even individual schools in the country where the translation of school violence research into school counseling practice seems to be most effectively occurring in an effort to understand and capitalize upon their successful strategies. Finally, they could strive for greater representation of urban school counselors who were underrepresented in the current study.

### **Conclusions**

In summary, the empirical and qualitative findings of this study point to three primary conclusions. The first is that threats and acts of student violence continue to be

seen as a serious problem among school counselors. The second is that school counselors may be applying only a small fraction of the knowledge and skills available for increasing effectiveness and safety as they engage in school violence prevention and intervention initiatives. The third and more hopeful conclusion is that with purposeful effort and collaboration among all stakeholders, significant advances may be possible toward narrowing or even closing the current gap between youth violence research and school counseling practice.

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