

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Rural youth and violence: a gender perspective

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A B S T R A C T

Introduction: The public health system must consider violence as an all too common reality in modern life. Violence can contribute to long-lasting negative consequences for individuals and communities. Research on violence has primarily focused on urban environments. Research examining youth violence within rural communities is limited. This is particularly the case for the links between gender and violence in small rural settings. The purpose of this study was to examine rural violence from a gender perspective by examining four variables: meaning, causes, consequences and solutions.

Methods: A survey was completed in Central Alberta, Canada with 178 students from grades 6 to 12. The schools' geographic locations represented two distinct economic settings: one natural resources and the other agriculture. The mean age of the participants was 16 years with 60% of the youth female and 40% male. The survey instrument was composed of demographic questions and 70 questions that focused on violence.

Results: Violence was a concern for all youth, but there were gender differences. Females viewed the meaning of violence as having the intent to harm others and causes contributing to violence included television, movies, video games and the internet. Females were more concerned than males about the emotional consequences of violence. For solutions, females were more accepting of intrusive means to control violence such as increased security and stricter school rules, and involving non-peer helpers such as teachers and community based agencies as a means to help combat violence.

Conclusions: The results of this study indicate that violence exists among rural youth and causes a great deal of concern. In particular, the study underscores the fact that there are potential gender differences in relation to causes, meaning, impact and solutions to violence. All the youth believed that violence in their lives needs to be addressed and want to develop anti-violence strategies. Females in particular see the development of such programs including youth themselves and community partners.

Key words: gender, violence, youth.



Introduction

Violence should not be ignored within the public health domain in Canada because the results of violence impact inter-related systems in all community settings¹⁻³. In addition, violence can have long-term effects, and strategies are needed to limit its impact on people and their environments⁴⁻⁸. Violence is a common problem, but incidence can vary among different individuals and populations. Many people have preconceived ideas shaped by a mix of personal experience as well as media and other influences. A commonly held belief is that youth violence occurs principally in large urban centers, as opposed to rural and small towns (ie populations < 10 000⁹). A few studies set in the USA have examined violence within rural communities¹⁰⁻¹². In these studies, the definitions of violence ranged from psychological non-physical behaviors, including taunting and teasing, to physical actions involving use of fists and weapons.

Other studies have focused on the predictors of violent behaviors for youth which include: familial violence, lack of parental warmth, lack of supervision and corporal punishment¹³⁻¹⁶; youth with a history of carrying weapons¹⁷; youth with poor interpersonal skills¹⁸; drug and alcohol use by students in elementary school^{19,20}; and, a time of change in identity²¹.

The literature identifies youth violence as a significant problem and also the need to have a better understanding of youth violence in order to develop more effective anti-violence programs²². In a 2010 Statistics Canada report, reference is made to the increasing rate of violence for children and youth²³. However, there is a lack of details that describe violence in rural Canadian communities, especially from the perspective of gender²⁴⁻²⁶. The current article is based on a multi-methods study that adds to the knowledge of violence by identifying possible gender differences among rural youth²⁴⁻²⁷.

Methods

This two-phase, mixed-method study generated information about the meaning of violence, its causes, consequences and possible solutions. The first phase, as reported elsewhere, included 52 qualitative interviews with youth in two different resource-based rural communities regarding their perspectives on violence^{25,27}. The researchers in Phase 1 had no preconceived definitions of violence, rather the youth themselves would define violence and their perceptions would guide the development of the Phase 2 instrument used in the study reported here. Phase 1 qualitative interviews asked the youth (aged 11 to 18 years in grades 7 to 12) to respond to eight open-ended questions. The content included:

- the definition of violence
- is violence a problem?
- causes of violence
- types of violence
- personal experiences
- reasons to participate in violence
- community resources
- solutions to violence.

The development of the Phase 2 survey data collection instrument was guided by the thematic findings from the qualitative interviews. The use of the language of the youth from Phase 1 contributed to ensuring the questions for the survey were meaningful to the youth completing the survey questionnaire in Phase 2²⁸. The survey data, although not as in-depth as in the Phase 1 qualitative interviews, allowed for a larger sample of youth. The survey was pilot tested in one rural school in Southern Alberta, Canada, and refinements were made as necessary. The research team did not do psychometric testing on the instrument but future research should include this type of analysis.

The rural youth violence survey instrument was composed of demographic questions and 70 questions that specifically



focused on violence. Using the qualitative findings, the survey questions were developed with anchoring from four-point Likert scales. Male and female youth answered questions on:

- the meaning of violence
- the causes of violence
- the consequences of violence
- solutions to violence within their respective rural communities.

The research received ethics approval for studies involving human subjects from the first author's university.

The youth chosen to participate were in grades 6 to 12, a group that previous research identified as having a rising incidence of violence on school grounds²⁹. The researchers identified a number of rural middle and high schools and randomly chose three names.

Local school superintendents gave permission for the staff to be contacted by the researchers. In order to enlist the involvement of the schools, the research team gave a presentation at each site, detailing the goals, data collection methods and the process of obtaining consent. Information packages were then sent to the principals and consent forms were distributed to be signed by parents or guardians. In each of the schools the principal volunteered to be the site coordinator. This role involved the distribution and collection of consent forms and arranging for the in-classroom completion and collection of forms as well as liaising with the researchers. Students made the choice of whether or not to take the consent forms home for signature, allowing them to complete the survey questionnaire during regular class time. The signed consent forms were returned to the research site coordinator in the school and were kept in a secure and confidential location. Often, it took weeks for the forms to be returned to the school.

An ethical issue arose wherein it was important for students in the class to not be aware of who was participating in the survey. In the classroom, those students not participating in

the research were given a handout on bullying with questions to complete by pencil at the same time other students were completing the survey. This potentially helped to ensure that students were not aware of who was participating.

The schools were located in Central Alberta and represented the different economic bases of natural resources and agriculture. Ultimately, only two of the chosen schools participated in the data collection phase. One school was situated in a natural resource community (with an economic base of oil and natural gas production) with an overall population of 5801, with 1400 persons in the 5 to 19 year age grouping. The other school was located in an agricultural setting (with an economic base of grain and cattle farming) of 671 people, with 190 persons in the 5 to 19 year age group³⁰. The two rural communities chosen met the Statistics Canada definition for 'rural and small towns', whereby the population is less than 1000 persons who live beyond the main commuting zones of larger urban centers⁹.

The following presentation of descriptive data collected in 2006 from the quantitative phase of the study provides an overview of the perspective of rural youth based on gender and may be useful in the planning of future studies and the implications of accounting for gender differences when developing anti-violence programs.

Results

Demographics

The entire demographic data profile showed that the total grades 6–12 population at the two schools was 259 students from which 178 students completed the survey, representing a response rate of 69%. Participants ranged in age from 12 to 20 years, with a mean of 16 years; 40% ($n = 71$) of the youth was male and 60% ($n = 107$) was female. Seventy-three percent ($n = 129$) of the respondent population lived with two parents; the highest percentage of respondents had one sibling (38%, $n = 68$). Sixty-four percent ($n = 113$) of the



respondents had lived in the rural community from 11 to 20 years.

Meaning of violence

The youth were asked a number of questions related to their perceptions of what violence is as well as when and how it occurs. The four-point Likert scale ranged from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. Females were more likely than males to view violence as the intent to harm someone ($t = 2.45, p = .015$) and the use of weapons was viewed as a form of bravado and toughness ($t = 2.392, p = .018$). Overall violence among youth was reported to be a normal occurrence in their lives ($t = 2.08, p = .038$). Although not statistically significant, males viewed violence as not having the primary purpose of inflicting harm. The carrying of weapons was for 'a show of toughness' and not to injure people. Items where males and females indicated no significant difference were: 'bullying gives power over others'; 'youth who are different are targets for bullying'; and 'violence serves as entertainment due to boredom in rural settings'.

Causes of violence

Both genders ranked their answers on the four-point scale from 'never', 'rarely', 'sometimes' to 'often' for 10 potential causes of violence. The items were: 'television and movie violence'; 'internet and video games'; 'violence in the home'; 'personal problems'; 'personal unhappiness'; 'peer pressure'; 'boredom'; 'alcohol and drugs'; 'competition between towns and schools'; 'getting even with others'; and, 'boyfriend/girlfriend issues'. The results showed that only 2 of the 10 causes were significant.

Females, more than males, believed that television and movies were factors in the creation of violence in their world ($t = 3.384, p = .001$), as well as video games and the internet as triggers for violence ($t = 2.638, p = .009$). Factors that were not viewed as causes of violence by both genders were interpersonal concerns such as unhappiness, individual problems and, surprisingly, alcohol and drugs. It appears that

for this group of youth, the only difference between males and females was in perceiving technology as a trigger for violence.

Consequences of violence

The consequences of violence section of the survey questionnaire asked the youth to respond to 8 consequences of violence on a scale of 'never', 'rarely', 'sometimes' or 'often'. The items included: 'isolation'; 'fear'; 'feeling upset for periods of time'; 'loss of self-esteem'; 'loss of self-confidence'; 'development of physical problems (eg headaches)'; 'thoughts of suicide'; 'feelings of power'; and 'feelings of respect from peers'.

The results demonstrated that female youth were more aware than male youth of how victims of violence were personally and emotionally impacted by violence. In this study, females were more likely than males to agree that the victim experiences emotional reactions such as: fear, being upset, losing self-confidence, self-esteem and thoughts of suicide (Table 1). However, the males viewed violence as providing respect from their peers. Similar to the findings on the meaning of violence, the youth viewed violent acts as not being motivated by the need to have and/or demonstrate power.

Solutions to violence

Youth were asked to rate 11 ideas for reducing violence on a four-point scale ranging from 'not at all useful' to 'very useful'. The ideas presented were: 'education for victims'; 'education for violent youth'; 'education for parents'; 'education for families'; 'education for school staff'; 'school rules against violence'; 'cameras inside schools'; 'supervision on school grounds'; 'security officers in schools'; 'sniffer dogs in schools'; and 'metal detectors in schools'.



Table 1: Consequences of violence (n = 178)

Consequence variable	Demographic variable	N	Mean	t	sig
Victim experiences fear	Female	106	3.36	2.528	.012
	Male	69	3.06		
Victim upset for long time	Female	106	3.18	2.883	.004
	Male	69	2.87		
Victim loses confidence & self-esteem	Female	106	3.36	3.466	.001
	Male	69	2.96		
Victim thinks of dying by suicide	Female	105	2.67	2.526	.012
	Male	69	2.33		
The violent youth gets respect	Female	106	2.42	-2.258	.025
	Male	69	2.74		

N = 178; P < 0.05.

Group differences were found in 6 of the possible 11 ideas for reducing violence (Table 2). Females were more likely than males to believe that parents and families need to receive education in order to reduce youth violence. Females were also more likely than males to accept more intrusive means to curb violence, including school initiatives such as zero tolerance against violence; supervision, both in schools and on school grounds; cameras or security officers in schools; sniffer dogs to find drugs; and, metal detectors for weapon identification. Males were not of the opinion that the solutions presented would be beneficial in preventing violence.

Program partners

The final section asked the youth about the people they thought should be involved in the development of anti-violence programs. They ranked the 6 possible choices (youth, adults, families, teachers, community workers, and members of town council) on a scale of 'not at important', 'somewhat important', 'considerably important' or 'very important'. Once again, females were more likely than males to believe that youth themselves, adults, families, teachers and community helpers could make a difference in dealing with youth violence (Table 3).

Discussion

Limitations

This research is limited by collecting data from only two rural schools. The third school had originally agreed to participate but when the data collection phase commenced, there was no assistance from this school. After two attempts to rectify the situation, data collection was abandoned at this site. It was not possible to recruit another school so late in the data collection phase. It is hoped that the survey will be replicated in a variety of schools. Increasing the number of school settings would allow for greater randomization and limit the impact of students to self-select, as was the case with the current study. A much larger sample would strengthen the generalizability of the findings. Another limitation is that the research did not examine how the growth and developmental stages of the youth could influence the data. Future research could examine how the differences in male and female maturational stages would impact on their perspectives of violence.



Table 2: Usefulness of solutions (n = 178)

Solution variable	Demographic variable	N	Mean	t	sig
Education for parents	Female	105	2.55	2.681	.008
	Male	69	2.16		
Education for families	Female	105	2.61	3.021	.003
	Male	69	2.17		
Supervision in schools and on schools grounds	Female	105	2.58	3.315	.001
	Male	69	2.10		
Cameras in schools	Female	103	2.40	3.035	.003
	Male	69	1.93		
Sniffer dogs in schools	Female	104	2.63	2.802	.006
	Male	69	2.14		
Metal detectors in schools	Female	104	2.13	2.376	.019
	Male	68	1.75		

N = 178; P < 0.05.

Table 3: Possible anti-violence program partners (n = 178)

Program partner	Demographic variable	N	Mean	t	sig
Youth	Female	105	3.54	2.769	.006
	Male	69	3.23		
Adults	Female	105	3.04	2.181	.031
	Male	69	2.72		
Families	Female	105	3.08	2.398	.018
	Male	68	2.74		
Teachers	Female	104	2.52	2.073	.040
	Male	69	2.20		
Community Helpers	Female	103	2.34	2.179	.031
	Male	68	2.01		

N = 178; P < 0.05.

Discussion of results

The results of this study indicate that violence exists among rural youth and causes them a great deal of concern. The study underscores the potential for distinct gender differences in relation to the meaning of violence, causes, consequences of violence for others and solutions. There is a need to incorporate the opinions of youth, especially females, in policy development and program planning.

Both genders indicated that violence in their lives was a normal occurrence. However, female respondents viewed the meaning of violence as the intent to harm but the carrying of

weapons was believed to be for a show of bravado, as opposed to inflicting injuries on other youth. The notion that movies, television, internet and video games were triggers for violence was upheld more so by females than males. However, factors such as alcohol, drugs and interpersonal problems were not viewed by either gender as substantially contributing to violence among youth. This result is somewhat counter-intuitive because interpersonal issues could lead to self-medication possibly fuelling violent behaviors.

Males and females had quite different views of the consequences of violence. Males seemed to indicate that



being involved in violent activities afforded them respect from their peers, possibly demonstrating a form of social status. Females, however, appeared to be more aware of and concerned about the emotional effects on victims, including suicide. A possible explanation for these differences in perception may lie with commonly held belief that females are socialized differently from males as they move through the life cycle. Such an assumption would require further study.

With regard to solutions to violence, female respondents were more likely than males to accept intrusive interventions that could interfere with their daily lives, such as increased security, supervision and tighter school rules. The proactive stance of females was also indicated in their belief that working with other youth, adults, families, teachers and community helpers could be useful in developing and implementing anti-violence strategies. The females seemed to believe that knowledge through education about violence begins in the home. Such an educative approach could begin early in a child's life and in the younger school grades as a way to prevent violence. This finding is similar to that of a recent study which recommended the need to involve parents as part of anti-violence programs for rural youth³¹.

The results of this study suggest that a 'one size fits all approach' may not be the most effective means for helping youth deal with violence, and for the promotion of violence prevention programs. For example, our study findings did not support the view that male youth carry weapons for the purpose of inflicting injury, as was reported from other research^{32,33}. If the general belief of both genders that violence is normal in their lives was combined with the perceptions of the females, this might allow for the creation of anti-violence programs that have meaning for youth. For example, female youths' sensitivity to the impact of violence on others may provide an opportunity for dialogue among community leaders, decision-makers, and the youth. This form of prevention is necessary because previous studies have identified that if youth are exposed to violence over time it can have serious long-term effects^{24,32}.

Policy-makers and clinicians need to be mindful that violence is a public health concern and assist in developing community-based solutions. Hence, from a public health planning perspective, youth who are concerned about violence provide healthcare professionals with a window of opportunity to dialogue with rural youth and mutually identify relevant anti-violence strategies. A top-down approach that imposes solutions can be viewed as an oppressive strategy that does little to empower youth as partners. This is especially important given the differing views on violence from the gender perspective. Mutual respect and understanding can lead to productive exchanges that result in meaningful anti-violence programs.

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