

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the shared concerns and remedies school social workers have about safety in their schools. A sample of school social work practitioners across the United States ($N = 260$) provided a response to the qualitative prompt: “In general, how do you think school safety in the United States can be improved?” An inductive, thematic study of pre-existing data was conducted to determine the aspects of school safety most concerning to participants. Through open, axial and selective coding, three salient themes for increasing school safety emerged: 1) increase training and services; 2) focus on school-community partnerships; and, 3) advocating for policy and school structural changes that affect school safety. Findings from this study indicate social worker concern for school safety and their willingness to assist with needed improvements. Implications for practice are discussed and recommendations for future research are provided.

School social worker views on the current state of safety in United States schools:

A qualitative study

Introduction

School social workers perform a number of functions that aim at positively impacting student academic performance and behavioral outcomes. Their effectiveness is reliant on an ability to identify and understand factors that influence students in the educational environment. Therefore, practitioners have a vested interest in policies and practices that shape school context, such as those introduced through school safety and security initiatives. Our newspapers report numerous tragedies of violence. The purpose of this study is to examine the shared concerns and remedies school social workers have about safety in their schools. This study utilizes qualitative data to examine school social workers' perspectives towards safety and examines their recommendations for improving safety in United States schools.

Review

The School Social Worker

School social workers can provide a number of student- and system-focused interventions designed to address the needs of their students using a person-in-environment perspective (PIE) (Kondrat, 2002). Their roles make them a critical component in the relationship of the school with the students' peers, home, and community; they work directly with school personnel, parents, families, community stakeholders, and health and mental health providers to benefit their students. School social workers play a unique and important role as school personnel in that they can identify elements of the school environment that impede student success, counsel individuals and groups, advocate for the disadvantaged, and promote student achievement through their service delivery and coordination.

The Role of Today's School Social Worker

Historically, the role of the school social worker has been to serve as an agent for addressing biopsychosocial factors that influence student well-being (Costin, 1969; Allen-Mears, 1994). School social work was founded on the principle that school-based professionals could engage a student by viewing their behaviors as contextual to their environment at school and at home. This perspective is what distinguished them from other school-based personnel, setting the framework for the school social worker today (Schaffer, 2006). In the late 1990's and early 2000's the profession shifted after the first two high-profile incidents of school violence and policy responses at the federal and state level. Incidents such as those seen in West Paducah, Kentucky in 1997 and Columbine, Colorado in 1999 resulted in the increased use of school safety strategies in United States schools (Addington, 2009; Booren & Handy, 2009). This likely shifted the school context in which school social workers are employed. Around the same time, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB; Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965) was introduced in 2002. This and the subsequent reauthorization of the IDEA in 2004 introduced evidence-based practice as a mandated component to improving student outcomes in school social work practice (Kelly et al., 2008). These policies likely influenced school social work practice in general, introducing the requirement to use evidence-based practices and incorporate family and community resources into the school curriculum. Both contributed to the development and implementation of nationally recognized multi-tiered evidence-based frameworks for service delivery in school settings, such as response to intervention (RtI) and positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS), a proactive approach to providing supports for students in school to help them achieve

multisystem success. These practices further defined and specialized the school social work profession we know today.

The field of school social work continues to grow because of federal legislation and the need to provide mental health care for children in schools. For example, in 1996 there were approximately 9,000 school social workers across the United States (Dupper, 2002), and as of 2008 there were approximately 20,000 to 22,000 (Franklin, Gerlach, & Chanmugam, 2008). The field is projected to grow 19% between 2012 and 2022 due to an increased demand for mental health services in schools (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). Today, the profession is represented by several independent national organizations, including the (NASW) National Association of Social Work, (CSWE) Council on Social Work Education, (SSWAA) School Social Work Association of America, and the (ACSSW) American Council on School Social Work.

School Safety and the School Social Worker: A Gap in the Literature

There is insufficient research on school social workers' perceptions toward school-level policies that are implemented to reduce violence in schools. Current research suggests that school social workers actively participate in school safety programs implemented in their schools (e.g., Astor et al., 2005); yet, there is very limited research on school safety from the perspective of today's school social worker (Author, 2017a). Past research concerning school social work and school safety has primarily focused on their perspectives and practices concerning violence in schools (e.g., Astor et al., 1997; 1998), their practices and involvement in selected school violence prevention practices (Astor et al., 2005), and their role within a particular framework or intervention (e.g., Franklin, Kim, & Tripodi, 2009; Kelly et al., 2010a, 2010b; Kelly et al., 2016).

More recent research has examined school social work practices and perceptions within different school security environments and practitioners' interactions with school police officers. Using subjective, cross-sectional data from school social workers in the United States, this body of research provides three noteworthy findings: 1) School social workers find their school security personnel more effective with increased collaboration; 2) Practitioners in highly authoritarian school climates (e.g., schools reliant on the use of authority and punitive discipline) perceive their schools' safety practices as less effective when serving higher percentages of socioeconomically disadvantaged and minority youth; and, 3) School social workers perform differently and engage in a variety of tasks as outlined by the School Social Work Practice Model in schools with different levels of authoritarianism (Author, 2017b). These findings suggest that school social workers interact with students and school security measures in a unique way that can be beneficial to our understanding of best practices in schools today.

School Social Workers on School Safety: Why Their Input Matters

School social workers experience the effects of school safety strategies first hand through school environment practices and direct practice with their students, providing them with the ability to contribute to the growing knowledge of school safety. However, school social workers are often overlooked in the academic literature regarding school safety strategies. Thus, an approach to better understanding how school safety strategies might affect school context is to consider the input of school social workers, a group very much involved with forces both within and outside the school.

Typically trained in violence prevention (Astor et al., 1998) and in the ability to use research to inform their practice (NASW, 2012), school social workers have the tools to develop and implement school safety strategies that have minimal harmful effects on

students and the school environment (e.g., Franklin, Kim, & Tripodi, 2009). Their professional preparedness contributes to their ability to identify student relational aspect that impede student success. They work in collaboration with other school personnel and view their students' issues as contextual to the environment. School social workers' connections with families and their students' communities allow for a perspective that many of their colleagues and administrators may not share. It is in this context that school social workers were selected to provide their perceptions on how to move forward with school safety initiatives.

The Present Study

The present study sought to examine school social workers' perceptions and attitudes towards safety in today's schools using a qualitative methodology. Practitioners across the United States were asked the following question: "In general, how do you think school safety in the United States can be improved?" Responses were examined to highlight student- and school-level needs regarding school safety." The study follows a thematic, ethnographic approach where school social workers voice their suggestions on resolving a commonly experienced problem: School violence.

Method

Sample

A purposive sampling strategy was used to collect qualitative data from school social workers across the United States. Participants were recruited through the (SSWAA) School Social Work Association of America, the (ACSSW) American Council on School Social Work and, 36 additional state-level school social work associations. A total of 260 school social workers chose to respond to the open-ended qualitative question: "In general, how do you think school safety in the United States can be improved?" The responses addressed concerns based

on the current school-workplace. All respondents were listed by their organizations as social workers.

Data Collection

Cross-sectional data were collected via an anonymous electronic questionnaire that was initially distributed by email through the SSWAA, the ACSSW, and identifiable state-level associations. A small incentive was used to increase study participation in the form of a prize drawing. This was done by having each participant include his or her email address in a separate survey that was unlinked to the initial survey. Participants who entered their email were then selected at random to receive one of five Amazon electronic gift cards. Data collection began in March 2017 and ended in May 2017.

Participants were asked to think of only one school in which they were employed during the 2016 – 2017 school year by the following prompt: “Thinking ONLY of the school in which you have spent most of your time at as a school social worker during the 2016 – 2017 school year, please answer the following question.” Using this approach, respondents were asked to consider a full academic school year as opposed to the few weeks of school that had begun at the time the survey was initially distributed (the middle of the 2016 – 2017 academic school year). The rationale for having a full academic year as the basis of the data collection was by giving social workers the opportunity to consider recent year-long events related to school safety, they would have the opportunity to process their experiences and respond more thoughtfully.

Data Analysis

Once data was identified, coding began using the Miles and Huberman’s (1994) model of open, axial and selective categories taken from grounded theory. Researchers worked independently, creating matrixes in Excel for the first two coding stages and came together to

work on the selective part to “tell the story.” The challenge of having a large sample proved easier to manage than expected. This was partly due to limiting the space for writing in responses resulting in compressed, to the point, statements. Additionally, researchers looked for what were considered passionate comments in the initial coding process and from there moved on to frequencies. These strategies helped reduce the burden of working with the large sample. Once the thematic categories were derived in the selective coding stage, they were compared to what we already know about school safety concerns of school social workers. This dual “inductive/deductive” approach increases data trustworthiness (Joffe, 2012) by factoring in the existing well-developed knowledge base.

The research approach can best be categorized a hybrid using a variety of methods and not conforming to any one theoretical model. The goal was to inductively determine school social workers’ opinions on a narrowly focused subject area, one in which the researchers knew a great deal about. Although the initial coding followed a strict inductive model, the final stages took on elements of *a priori* knowledge. Rigorous efforts were made to restrain the influence of what we knew from the “unknown,” the subject of the research (Padgett, 2017).

The themes described in the findings offer the social work perspective to this base and enhances its usefulness to both the social work and education professions. Every attempt was made to report unique responses allowing for what Guba and Lincoln (2005) call “fairness” authenticity, as a way of reducing the chance of marginalizing any one person or small group of participants. The decision to reduce marginalization adheres to the “passionate participant” paradigm, that stresses the inclusion of passionate voices regardless of frequency of responses (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). As it turned out, there were just a small number of “different” voices in the sample. Although there was disagreement in strategies to enhance school safety, these

differences were largely expressed in clusters of responses (Boyatzis, 1998; Padgett, 2017), likely a result of the large sample size and the subjects' familiarity with the problem of school safety. The wording of the question, asking for suggestions, allowed the researchers to focus the themes on what Guba and Lincoln (2005) term as a "call to action."

Results

Demographic information for the sample ($N = 260$) can be found in *Table 1*. School-level characteristics for the schools are found in *Table 2*. Overall, thematic content indicated a concern that although there has been progress in implementing school safety protocols, more could be accomplished. Interestingly many respondents looked outside of the school grounds toward the community as potential initiators of increasing safety. The "off the school grounds approach" has been suggested by a number of recent researchers when analyzing the influences of communities on school achievement and school safety (Author, 2016; Bryk, et al., 2010).

Viewing the data as a whole, school social workers disagreed about the value of adding more security personnel to their campuses; the split was about even. There was consensus that security personnel should be better trained for working with young people. Additionally, there was agreement that there needed to be better gun control in the schools, with some suggesting this initiative should come from the community and others leaving it to school policy for some respondents, the focus on community responsibility went beyond parents and families and addressed state and local laws. It is important to note that this was a national sample and currently 8 states allow adults to carry concealed guns in the K-12 public schools either with a permit or without any restrictions (Giffords Law Center, 2017). Participant data were anonymous and reflected the carry laws in their states. Additionally the call for mental health and trauma informed training and services that included trauma reduction informed services in the

schools; and, the suggestion for local community partnerships to address the issue of school safety.

The thematic content arrived at through the coding process indicated a serious concern about school safety. The results are divided into three categories, the first two categories summarize approaches that call for *additions* to school programs and structural changes, while the remaining category is a suggestion for withdrawing or *reducing* what participants saw as dangers to the school environment. *Table 3* illustrates a summary of our findings. Here we include a description beginning with the *additions*.

Additional Mental Health Training

It makes sense that school social workers would focus on mental health training as a remedy for what they perceived as a needed improvement for school safety. Social work education places considerable emphasis on mental health with most programs offering courses in assessment and interventions in the fields of mental and behavioral health. Here are examples.

Teach ALL people about mental health and wellness and de stigmatize it. Teach all people how to greet others and reduce isolation.

Address mental health in our schools and provide more resources for mental health for families (i.e. school based therapy services), mentoring programs, trauma informed schools!

I do think that by providing more mental health staff to the schools, our schools would be safer. Although we are grateful to have the support staff we do have, a 1:1500 student to social worker ratio that doesn't give a lot of room to be proactive or have a lot of follow-up with students.

Improved education for school staff and the community in general to identify early warning signs of mental health issues. AND more adequate mental health resources for youth (therapists, psychiatrists, day treatment programs). Putting more emphasis on mental health services within the school setting

Teach mindfulness. Change the mindset of mental health so it is not so stigmatized, have better access to mental health services for the severely mentally

ill and more access for everyone. CHANGE THE OVERALL MINDSET ON MENTAL HEALTH.

Participants added specialized training in trauma and bullying to their calls for additional mental health training. Trauma and bullying were noted as areas that contribute to unsafe school and community environments. Training of both school personnel and students were encouraged through staff development, curriculum reform, and specialized programs for building knowledge and interpersonal skills, as well as creating safe places for open discussion.

...by training students how to recognize and respond to mental health crisis amongst their peers, by training teachers how to recognize and respond to mental health crisis, improve anti-bullying programs, improve district climate, and by supporting parents of students with mental health concerns better with training and resources.

More trauma informed education.

There needs to be a focus on creating a safe environment for kids to come forward when they need help. Additional training for staff and teachers about mental health needs, as well as risk factors for violence or self-harm would be beneficial.

Social workers saw the creation or the expansion of prevention-type programs as a way of making their schools safe. Several programs were mentioned including anti-bullying, conflict resolution, and social, emotional learning (SEL), and stress reduction. Here is an example.

Re-education of mainstream educators with emphasis on social emotional learning...Stronger programming to reduce bullying with stronger administrative engagement, not just checking off the box that the program was implemented.

Mandating stress reduction training for Teachers, Teacher Assistants, Bus Drivers, Monitors and Administrators.

More training in conflict resolution and supervision by principals not the police department.

More peer mediation.

Through anti-racist training... More evidence-based programs that offer more support to the students who need it the most.

Several respondents mentioned Positive Behavioral Intervention Supports (PBIS), a U.S. Department of Education initiative to improve school climate and school safety through positive programming. They were pleased that their schools were engaged in PBIS-related policies and programming.

The wish for more services also implies a call for additional funding or alternatively a redistribution of current funding. Several mentioned the need for additional school social workers. Interestingly, there were no responses that alluded to the challenge of paying for additional programs.

Additional Community Involvement

Social worker respondents were very positive in endorsing additional community involvement. Phrases like community partnership, outreach to parents/communities, and utilizing community resources, permeated the responses. These examples sum up much of these views.

Have schools return to being centers of the community, offering workshops and resources to community members.

Increased partnerships with local community mental health providers and increased program offering in our schools, such as outpatient counseling and therapeutic day treatment services.

More parental involvement /services and by providing actual community based interventions that focus on prevention vs. reacting.

Reestablishment of community in schools.

Also noted was the connection between the social and economic characteristics of the community with that of the school.

I feel that school safety can be combatted with a focus on community safety. Therefore, partnerships with local law enforcement would be a great way to address school safety.

Safer communities foster safer schools.

Really it is about our society providing needed supports and social equity. It is about whether a family has health insurance so the child can get counseling or a neuropsychologist evaluation. It is about our culture of violence and winning. It is about racial equality.

Seeking out to connect students to the school- community. Ensuring that all students have their basic needs met at home (as a minimum standard)

More contact with parents especially in the area of domestic violence.

Structural Changes

Additionally, respondents were concerned about the design of schools and called for more ways the physical building plan could both keep intruders out and allow for quick exits. In addition to installing metal detectors, emergency training and practicing safety behavior was also mentioned. Here are just two examples:

More Attention to School Design for Security

I think if schools can plan, prepare, and practice safety drills (I love that my district has the adopted the ALICE planning for dangerous situations). We will continue to be prepared and able to respond to alarming situations that could occur.

I believe that schools need to have security cameras. , require visitors to check in and have an anonymous reporting system that includes having school personnel getting needed information quickly

Reducing the Number of Guns in the Schools

The next theme centers on reductions. Eliminating guns from school was a suggestion with a great deal of support. Most respondents who mentioned guns opposed anyone having a gun including security staff. Others mentioned the so called “carrying laws” that allowed teachers and older students in some states students to bring guns to school for protection.

Get rid of guns. Most reports regarding school violence includes gun violence. Remember Sandy Hook, Laurie Dann, Columbine.

No guns in schools.

Unregulated conceal and carry and uncontrolled open carry laws are ridiculous and dangerous

Implications for School Social Work Practice and Policy

School safety has been linked to school achievement and student and teacher retention (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009; Bryk et al., 2010). Feeling safe in school is one experience likely to influence student retention and graduation rates. School climate, influenced in part by having a safe place to work, has been shown to have a role in teacher retention. Additionally, school social workers are in a good position to understand the benefits of a safe school environment including a reduction of chaos, violence, negative thinking, and an increase in achievement and good citizenship. Our data show their recognition that schools exist in a community and the attributes of the surrounding neighborhoods are likely to be reflected in school climates. There is evidence that even in the most socially and economically distressed areas community-school partnerships can bring about important mutual contributions (Author, 2016). As one social worker noted, *“I don’t know my community needs more locked doors or security badges or metal detectors”*.

Advocates of the community-school model look for resources that can be brought into the schools or in nearby accessible spaces. Resources may include counseling, mental health and other behavioral health services, health clinics, and legal services. School social workers know that access to education does not begin at the school gates; it is in the home and neighborhoods where children learn the value of education. The findings from this study indicate the importance of school-community involvement in ways that can influence state and local policies to increase safety and provide adjunctive services to children and their families. Collaborative work among

researchers, school-based staff including social workers, and community activists is the next step in ensuring healthy development of the youth they serve.

Respondent's specific calls for additional mental health, trauma reduction and preventive programs as anti-bullying, and social emotional learning, and interpersonal-relations skills training may serve as a wake-up call to educators, organizational and association leadership, and policy writers. School social workers were willing to write passionate responses calling for these measures. These data indicate a real concern for improving school safety using a preventive model that goes beyond locking the doors. This preventative model can be established through interprofessional collaboration. School social workers can seek coalitions with other school-linked professionals to achieve a louder voice in making suggested changes. Through the work of professional organizations, interprofessional collaboration may include educators, administrators, community stakeholders, legal and health professionals to promote healthy development for the youth they serve.

Needless to say, a key word for many was "more"; yet not one respondent suggested ways to pay for additional programs and activities. This seemingly disregard for financial realities may be the result of our social work culture of putting people first or from other factors beyond the scope of this study. Further there were no references in the entire sample to the Federal Safe Schools Healthy Students Program that concentrates mostly on reduction of drugs in the schools. Drugs in the schools were mentioned infrequently and without focus making them difficult to connect to the research objective. Social workers' concerns for school safety focused on programs addressing student needs, community involvement, planning safety strategies in the schools and reducing or eliminating guns.

Conclusion

Overall, social workers indicated a desire for changes in policy and practice to increase school safety. School social workers can promote this change through their work and collaboration with educators and administrators within educational organizations. Additional services in the areas of mental health recognition training and counseling services to students and families and trauma and bullying prevention and interventions were mentioned as areas that required special attention. These areas can be further developed and explored by practitioners through leadership and collaborative efforts within the school as well as with the local community. Community partnerships for service provision and resources indicated school social workers' understanding of the importance the community plays in keeping its schools safe. Promoting these partnerships requires social workers to effectively collaborate with personnel within the school as well as with members of the community. This interdisciplinary collaboration is critical to promoting student well-being and school health, and requires leadership and engagement with an understanding of the school climate from the (PIE) person-in-environment perspective. The socio-economics statuses of communities were also mentioned as factors to be considered when planning for safety measures and especially keeping in mind matters related to poverty, children from non-traditional families (e.g., foster/adoptive children), violence perceptions, racism, mental illness, and developmental disorders, to name a few. Finally, there was a call for the reduction or elimination of guns in the schools which many social workers strongly proposed, and better planning for keeping the buildings safe through facility designs and safety rules and practices.

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Table 1 Demographic Information for Sample ($N = 260$)

	Percent ¹	N
Gender	83.4	191
Male	6.3	12
Female	93.7	179
Race	83.8	192
White	88.5	170
Black/African-American	8.3	16
Asian	1.0	2
Other	2.1	4
Hispanic/Latino	7.9	15
Education	84.3	193
Bachelor of Social Work	5.2	10
Master of Social Work	90.7	175
Doctor of Social Work (DSW)	0.5	1
Doctor of Social Work (PhD)	1.0	2
Other	2.6	5
Professional Licensure	83.8	192
State-issued School Social Work Certificate	61.1	140
Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW)	36.2	83
NASW Academy of Clinical Social Workers	2.2	5
NASW School Social Work Specialist	2.2	5
Other	17.0	39

¹Valid percentages reported

Table 2 School-Level Characteristics of Sample (*N* = 260)

	Percent ¹	<i>N</i>
Education Level	98.3	225
Elementary	36.4	82
Middle	20.4	46
Secondary	42.2	95
Other	0.9	2
School Setting	98.3	225
Rural	30.7	69
Suburban	37.3	84
Urban	32.0	72
School Size	98.7	226
0 – 249	16.4	37
250 – 499	26.1	59
500 – 749	21.2	48
750 – 999	12.8	29
1000+	23.5	53
Percent Students Socioeconomically Disadvantaged	98.7	226
0% - 24%	20.8	47
25% - 49%	20.8	47
50% - 74%	24.3	55
75% - 100%	34.1	77
Percent Students Ethnic Minority	96.9	222
0% - 24%	40.5	90
25% - 49%	15.3	34
50% - 74%	16.7	37
75% - 100%	27.5	61
Type of Organization	84.7	194
Public School	91.8	178
Private School	1.5	3
Other	6.7	13

¹Valid percentages reported

Table 3 Summary of Suggestions for School Organization Changes to Increase School Safety: Additions and Reductions

Additions

Mental Health Programs

1. Provide mental health training in the schools to teachers, staff, students, and families to reduce stigma and encourage acceptance and understanding of students with psychological and emotional problems.
2. Offer mental health services to students and families, and include school –based therapy, mentoring and trauma reduction programs.
3. Train students how to respond to crises experienced by their peers. .
4. Train teachers how to identify and respond to student crises.

Specialized Programs for Confronting Bullying and Trauma

5. Improve anti-bullying programs; teach students how to ask for help.
6. Offer educational programs on trauma identification and reduction.
7. Make the school a place where students feel comfortable to speak about their concerns about bullying, and violence.
8. Engage families and provide support for their trauma and bulling concerns.

Conflict Resolution, Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), Stress Reduction and Anti-Racist Programs

9. Provide conflict resolution and social and emotional learning programs (SEL) and ensure administrative participation (not just checking it off on a list).
10. Mandate stress reduction training for teachers, teaching assistants, bus drivers, monitors and administrators.
11. Implement training in conflict resolution and supervision for principals (not police).
12. Offer peer mediation services to students.
13. Provide anti-racist training to help students who need it the most.
14. Offer the Positive Behavioral Intervention Supports (PBIS) Program recommended by the US Department of Education.

School-Community Partnerships

15. Have schools become the centers of the community with workshops and resources for community members.
16. Focus on community safety as a way to increase school safety. Encourage partnerships.
17. Support community efforts to reduce domestic violence and racism.

Structural Changes

18. Eliminate physical obstacles in the way of emergency exits
19. Reduce potential chaos with emergency drills.
20. Increase cameras and checks on visitors.

Reductions

Eliminating Guns in the Schools

21. Protest open carry laws
22. Tighten illegal concealed gun regulations and enforcement.