

VIOLENCE IN SCHOOLS: GLOBAL PREVALENCE, IMPACTS ON STUDENTS, AND PROMISING INTERVENTIONS

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Abstract Violence is a ubiquitous problem in many schools throughout the world, directly affecting students and teachers, and indirectly having an impact on the wider community. It has multiple, lasting negative impacts on students, including on trust. It also undermines the ability of communities and governments to create schools that are safe harbors where children and adolescents can develop their abilities and skills while also embracing the values of cooperation, mutual respect, peaceful problem solving, inclusion, and gender equality. This paper provides data on the prevalence of violence in schools as well as some of its impacts, including on the trust that students have in their schools and teachers. The paper considers next promising interventions to end violence in schools and provides a summary of cost-benefit analyses of those interventions, suggesting that they tend to have high benefit to cost ratios.

Keywords: Violence in schools, bullying, trust, health, cost-benefit analysis.

1. Introduction

Receiving an education of good quality is the right of every child, as enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Education plays a fundamental role in countries' ability to achieve the targets set forth under the Sustainable Development Goals, especially for girls (Wodon et al., 2018). It is the foundation of countries' future economic development as it drives human capital wealth, that is the value of the future earnings of the labor force, which accounts for two thirds of the changing wealth of nations (Lange et al., 2018; World Bank, 2021). Education also plays a unique role in promoting respect for human rights and contributing to safe and inclusive societies that do not condone the use of violence, but rather provide children with the skills they will need as adults to find peaceful solutions to conflicts.

Preventing violence in schools is a moral imperative. It is also essential to reap the benefits from education in terms of learning in school and ensure students' trust in schools and their well-being. Schools should be safe and inclusive. Unfortunately, violence in schools remains widespread in

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developing and developed countries alike²¹. Failing to prevent violence in schools will affect children not only today, but also in the future, with negative effects for their future families and children, their communities, and societies. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated some of the factors associated with violence against children. The need to end violence against children, including in schools, is more pressing than ever.

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines violence as *“the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against a person or group that results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation”* (Krug et al., 2002, based on WHO Global Consultation on Violence and Health, 1996). Violence is the result of an abusive use of force. The harm can be actual or threatened. It can lead to injury or death, but also to trauma or other mental health symptoms. Violence is also often multidimensional, as individuals including children tend to be subjected to multiple forms of violence and in multiple locations (this is referred to as poly-victimization).

Violence in schools includes but is not limited to child victimization, physical and psychological exploitation, cyber victimization, bullying²², fights, and sexual violence. It also includes violence by teachers such as corporal punishment, with potential negative impacts (Naz et al., 2011). It is a threat to both schooling and learning, and it also affects students’ well-being and health, and their trust in others. A recent study at the World Bank suggests that the cost of violence in schools in terms of lost schooling (some children dropping out) and lost learning (students learning less as measured by standardized tests) may be US\$ 11 trillion globally. This is just an order of magnitude, but the estimate suggests that apart from the moral case to end violence in schools, the economic case is strong (Wodon et al., 2021).

This paper is based on analysis carried for the global study at the World Bank on ending violence in schools. The aim is to share a few insights from that study for readers of this journal, who tend to be involved in Catholic education. The next section provides data on the prevalence of violence in schools as well as some of its impacts, including on the trust that students have in their schools and in teachers. The paper then considers promising interventions to end violence in schools. Finally, it provides a summary of cost-benefit analyses of those interventions, suggesting that they tend to have high benefit to cost ratios. The focus in this paper is on global evidence on violence in schools and promising interventions. In a separate paper also published in this issue of the journal

¹ On the prevalence of violence against children globally, see Hillis et al. (2016). See also Office of the SRSG on Violence against Children (2016), UNICEF (2017, 2019), and Know Violence in Childhood (2017).

² Bullying is defined as repeated aggression (physical, verbal, or psychological) over a prolonged period of time among peers who have an imbalance of power.

(Malé and Wodon, 2023), a case study is provided to compare violence in schools in public, private secular, and religious schools in the United States.

One important caveat to the analysis is the fact that due to data constraints, the focus is less on sexual violence in schools than other forms of violence. This should not be interpreted as placing less importance on sexual than other forms of violence, especially in Catholic schools where sexual abuse by priests has been documented and requires specific interventions. But for this analysis, given the available data, the focus is more on physical and emotional violence and their effect on children, including for trust.

2. Prevalence and Selected Impacts of Violence in Schools

Data are available on student's experience in school in several surveys implemented in multiple countries. This includes surveys are implemented in secondary schools, namely (1) the Global School Health Survey (GSHS) which includes mostly low- and middle-income countries; (2) the Health Behavior in School-Age Children survey (HBSC) which includes mostly European countries as well as Canada and a few countries from the MENA region; and (3) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) which includes mostly middle- and high-income countries. Two surveys are implemented in the population as a whole: the Violence against Children Survey (VACS) and the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS), both of which have been implemented in low- and middle-income countries.

Across most surveys, estimates suggest that more than one in three children are subjected to physical violence, and almost one in three are bullied. For example, across countries, Table 1 suggests that 27.6 percent of children in GSHS surveys have been involved in a fight at school in the last 12 months, while the share is 31.2 percent for children in HBSC surveys. For bullying, the shares of students affected in the last 30 dates are very similar at 29.5 percent in GSHS surveys and 29.0 percent in HBSC surveys. The estimates in Table 1 are averages across countries, with different surveys targeting different sets of countries, but there is quite a bit of consistency in the average estimates across countries. This suggests that violence in schools affect students in all types of countries, whether low- or high-income.

The prevalence of sexual violence is much lower in Table 1, but is likely to be underestimated especially as the topic remains taboo in some countries and collecting data is not easy. Girls and boys experience the risk of violence in school in somewhat different ways in terms of prevalence. Apart from differences in exposure to sexual violence, girls are more likely to experience verbal and emotional abuse whereas boys are more likely to be physically abused, but all types of violence do affect boys and girls to a substantial extent. While there are no cross-country estimates of violence in Catholic schools, partial data for a few countries including in sub-Saharan Africa

suggest that in some, Catholic schools may have lower levels of violence, but in other countries, this does not seem to be the case (Wodon, 2024).

Table 1: Prevalence of Violence in Schools in Multi-country Surveys (%)

	GSHS	HBSC	PISA	VACS	DHS
GSHS and HBSC surveys					
Attacked in last 12 months	37.8	-	-	-	-
Involved in fight in last 12 months	27.6	31.2	-	-	-
Injured in last 12 months	31.3	44.5	-	-	-
Injured from fight	1.5	1.8	-	-	-
Bullied in last 30 days	29.5	29.0	-	-	-
PISA Assessments					
Threatened by other students	-	-	23.8	-	-
Others destroyed my things	-	-	26.5	-	-
Hit by other students	-	-	23.4	-	-
Nasty rumors about me	-	-	33.5	-	-
VACS and DHS surveys					
Physical violence in schools	-	-		28.7	-
Emotional violence in schools	-	-		3.5(*)	-
Sexual violence in schools	-	-		2.8(*)	1.5(*)

Source : Wodon, Fèvre et al. (2021).

Note: The data sources are as follows: Global School Health Surveys (GSHS), Health Behavior in School-Age Children Surveys (HBSC), Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), Violence against Children Surveys (VACS), and Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS). (*) The prevalence of emotional and sexual violence in VACS and DHS surveys is likely to be underestimated.

In the global south, corporal punishment also remains widespread in schools, with many countries still not having legislation banning corporal punishment in schools. In Francophone Africa, data on corporal punishment from the PASEC student assessment suggest that more than a third of teachers in sixth grade of primary school use corporal punishment in the classroom, leading to almost two-thirds of students being beaten by teachers (Wodon et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic is likely to have exacerbated some of the factors that lead to violence against children in general, and violence in schools in particular. This is because many individuals and households have been under stress due among others to social isolation, losses in employment and income, and illnesses or death from the pandemic.

As mentioned in the introduction, the World Bank study estimated that the cost of violence in schools due to lost lifetime earnings could be of the order of US\$11 trillion. The estimate is based on the risk of children not learning in school because of violence in schools as well as the risk of some children dropping out of school. Regarding learning losses, regression analysis using data

from the PISA and PASEC international student assessments suggests that the losses could be at two percent versus baseline values across all students taken together (those affected by violence and those not affected). Regarding children dropping out of school, the estimates suggest that violence may be the reason for dropping out for about five percent of children dropping out. These are the estimates leading to the economic loss mentioned.

Beyond learning losses and the risk of dropping out, violence in school may however have a wide range of other consequences, including leading to a lack of trust. For perceived health, surveys ask questions on difficulties sleeping, having headaches, stomach-ache, or back-ache and a self-assessment of health. For risky behaviors, questions are asked about whether the children have ever smoked, used alcohol, drug or cannabis, or had sex. Finally, for psychological well-being, questions are asked about whether the children ever considered suicide, planned to commit suicide, or attempted to commit suicide. Questions are also available on whether children are feeling low, irritable, nervous, or dizzy. And questions are asked about the level of trust of students in teachers and their school. In virtually all cases, experiencing violence in schools is associated with worse indicators after controlling for other factors. Some of the largest effects of violence in schools are observed for the probabilities of feeling bad about one's health, trusting others, having suicidal thoughts, and having sex before the age of 18.

For example, with the HBSC surveys for European countries plus Canada and a few countries from the Middle East and North Africa region, information is available on whether students (1) like their school; (2) feel that their teachers think they are doing poorly academically in comparison to other students; (3) feel that other students do not accept them the way they are; (4) feel that their teachers do not accept them the way they are; (5) feel that their teachers do not care about them as a person; and finally (6) have no trust in their teachers. In most cases, multiple answers can be provided by students, for example ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree when asked about perceptions, but these variables can be dichotomized (yes/no coding) for analysis in order to facilitate the interpretation of the results.

To assess the potential impact of violence in schools on those perceptions controlling for the factors that may affect them, a range of controls are included in the regression analysis³. Once regressions

³ For the HBSC surveys, the controls include gender, age, grade, the student's height, whether the student is underweight or overweight, whether the student participates in physical education and for how many days per week, whether the students feels that other students are kind and helpful, whether the household in which the student lives is well off as per the student's assessment (with various degrees of being well off), whether the mother and father of the student live at home, whether the student finds it easy to talk to his father and mother, whether the student feels that friends and family try to help when in need. Some of these variables could perhaps be considered as outcomes as well, but they are used for the analysis as controls. For the GSHS data, the controls include gender, age, grade, the student's height, whether s/he goes

are estimated, predicted values are obtained for the dependent variables with and without violence in schools. Comparing these predicted values gives an idea of the share of various issues that may be attributed to violence in schools. With the HBSC survey for example, the shares of issues related to trust and acceptance in schools that can be attributed to violence in schools are as follows: 11 percent for children stating that they do not like their school; 9 percent for children stating that their teachers think they are not doing well; 15 percent for children stating that other students do not accept them like they are; 14 percent for children stating that teachers do not accept them like they are; 5 percent for children stating that their teachers do not care about them, and 7 percent for children stating that they do not feel a lot of trust towards their teachers. In other words, taking this last estimation as an example, violence in schools may be responsible for every 1 in 14 cases (7 percent) of children lacking trust in their teachers. Violence in schools is not the only factor for lack of trust and other issues, but it is an important factor.

3. Cost-Benefit Analysis of Violence Prevention Programs⁴

How can violence in schools be prevented? As importantly, given many issues in schools that compete for funding and attention, do interventions to reduce violence in schools have high benefit to cost ratios, which would help in advocating for such interventions? To show that reducing violence in schools can be done and is a smart investment, cost-benefit analyses are reviewed in this section.

3.1. Principles and Limits of Cost-Benefit Analysis

Cost-benefit analysis aims to compare the benefits of interventions to their cost. When the ratio of benefits to cost is high, which typically also implies high internal rates of return, an intervention may be especially attractive for policy makers in contexts where budget resources are limited. Extensive data and assumptions are typically needed to conduct a cost-benefit analysis. This implies that results can be sensitive to assumptions as well as other parameters related to data quality. Cost-benefit analyses must rely on the results of impacts evaluations since the benefits relate to the impacts of the interventions. Such impact evaluations may be limited in number and may themselves be more or less robust.

Apart from impact evaluations, detailed estimates of costs and benefits are also required. While some interventions may provide a comprehensive accounting of all costs involved, this is often not

hungry, whether s/he is underweight or overweight, whether s/he is active, whether s/he benefits from physical education at school, the time spent sitting without activity, whether parents check his/her homework, understand his/her trouble, know what s/he does in his/her free time, and go through the child's things. Other factors could affect the outcomes of interest, but these are the variables available in the dataset that seem to be the most important potential factors affecting outcomes.

⁴ The analysis is based on Wodon et al. (2021).

the case. In the literature, information on implementation costs is often lacking even when information on the impacts of interventions may be available. In addition, implementation costs may be very different for an initial pilot intervention in comparison to a scale up. Accounting for benefits is also fraught with issues. One issue relates to the economic valuation of benefits. But another issue relates to the type of benefits included. Some interventions may have been documented to have impacts in a wide range of areas, while for other interventions, only a few impacts may be available. This may distort comparisons of benefits due to differences in the comprehensiveness of the benefits being included in the analysis.

When comparing the streams of costs (during implementation) with benefits (during and after implementation, including in adulthood for children who benefited from interventions), the issue of which discount rate (given the need to compute the present value of benefits that may arise many years in the future) to use may be debated. A higher discount rate, which may be warranted in developing country contexts, may reverse the conclusion that would result from a lower discount rate, in that the sign of the net present value estimated may change. This is also an additional reason why it is often difficult – and not advisable, to narrowly compare cost-benefit analyses conducted separately for different interventions since these analyses may have used different hypotheses, including for discount rates. Readers should not infer that one intervention is necessarily better than another simply because the benefit to cost ratio of the first intervention appears to be higher than that of the second.

Still another issue is that of the external validity of an impact evaluation, and therefore of any cost-benefit analysis based on the results of the evaluation. An intervention may have been successful in a particular context. This does not imply that it will remain successful when scaled up or when implemented in a different context, or even a different country. It is often the case that intervention that were successful when piloted turned out not to have the same impacts when scaled up, or when implemented in a different context. Many of the available cost-benefit analyses for programs aiming to reduce violence in schools have been conducted in Western countries, and especially in the United States. It could be that the ratios of benefits to costs would differ for similar interventions in other countries, and in particular in developing countries. This being acknowledged, this next section provides illustrative results from cost-benefit analyses with a focus on programs for primary and secondary schools.

3.2. Socio-Emotional Skills and Related Programs

In primary schools, one way to reduce the prevalence of violence in schools is to implement programs helping children improve their social and emotional skills. This includes competencies such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Weissberg et al., 2015). Acquisition of socio-emotional skills often leads to gains

in well-being, positive attitudes, and pro-social behavior, reductions in risky behaviors such as violence and substance abuse, and improvements in academic performance (Durlak et al., 2010), all of which can lead to success in the labor market. In secondary schools, for at risk adolescents, approaches such as cognitive behavioral training have proven effective (Life Skills Training is an example). Specific interventions can also be implemented to prevent dating violence, as is the case with the Fourth R program that aims to empower adolescents to build and maintain healthy relationships (Wolfe et al., 2009). Finally, after-school programs that combine recreational activities and academic support may also reduce violence.

How do the gains suggested by impact evaluations translate in terms of the comparison of the resulting economic benefits with the cost of implementing the programs? Analysis is not available for most programs, but a recent synthesis of cost-benefit analyses of SEL interventions covers six different programs (Belfield et al., 2015). The synthesis acknowledges previous cost-benefit analysis for several of these programs, but notes that because previous analyses often relied on different methodologies, hence conducting new analysis with the same methodology provides additional insights.

The first program is the 4Rs Program (Reading, Writing, Respect, and Resolution) implemented in grades K-5 to promote pro-social behavior and help students develop cooperative problem-solving skills. An evaluation in New York City suggested a reduction a range of aggressive behaviors as well as gains in achievement for mathematics and reading (Jones et al., 2011.) The second program, Positive Action, aims to promote positive thinking, actions, and self-concept for all students in grades 3 to 8. The third program, Life Skills Training, is a classroom intervention for grades 6 to 12 to reduce substance abuse and violence (Hawkins et al., 1998). The fourth program, Second Step, is based on a social skills curriculum to improve problem-solving and emotional management for children from pre-kindergarten to grade 10. The next program, Responsive Classroom, targets students in grades 3 to five to improve socio-emotional skills by improving teacher efficacy. The last program, Social and Emotional Training, was implemented in Sweden for grades 1 to 9. While some programs target students at risk, many cover all children.

Table 2 provides results for baseline estimates. Each of the six interventions generates higher benefits than costs according to the review, with benefit-cost ratio ranging from 3.46 to 13.91 across interventions in the baseline scenarios. For each intervention, the authors also consider alternative scenarios that affect the benefits to costs ratios, but in no case are the ratios negative. This suggests that investments in SEL and related programs could generate substantial economic returns.

Table 2: Cost-Benefit Analysis for Social and Emotional Learning Interventions

Program	Description	Cost in 2011 USD (1)	Benefit in 2011 USD (2)	Ratio (2)/(1)	Net Present Value (2)- (1)
4Rs (United States)	Learning and literacy program to combat aggression/violence (grades K–5, disadvantaged students)	\$68,000	\$832,000	12.24	\$764,000
Positive Action (United States)	School curriculum and activities to promote positive thinking, actions, and self-concept (grades 3–8, all)	\$51,000	\$258,000	5.06	\$207,000
Life Skills Training (United States)	Classroom intervention to reduce substance abuse and violence (grades 6–12, at-risk students)	\$13,000	\$45,000	3.46	\$32,000
Second Step (United States)	Social skills curriculum to improve problem-solving and emotional management (grades PK–10, disadvantaged students)	\$44,000	\$432,000	9.82	\$388,000
Responsive Classroom (United States)	Improving teacher efficacy to influence SE skills and school community (grades 3–5, all)	\$90,000	\$892,000	9.91	\$802,000
Social and Emotional Training (Sweden)	Classroom intervention to support cognitive and SE competencies (grades 1–9, all students)	\$54,000	\$751,000	13.91	\$697,000

Source: Adapted from Belfield et al. (2015).

3.3. *Anti-Bullying Programs*

In secondary schools, the literature suggests to focus on programs that reduce the prevalence of bullying. Bullying is defined as repeated aggression (physical, verbal or psychological) over a prolonged period of time among peers who have an imbalance of power. Reviews also suggest that intensive and long-lasting program are needed to change behaviors, with parental sessions contributing to the success of the programs. In their meta-analysis of multiple evaluations of anti-bullying programs, Farrington and Ttofi (2009) suggest that the programs reduced the prevalence of bullying by about a fifth on average, with comprehensive programs inspired by the Olweus model working particularly well.

As for SEL-related programs, cost-benefit analysis has been conducted for several programs aiming to reduce bullying. Two frequently cited programs are the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP) as well as the KiVa anti-bullying program, which includes actions targeting all students (curriculum including student lessons and online games to prevent bullying), and indicated actions to be used when a bullying case has emerged – those actions specifically target children and adolescents who have been involved in bullying as perpetrators or victims. A cost-benefit analysis of the potential benefits from OBPP in Pennsylvania suggests that the cost of implementing the program would be at US\$25.8 million or an average of US\$7.70 per student per year. However, when start-up costs are not considered, the on-going cost of implementation falls to US\$2.07 per student per year. The analysis suggests that net savings from the program through lower healthcare costs thanks to the expected reduction in bullying are valued at \$12.30 per student year (Highmark Foundation (2018). This in turn suggests a benefit-cost ratio of 6.94 not including start-up costs (these costs would be spread over time over multiple years, so the program appears cost effective; in addition, other potential benefits not included in the analysis could raise the benefit to cost ratio). Results are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3 also provides data on three cost-benefit analyses for the KiVa anti-bullying program for the Netherlands (Huitsing et al., 2019), Wales (McDaid, 2017), and Sweden. The analyses for the Netherlands and Wales suggest positive net present values, and as a result benefit-cost ratios well above 1. The lower ratio for the program in Wales is likely due in part to a smaller set of benefits taken into account. In Sweden, the analysis is presented in a different way, showing the estimated cost per QALY (Quality-adjusted life year) at €13,823. This is well below the accepted norm for cost effective interventions in the country, at about €50,000, suggesting that in comparison to the norm, the intervention is cost effective (the value of the benefit to cost ratio here is computed differently, and defined simply as the norm divided by the cost, or €50,000/€13,823, so this estimate is not comparable to the other benefit-cost ratios provided, but again, as mentioned in the introduction, one should be careful not to compare benefit-cost ratios across programs unless exactly the same methodology has been used for the various cost-benefit analyses, which is often not the case).

Table 3: Cost-Benefit Analysis for the Olweus and KiVa Anti-bullying Programs

Program	Description	Cost in 2015-16 (1)	Benefit in 2015-16 (2)	Ratio (2)/(1)	Net Present Value (2)-(1)
Olweus (United States)	Olweus curriculum in K-12 schools	\$2.07 (on- going only)	\$14.37 (*)	6.94 (on- going only)	\$12.30
KiVa (Netherlands)	KiVa curriculum in primary schools	€203 (4 years)	€819 to €1,363	4.04 to 6.72	€203 to €818
KiVa (Wales)	KiVa curriculum in primary schools	£656 (4 years)	£1,037	1.58	£381
KiVa (Sweden)	KiVa curriculum in primary schools	€829 (4 years)	€13,823 per QUALY vs. €50,000 norm	3.62 (**)	NA

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Note: (*) The value of \$14.37 is not provided by the authors but reconstructed by adding the on-going cost of the program and the net benefit. (**) The ratio of benefits to costs is computed differently, as the accepted norm in the country for acceptable cost per QUALY divided by the estimated cost per QUALY for the program.

4. Conclusion

Violence in schools is a threat to both schooling and learning, as well as to children's well-being, health, and future earnings as adults. Globally, violence in school is likely to affect well above a half billion children each year (including those in primary schools). Corporal punishment also remains widespread. The various forms of violence often do not occur in isolation. Instead, they tend to reinforce each other. Children are often victims of violence in separate locales, at school but also at home and in the community. This feeds into a self-reproducing cycle or poly-victimization, which has negative multiplier effects on children's wellbeing and capacity to learn, leading to higher risk of lasting physical, mental and emotional harm. The economic cost of violence in schools in terms of lost future lifetime earnings could be of the order of US\$11 trillion according to a recent World Bank study. These estimates are simply orders of magnitudes and could be higher if the health effects of violence in school were included.

Ending violence in schools requires multifaceted interventions, but promising interventions have high benefits to costs ratios. In primary schools, programs helping children improve their social and emotional skills show promise. A recent synthesis of cost-benefit analyses for these types of programs suggest benefit to cost ratios ranging from 3.46 to 13.91 across interventions in baseline scenarios. In secondary schools, a key area of focus should be to reduce bullying. Reviews suggest that intensive and long-lasting programs are needed to change behaviors, with parental sessions contributing to success. Cost-benefit analyses have been conducted especially for the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program and the KiVa anti-bullying program. These analyses suggest that promising interventions have high benefits to costs ratios. Preventing violence in schools is a moral imperative, but it is also a smart investment.

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